**Amortentia**

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**Amortentia**

by olivieblake

**Summary**

Will they or won't they? Oh, they will. Fluff for when you need it. Romantic short stories, multiple pairings, mostly Dramione but some by request. Includes Bachelorette, Reunion, and The Real World: Hogwarts series.

**Notes**

*a/n: Amortentia is a collection of romantic drabbles, some sexually explicit, some not; mixed pairings, mixed universes, etc. Each drabble/one-shot will be labeled with the title, pairing, universe, rating, and summary. There will be no tragedies here. Fluff only. Enjoy!*
Table of Contents:
(Updated as new chapters are added; first chapter below.)

Multi-chaptered Series

5 | Bachelorette, Pt. I of V, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
7 | Bachelorette, Pt. II of V, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
9 | Bachelorette, Pt. III of V, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
12 | Bachelorette, Pt. IV of V, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
13 | Bachelorette, Pt. V of V, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
21 | Reunion, Pt. I of IV, Ensemble Pairings (Dramione, Ronsy, Blinny, Nottgrass, Pottgood)
24 | Reunion, Pt. II of IV, Ensemble Pairings (Dramione, Ronsy, Blinny, Nottgrass, Pottgood)
25 | Reunion, Pt. III of IV, Ensemble Pairings (Dramione, Ronsy, Blinny, Nottgrass, Pottgood)
73 | Reunion, Pt. IV of IV, Ensemble Pairings (Dramione, Ronsy, Blinny, Nottgrass, Pottgood)
20 | Drunk Epilogue Rewrite (Canon pairings)
29 | Drunk Rewrite, Pt II: The Forest Again (Canon pairings)
35 - 59 | The Real World: Hogwarts, Ensemble Pairings
65 | Drunk History: The Voldemort Wars, Part I (No pairing)
68 | Drunk History: The Voldemort Wars, Part II (No pairing)
76 - 95 | The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Ensemble Pairings
108 - 131 | Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Ensemble Pairings

Dramione one shots

2 | Mousetrap, Pt. I of II, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
3 | Mousetrap, Pt. II of II, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
4 | Reparations, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
11 | Wedding Dates, [background pairing] Pottgrass / Ronsy (Harry x Daphne, Ron x Pansy)
19 | Below the Surface, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
27 | How to Lose Her, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
28 | Ride or Die*, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
60 | Correspondence, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
63 | Pirate Queen, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
64 | Better If You Run [background pairing] (Theo x Harry)
66 | Paradox¹, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
69 | Rook [background pairing] (Theo x Daphne)
72 | Valour, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
96 | A Gentleman's Guide to Incandescence, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
100 | The Commoner's Guide to Bedding a Royal², Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
101 | Reverie, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
107 | A Hive of Scum and Villainy, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
132 | A Matter of Practicality, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
146 | Dearly Departed, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
148 | A Little Twisted, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
151 | Never Tell Me the Odds, Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Nottpott (Theo x Harry)
152 | The New Royal's Guide to Bearing Princes, Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne), Hansy (Harry x Pansy)
154 | Disenchanted, Dramione (Draco x Hermione)
Mixed Pairing one shots

6 | Toothbrush, Hinny (Harry x Ginny)  
11 | Wedding Dates, Pottgrass / Ronsy (Harry x Daphne, Ron x Pansy)  
16 | American Boys, Theomione (Theo x Hermione)  
14 | Locker Room, Viktevra (Ginny x Krum)  
22 | Chaotic Good**, Hansy (Harry x Pansy)  
23 | Happenstance, Tomione (Tom x Hermione)  
26 | Chimera, Sevmione (Severus x Hermione)  
32 | Three Wishes, Krumione (Viktor x Hermione)  
33 | Better, Parkweasel (Percy x Pansy)  
34 | The Fairer Sex, Hidden Pairing  
61 | Movements, Black Pansy (Sirius x Pansy)  
62 | The List, Pottgrass (Harry x Daphne)  
64 | Better If You Run, Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
67 | Battle of the Bands, Lucissa (Lucius x Narcissa), Mulcibery (Darian x Caleb), Wolfstar (Sirius x Remus), Jilx (James x Lily), Tedromeda (Ted x Andromeda)  
69 | Rook, Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne)  
70 | Wonderland, Tomcissa (Tom x Narcissa)  
71 | Beast, Jilx (James x Lily), Wolfstar (Sirius x Remus)  
74 | S.P.E.W., Themione friendship (platonic Theo x Hermione)  
75 | Vive le Tour, Mulcibery (Darian x Caleb), Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
97 | Survival Techniques, Parkweasel (Pansy x Percy), Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne)  
98 | Things About You, Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne)  
99 | Death Wish, Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
102 | Convenient Ways to Kill a Man, hidden pairing  
103 | Primo, Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
104-106 | Rebel North, Jilx (James x Lily)  
133 | Black Jeans and Daphne Blue, Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne)  
145 | Le Vélo Pour Deux, Mulcibery (Darian x Caleb), Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
147 | It Could Burn Out, Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
149 | Work Out, Parkweasel (Pansy x Percy)  
150 | Something Big, Dransy (Draco x Pansy)  
151 | Never Tell Me the Odds, Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
152 | The New Royal’s Guide to Bearing Princes, Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne), Hansy (Harry x Pansy)  
153 | Sweet Talk, Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne)  
155 | Forgive Me, Father, Parkweasel (Pansy x Percy)  
157 | Beautiful People Will Ruin Your Life, Blaise x Parvati  
158 | Prophecy, Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
159 | With Love and Admiration, Ronsy (Ron x Pansy)  
160 | In Harmonia Progressio, Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
161 | Where You At, Parkgrass (Pansy x Daphne)  
162 | Masters of Ink, Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Nottpott (Theo x Harry)  
163 | I'll Tell You How the Sun Rose (Blaise x Neville)
Moves

Pairing: Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne)

Universe: This World or Any Other storyverse (Clean/Marked)

Rating: M for sexual content, language

Summary: Daphne Greengrass is tired of being put on a pedestal. Enter Theo Nott.

This was not the best party Daphne had ever been to. Not the worst, either, but certainly leaning more towards that end of the spectrum. She had fervently hoped that coming of age and entering the social scene would be a little more exciting, but really, it was more of the same. The only difference was that now, she had to be there, smiling politely while her parents discussed her pedigree, offering her up to the rich and inbred like she was some kind of prized livestock. It was exhausting.

Top of her house, you know.

Not true. Pansy's grades were better.

She would have been a shoo-in for prefect if not for ridiculous politics.

If you consider "having less merit than other possible options" to be politics, then yes.

Comes from beautiful stock, as you can see.

She half expected her father to strip her naked and gesture enthusiastically to her breasts and thighs. It was only a matter of time.

She sighed, growing bored with her surroundings. It was still fairly early in the night, so she had a
considerably long time to waste; unfortunately, Pansy wasn't there, and Astoria was still too young for these things, so Daphne was left to her own devices.

She looked around the room, admiring the ceiling of Narcissa Malfoy's charmed ballroom. It was a beautiful home. Unlikely to be hers, of course; not that she was all that unhappy about it. She'd held tight to her virginity until curiosity had gotten the better of her, and she thought she'd chosen well in Draco. They were highly compatible in looks, for one. There was no denying he was exceedingly handsome, and he was only improving over time. He would have been an ideal match in every way her parents considered important - wealthy, well-bred, well-mannered - and not exactly a worst case scenario as far as Daphne was concerned. Smart, attractive - and the sex hadn't been unpleasant, per se. She just wanted someone who was going to be a little more in love with her than they were with themselves.

So Draco was out.

They agreed to keep their single tryst between them, and she hadn't done anything with anyone else since then. Not that she'd really felt that compelled, if she were being honest. Her other options weren't exactly ideal, and she figured she could manage to wait until someone interesting came along. Everyone she knew at this point was either a moron, an outright snob, or they were constantly putting her on a pedestal. Either they advised her that she should bed them because of how impressive they were, or they insisted that she should love them without question because of their mindless devotion.

She wanted neither.

Was it so hard to just be genuine?

She looked around the room. Draco was there, but busy. Elsewhere. She didn't particularly care. Marcus Flint was there - again. Giving her eyes, of course.

She shifted away. No thank you.

She heard a small cough behind her, and then someone sidled up next to her.

"These things are fucking murder, aren't they?"

Daphne looked over to make eye contact with Theo Nott, whom she hadn't even noticed was at the party. Not that anyone ever seemed to notice Theo Nott. Certainly not Daphne. He wasn't particularly . . . well, notable, was he?

Well dressed, at least, she remarked internally, biting her lip appreciatively at his elegantly cut dress robes.

A shame he was so . . . what was a nice way to say it? Slender, she supposed.

"Could be better," she allowed, giving him a disinterested shrug.

"Here," he said, handing her a small flask.

"What's this?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Firewhiskey," he replied. "You look like you need it. I nearly always do."

She pursed her lips, flashing him a look of haughty skepticism. "Really?" she asked drily. "So you're, what - a bad boy?"
"That's Draco's move," he corrected her, bringing the flask to his lips and tossing it back. "I'm actually wonderful."

"Draco's move, hm?" she murmured, fighting a smile. "Okay. So what's yours?"

"I don't need moves," he told her, giving her an impertinent smirk.

She let her eyes travel deliberately up and down his lithe frame, lingering on his narrow chest as he stretched out languidly, leaning casually against the wall.

"Actually, you kind of do," she said, lightly admonishing him in her most aristocratic tone.

To her surprise, he laughed.

"I might need them," he admitted. "But I suspect you've seen all the moves already, haven't you?"

"A few." She sighed, putting her hand out. "Fine. I'll have a drink."

"There you go," he said jovially, putting the flask in her hand and grinning at her as she took a sip, grimacing as it went down. "Daphne Greengrass, witch gone wild."

"Don't," she threatened, giving him a look. "This doesn't mean I like you."

"Oh, I know that," he agreed. "I mean, you do like me, but I would hardly consider this my primary evidence."

"I didn't realize you were collecting evidence," she remarked faintly, unimpressed.

Okay. A *little* impressed.

He looked around. "Walk with me," he suggested.

"Why?"

"You don't like to sit still," he said, shrugging.

She raised a perfectly arched brow. "Me specifically?" she asked dubiously. "I hardly think you'd know."

"Walk with me," he said again, more a recommendation than a request, "and I'll tell you how I know."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine," she conceded. "But only because there's nothing else to do."

"I can't imagine there would be a better reason," he said solemnly, moving to exit the ballroom. "Gardens?"

"This isn't some romantic walk," she warned, though she moved to follow. "Don't think you're going to get anywhere with me."

"It is already not a romantic walk by virtue of me being present," he informed her. "I'm not here for romance. Thoughtful intellectualism, though." He gestured wildly. "*Boatloads.*"

"Sarcasm, you mean," she corrected him, feeling the breeze rustle through her auburn hair as they stepped outside. "Not a particularly high form of wit."
"You injure, Greengrass, really," he replied loftily.

Well. She could do worse for entertainment than sparring with Theo Nott, she supposed.

"So," she said. "What do you know about me?"

"Did you only come outside with me to talk about yourself?" he asked, taking another swig from his flask. "I thought you were raised better than that."

She glared at him. "Don't," she said again.

"How about a trade," he offered. "I'll tell you something that I know about you, and in return, you can tell me something you know about me."

"I don't know anything about you," she said, sniffing.

"How about a trade," he offered. "I'll tell you something that I know about you, and in return, you can tell me something you know about me."

She glared at him. "Don't," she said again.

"How about a trade," he offered. "I'll tell you something that I know about you, and in return, you can tell me something you know about me."

"I don't know anything about you," she said, sniffing.

He nudged her slightly. "Same, then," he told her, adopting her arrogant tone.

"Fine." She stopped, turning to face him. "I know you're a too-clever prick with no moves."

"Ouch," he said, grinning again despite the slight. She was almost taken aback by how thick-skinned he was. "Okay. And you, Daphne Greengrass," he said, making good on his promise, "you have your best grades in the classes where we move around a lot. Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures - you know, that ilk. You don't like theory, because like I mentioned before, you don't like to sit still."

"Your turn," he said with a shrug, and she looked at him in disbelief.

"Stalk much?" she managed arrogantly, pivoting to continue their walk. They were well into Narcissa's gardens now, and she could smell the gardenias.

"Your turn," he said with a shrug, and she looked at him in disbelief.

"Seriously?" she asked, and he gave her a curt nod. "Fine."

She paused for a moment, thinking about what she knew about him. Not much, really.

"Is it true your mother died when you were born?" she asked, and she saw him flinch.

"Ouch," he said again. "Heavy."

She offered him a half-hearted head tilt of apology. "I told you I don't know much," she reminded him.

"Fair," he pronounced. "Yes, that's true. And my very aged father, who saw nothing in me but the ghost of his beautiful dead wife" - his tone utterly reeked of bitterness and Daphne could tell this was a sensitive area for him - "never forgave me for it."

"Well, it's not like it was your fault," she said, slightly appalled.

Theo shrugged. "I'm not sure he would agree."

He'd been right. Too heavy.

"Your turn," she reminded him, and he exhaled slowly, nodding with relief.
"You bite your nails and then charm them to look like you don't," he said, and she instinctively reached out and grabbed his shoulder.

"How did you know that?" she demanded, fixing him with a sullen glare.

"You bite them in class when you're thinking, but obviously they're charmed," he said, grabbing her hand from his shoulder and waving it around in front of her. "This can't be what they really look like."

She ripped her hand from his grasp, hiding it behind her back. "Do you just stare at me all day?" she asked, indignant.

"I notice things," he replied evasively. "Your turn."

"You are extremely creepy," she said, pouting.

"Opinion, not fact," he said, shrugging dismissively. "Try again."

She huffed a little. "You - " she paused. "You swear a lot."

"A lot?" he echoed, feigning confusion. "Fuck, I hadn't noticed."

"Hilarious," she said, grimacing.

He smiled. He was sort of handsome when he smiled. His eyes were so green.

"I suppose that one can stand," he said, humming with thought as he considered his next observation. "Let's see." He perked up, thinking of something. "You never eat dessert at school, but you do have a stash of Fizzing Whizbees."

"Don't tell me you've been in my room!" she exclaimed, aghast.

"No, no," he said quickly. "Your mum sends them to you every month, and sometimes you have them in your schoolbag."

"They're really good!" she insisted, feeling her cheeks flush. "Better than treacle tart, in my opinion."

"They are good," he agreed. "I'm not judging you."

She squinted at him. He really wasn't, was he?

"Good," she said, nodding firmly.

Okay. He was more than sort of handsome, she supposed, looking at him again. Maybe it was just the moonlight or something.

"Your turn again," he said casually.

"Your eyes are green," she offered, trying to sound aloof and failing tragically. Her stomach flipped a little when he let his tongue trace over the smile on his lips.

"That's true," he said, sparing her the trauma of a sarcastic response.

"Your turn," she said, coughing a little as she ducked to hide her face. How embarrassing. She didn't know what had come over her.
"You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," he told her, not breaking eye contact.

Well, she'd certainly heard that one before. Many times. Because, of course, she was beautiful, and not in a subjective way, either. She was classically, proportionally, artistically beautiful; the architecture of her face was flawless. But there was something about the way it sounded when it was Theo Nott who said it. It was effortless. Factual. Not a trace of irony or ulterior motives. Just a small thing, some little observation that he'd thought about before. An easy, passing remark, like he knew she knew it - the same way he knew she liked Fizzing Whizbees - but wanted to tell her anyway.

"You've been wanting to tell me that all night," she said, hazarding a rather safe guess.

He shrugged. "Six years if we're doing the math, but who's counting?"

She smiled. It was her first real smile all night.

"You won't be able to trick me into anything with flattery, you know," she said, playfully tapping his arm.

"I don't have to," he said loftily. "Want to hear something else about you?"

"Sure," she said, suddenly conscious of his proximity to her. They had stopped walking several minutes ago and now stood face to face, alone in the garden.

His mouth twitched into a smirk. "You want to kiss me," he informed her.

"Big words from someone who hasn't even tried," she mocked, lifting her chin defiantly. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of being right.

Though he was. Stupid Theo Nott.

"And deprive you of the honor?" he asked, catching her chin in his hand and running his thumb across her lower lip. "Never."

She could hear her blood rushing in her ears, felt her heart pounding in her chest. Stupid Theo Nott.

"Only if you want to," he whispered.

Strange, she thought. He meant it. He wasn't going to pressure her. That much was obvious, as she watched him swallow with difficulty.

Oh, hell. Why not.

She tentatively lifted her chin, touching her lips to his. It was gentle, soft, experimental - almost not a kiss at all. Almost nothing more than him being the air she breathed, her just being there, next to him, with him, touching him - a brush of curiosity, and then she pulled away.

"Is it my turn again?" she asked, dazed.

"I have no fucking idea," he mumbled incoherently, closing his eyes and touching his forehead to hers.

"Kiss me instead," she suggested, and he didn't hesitate.

His lips were soft but commanding and she could taste the firewhiskey on his breath, the spice of it filling her mouth in a way that stirred excitement she'd never felt before. His kiss was dizzying in
the best of ways and when he let the tip of his tongue trace across her lip, she slid her tongue along his, inviting him. Coaxing him. His hands were on her waist and she slid them up along her gown, taking his hands and placing them over her breasts. He inhaled sharply against her mouth and she smiled in spite of herself.

*Not always so confident, are we, Theo Nott?*

"Come on," she whispered, pulling him a little bit further and stepping into the gazebo in the garden. She'd been here often enough to know her way around the Manor's manicured grounds, and while there was no chance of being seen among the gardenias, there was no reason to disregard romance entirely. This place was beautiful.

He pressed her against a pillar, moving to kiss her neck and she slid her hand against his stomach, starting to unbutton his shirt. He wasn't as muscular as Draco or some of her other suitors but he was firm and sturdy under her touch, and she felt his abs contract as she brought her fingers to the waistband of his trousers.

A little clever maneuvering from her quick fingers and she had his full length in her hand.

"Daphne," he hissed, gasping a little as she slid her palm against it. "Are you - "

"I'm sure," she told him, and she was. *Quite* sure.

He pulled her towards him, wrestling with her gown to bring his hands to her thighs, running them along her legs and then gently putting her against the low fencing, propping her up. She wrapped her long legs around him, giggling a little at his haste, tugging the hair at the back of his head to catch a glimpse of his green eyes, darkened with longing.

"Slow down," she told him, kissing him slowly, languorously. "Take your time."

He was a quick learner. He brought his hands up to the top of her gown, letting his thumbs trace the outline of her neckline and slipping them under the fabric, teasing her nipples as he bent to kiss her neck.

"Better?" he asked, and she nodded.

He let his mouth travel lower until he'd peeled the dress away from the top of her breast, taking her nipple in his mouth and flicking his tongue over it. She moaned a little at that, leaning back and pulling him towards her, returning her attention to her ministrations along his hardened length. In response, he bit down a little, sucking against her skin.

Who knew he had it in him?

His hands slipped back under her gown, pushing aside the lace of her underwear as he let his index finger circle her opening, teasing her. Torturing her.

"Faster than *that*," she gasped, leaning into his touch.

He grinned, taking her clit between his fingers and waiting for her tell-tale whimper.

"As the lady wishes," he murmured, lifting her gown up to her thighs and dropping to his knees. His breath on her inner thighs brought her a mystifying elation that she'd never known and she gladly parted her legs, reaching down to take a tight handful of his thick, dark hair. He sunk his teeth into her thigh and she gasped, stumbling back against the railing as he roughly pushed her
knees further apart, simultaneously bringing his mouth to her clit and slipping his finger inside her.

She let her head fall back, limp at the feel of his tongue against her, knowing her legs were shaking and wondering how much longer she could stand. There was a pulsing inside her that she hadn't known could exist; a tiny, mystifying ball of agonizing pleasure that nagged at her for escape.

"Theo," she said, raking her fingers through his hair. "Theo, I - "

He abruptly came to his feet, turning her around and keeping his hand against her, slipping his fingers inside her and then bringing them back to rub against her clit, his movements crude and rapid and anything but gentle.

"Yes," she managed. "There - like that - "

She leaned back into his chest, enjoying it. She wasn't a delicate flower, after all. She found she was quite enjoying him being a little rough with her.

"Your cock, Theo," she said, turning to mutter in his ear. "I want your cock."

"I'm not the only one with a filthy mouth," he mused, complying. Some readjustment on his part and then he was inside her, buried into her in a single thrust, his hand still relentless against her clit and she was speechless, so close to the edge she thought she might explode.

Was this how it was supposed to feel? She didn't know. She didn't care. Whatever this was, it was bliss. It was savage and wild and untamed bliss.

"There, yes - yes, yes - Theo, yes - "

He brought his free hand to her mouth and she bit down hard as she came, every muscle in her body suddenly finding release, shaking as she heard him stifle a groan into her hair, twitching against her and staggering forward, bracing them both with one arm against the pillar.

It took almost a full minute for even a partial recovery.

"We can't date, you know," she panted, still relying on him to remain upright.

"Oh I don't want to date," he said, gasping for breath. "Can you imagine, if I had to date you? Flowers and makeup sex and all that? Exhausting."

"Too much," she agreed, tipping her head back against him.

He kissed her slowly, sweetly.

"I realized there is one thing I don't know about you," he commented when they broke apart.

"I find that hard to believe," she remarked, rolling her eyes.

He chuckled against her skin. "Just one thing," he said, and she smiled.

"Go ahead," she murmured.

He shifted, wrapping his arms around her. "I don't know your move," he said regretfully.

"I don't need moves," she told him, and he laughed.

"No," he agreed, pressing his lips to her shoulder. "No, you certainly don't."
"Are you fucking kidding me, Draco?" Astoria shrieked, pointing her wand at him. "Affligo!"

He ducked her spell, lunging around a pillar. "Would you stop for a second, please?" he panted. "Just let me talk to you."

"What can you possibly say this time, Draco?" she said angrily, tossing another hex his way. "My best friend? My best friend?"

"I'd like to remind you once again that you agreed to this arrangement," he shouted, peeking around to see if she was listening and then narrowly missing a particularly vicious stinging jinx. "I told you I wasn't looking for a relationship, and you agreed - "

"Yeah, three months ago!" she yelled, blasting off a chunk of the pillar he hid behind. "I thought - "

"You thought what? That I'd change my mind?" he asked drily, darting away as the pillar started to crack and then leaping to duck behind a table. "Astoria, listen to me. I know you agreed to it because you thought it would make you sound, I don't know - hip and appealing - "

"Fuck you, Draco!"

" - but seriously, either you were never interested in a relationship to begin with and you just think we should be in one because of, I don't know, society, which is ridiculous - "

"Alveusio!"

" - or, or, you thought I would change my mind, which makes you totally unrealistic," he concluded, putting his hands up. "Would you please just listen to me?" he begged. "You know, have an adult conversation with me?"

"Fine," she spat, and he poked his head out from behind the table, hands still raised.

"I'm sorry," he told her, and he was. Sort of. "But to be fair, I didn't know she was your best friend - "
Astoria raised her wand again. "What the fuck - "

"Stop, stop," he said hastily, motioning his desperate surrender. "Stop, just listen to me, would you?" At her silence, he frantically continued. "I didn't break any rules here, okay? I mean, I know you're unhappy that it was Tracey - "

"Don't say her fucking name," she snarled, her fingers white where she gripped her wand.

"Fine," he said hurriedly. "Fine. I know you're unhappy about who it was, but come on, Astoria. Be real for a minute. You were never serious about me," he reminded her. "You wanted to have fun and we are having fun. Lots of fun. You can't just change the rules just because you're upset."

"I didn't realize you'd need to have fun with other witches, too!" she exclaimed, her chest heaving.

"Look, the opportunity presented itself, and I went with it," he said, semi-regretfully. "I'm sorry, really, but listen. Don't pretend this is more than what it is, okay?" He looked meaningfully at her. "But regardless of our arrangement, you don't hold a candle to her, Astoria. She's got nothing on you."

Astoria sighed heavily, slowly calming down.

"I mean it," he said gently, beginning to crack a smile as he watched her lower her wand. "But look at it this way," he suggested. "Isn't this an excellent opportunity for you to, I don't know" - he shrugged, feigning innocence - "slip out of that dress and let me show you how sorry I am?"

A slow smile started to spread across her face and he relaxed, letting his arms fall to his side.

"Fuck you, Draco," she said sweetly, right before she hit him with a wrathful swarm of conjured bees.

"You look beautiful, Hermione," Cormac said fondly, reaching out to touch her wrist. "I can't believe it's already been three months."

"Yes," she said, shifting uncomfortably. "I can hardly believe it myself," she added faintly.

"Sorry, I interrupted you," he said jovially, turning briefly to gesture to the waiter. "Firewhiskey, please?"

"Right," she said hesitantly, once she'd regained his attention. "Yes, well. There's - " she bit her lip. "There's something I need to tell you."

"Something good, I hope," he said, flashing her his too-charming grin. "Worthy of the occasion?"

"Er," Hermione said, nervously letting her tongue drag across her lip. "Um. Maybe if you just let me get it out, all in one go?"

"Certainly," he said, reaching out for her hand. "Go ahead."

"We probably shouldn't, you know, hold hands," she said anxiously. "Just - just let me get through this."

He seemed to finally register that something was wrong.

"What is it?" he asked, his tone suspicious.
"Well," Hermione said, taking a deep breath. "It's been pointed out to me that I've been - well. Less than admirable," she confessed, struggling to get through the statement. "I think perhaps I need to tell you - " She paused.

"Tell me what?" he demanded, leaning forward. "What is it?"

"I'm so sorry, Cormac," she said, her cheeks flushing. "It's just that - it's just that I slept with someone else."

"Firewhiskey?" the waiter asked, suddenly appearing and setting a glass down in front of each of them. " Anything else?"

"You cheated on me?" Cormac repeated, and the waiter's face went pale.

"Nothing then, okay," he said, hastily exiting the conversation.

"Yes, and I'm so sorry," Hermione said, cringing. To be honest, she was rather relieved to have it out in the open. "Cormac, really, I mean it - I never meant to hurt you - "

"How many times?" he asked.

An odd question, in her estimation.

"Sixteen?" she hazarded, tilting her head to think. "More than a dozen, but less than twenty. I think," she added.

He gaped at her. "Sixteen people? Merlin, Hermione - "

"No, no," she said frantically. " Just - just one person, but, you know, sixteen times - "

"Who?" he demanded, bringing his fists down in a loud bang against the unsteady table. "Who was it?"

"Nobody," she said, biting her lip again. She couldn't name him. It would be in the papers if she did.

"Hermione - "

"I'm sorry!" she cried. " It's - it's like an addiction, okay? I'm trying to fix it - I'm trying to come clean to you so that I can do something about it - "

"An addiction?" he echoed, sneering. "Fuck, Hermione."

"It's real!" she squeaked. " I - I talked to a muggle therapist, and it's - it's called a love addiction, but - I think there's something to be done about it - "

"Oh fuck that, Hermione," he growled, throwing his napkin on the table in disgust. "You're not an addict."

She faltered. "But - "

"You're not an addict," he repeated, giving her a last look of revulsion. "You're just a whore."

He disapparated on the spot and she bent her head over her plate, sniffing quietly.

She pulled the galleon out of her pocket, tapping it with her wand.
"Hi," she wrote, though she didn't expect a response.

The coin glowed within a minute.

"Where are you?"

She let out a ragged exhalation, feeling the rush she always did when she heard from him. Every once in a blue moon.

"Come get me, Ron."

She waited.

"I'm with her right now. I'll be by your place after midnight."

She sighed shakily. Good enough.

Ginny slammed the small glass of firewhiskey on the table, making a face that was equal parts utter disgust and boundless ecstasy.

"I'm so glad you were able to come out tonight," she said, coughing and nudging Hermione. "I love that tiny baby but I swear, he's already a little shit - "

"How is James?" Hermione asked, daintily sipping her wine.

"He cries, he shits, he's the miracle of life," Ginny proclaimed, gesturing to the barkeep. "Another, please!"

"Slow down," Hermione said, laughing. "We have all night."

"Not true," Ginny grunted, sighing. "Harry's not exactly confident with handling James. He could send his stupid deer-faced Patronus in here at any moment - 'Ginny, he's crying, what now?' she mimicked, and Hermione had to admit, it was a very solid impression.

"Could be worse," Hermione suggested, shrugging. "You could still be sleeping with your engaged ex-boyfriend."

"Hermione," Ginny said, aghast. "Not Ron again - "

"Just the one time," Hermione said, hanging her head. "But then I heard about the engagement, so, you know," she trailed off lamely.

"You know, he's my brother and I love him," Ginny reminded her, "but he's a real shit, and I'm getting pretty tired of keeping your secrets. I like Lavender," she added. "I mean, I'm sorry things didn't work out between you two, obviously, but - "

"It wasn't meant to be," Hermione concluded. "I know. I'm coming to terms with it."

"Are you?" Ginny asked skeptically, picking up the firewhiskey as it was set down in front of her. "Hold on." She vigorously knocked it back, then hiccuped. "What was I saying?"

"You were doubting me," Hermione said primly.

"Right," Ginny proclaimed. "I mean, have you tried getting back out there?"
"I'm not really into the idea of dating," Hermione said, wrinkling her nose. "Cormac calling me a whore was kind of a downer."

"I didn't say dating," Ginny corrected her. "What you should be doing is fucking."

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Oh, hush," Ginny said, frowning. She looked around the tavern. "Maybe there's someone in here you can fuck."

Hermione buried her face in her hands. "Ginevra Weasley Potter, will you please not do this right now - "

She looked up at the sound of Ginny's gasp.

"Look," Ginny said, pointing. "Look who it is! Perfect."

Hermione looked up to catch a glimpse of silvery blond hair, a bent head that was so pale it could almost be white from a distance.

"No," she grumbled, immediately turning away. "Absolutely not."


"Please stop," Hermione begged. "Please. I will do anything."

"F*ck him and I'll stop," Ginny said, grinning maniacally. "Please." She dramatically clasped her hands together, begging Hermione. "It would make my night, seriously - "

"He hates me," Hermione reminded her. "And you're drunk."

"Oh, too true," she agreed. "The drunk part. But we're older now," she said pointedly. "He's already spoken publicly about his change of heart about blood status, remember? And to be honest, I doubt he ever really hated you."

"He did," Hermione said grimly, frowning into her glass. "And more importantly, I hate him."

"Only your brain does," Ginny told her. "And your brain doesn't really need to be involved."

"Ginny!"

"Look at him, Hermione!" Ginny said longingly, practically drooling onto the bar. "I love Harry more than life itself but Merlin, what I would do to see what's under those robes, I swear - "

"I'm leaving," Hermione said abruptly, standing. "I can't be here, this is ridiculous - "

"That you, Granger?"

Oh, hell.

He was coming towards them, Theo Nott strutting smugly at his side.

"Well, well," Malfoy said, grinning at her. "Look who's out of the library."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We're not at Hogwarts anymore, Malfoy," she said irritably. "And I was
"Just leaving."

"You should stay," Theo advised. "Have a drink."

"Agreed," Ginny said, an obnoxious smile slapped across her face. "You need to stay. I can't entertain these two all by myself, you know," she added, lifting her left hand. "Seeing as I'm all wifed up."

"Same!" Theo exclaimed, lifting his own left hand. "Who?"

"Harry," Ginny said. "Of the Potter variety. You?"

"Daphne," Theo returned. "Of the Greengrass ilk."

"Babies?"

"Yes, in fact. Twins. You?"

"Yes! Baby, just the one, but feels more like twelve - "

They were babbling together while Hermione pointedly avoided Malfoy's glance.

"Let me buy you a drink, Granger," he suggested, uncharacteristically polite.

"I can buy my own drinks, Malfoy," she insisted stubbornly.

"Fine," he pronounced. "Buy yourself a drink, Granger, and let's catch up."

"Since when do you want to 'catch up'?" she asked suspiciously, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Since my friend here started talking to your friend, and I've got nowhere else to be," he said, his stormy grey eyes dancing a little as he looked at her. "Come on. I won't bite."

"Maybe you should," Ginny interjected loudly, and she and Theo snorted with laughter.


"She hasn't changed a bit, has she?" Theo asked, and Ginny shook her head dramatically.

"Oh, a bit," she said. "Still pretty rigid, though."

"A shame," Theo proclaimed. He was clearly also very drunk.

Hermione rolled her eyes. What was it about new parents already trying to escape their spouses and children?

To her surprise, Malfoy also sighed impatiently. "Ignore him," he said briskly. "Come on. Let's sit over here."

"But - " Hermione sputtered. "I mean, I came here with Ginny - "

"She's in safer hands than you think," Malfoy told her. "Theo is madly in love with his wife, and just wants someone to go wild with him, I think." He grimaced. "Which won't be me."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, following him as he gestured to an open table. "Not interested in going wild?"
"I have work to do in the morning, Granger," Malfoy said irritably. "Important businessman and all that. Can't just frolic all the time."

"I'd heard that," she commented. "The businessman part. And other things about you," she added evasively.

"Good things?" he asked, his eyes laughing as he tipped his still relatively full tankard against his lips.

She shrugged. "Depends," she said impassively.

"On?" he prompted.

"Whether or not you consider the notches on your bedpost to be a good thing," she said, and he choked a little on his mead.

"Damn, Granger," he said, coughing. "Tough critic."

"Not going to deny it?" she asked pointedly, raising her brow.

"I'm sure some of it is overstated," he insisted innocently.

She smirked at him. "Some of it?"

"I mean, statistically speaking, there's got to be a margin of error," he said, flashing her the arrogant smile she remembered from her school days.

Funny. She didn't remember it affecting her this way before, she thought, shifting uncomfortably.

"Good for you, Malfoy," she managed faintly, taking a sip of her drink.

"What's new with you?" he asked. "Sex or otherwise."

"Otherwise," she determined. "I work for the ministry. Legal department."

"I'd heard," he commented. "Doing well."

Sort of.

"For the most part," she agreed, not really interested in sharing.

"Such a shame that things didn't work out with Weasley," Malfoy drawled, and she could see the laughter in his eyes that told her he was mocking her.

"Don't," she warned.

"Sorry, sorry," he said quickly, putting his hands up in mock surrender. "Seriously," he added, and he did look quite serious. "I'm glad you didn't end up with that twat. He was never good enough for you."

She put her glass down, stunned. "What?"

"Well he was a dumb little shit, wasn't he?" Malfoy said, smirking. "He'd have never been able to keep up with you."

"Not that that was the problem," she grumbled.
Malfy seemed to catch something in either her tone or her expression.

"Not over it?" Malfoy asked gently.

The question was surprisingly inoffensive.

"It's not quite as over as you might think," she said quietly, and then immediately frowned, wondering what had possessed her to share that information with him.

This was Draco Malfoy, arsehole extraordinaire. She hadn't told anyone in the world besides Ginny about what had been going on with Ron. What on earth had come over her?

He was looking at her with blank confusion.

"He's engaged, isn't he?" he asked.

She grimaced. "His moral fiber is not quite as durable as you might think," she said glumly. "And neither is mine, as it turns out."

"Prick," Malfoy declared. "Idiot, too, if you ask me. I'd pick you over Lavender Brown any day of the week."

She didn't know whether to be suspicious of that statement or not.

"What?" she asked, blinking.

"Granger, don't overthink it," he advised, pushing her glass towards her. "Just have another drink."

With more ease than she would have expected, she unexpectedly complied.

"Are we friends now?" she asked, taking another bite of her salad.

"This is, what, the second weekday lunch?" he asked, thinking. "I assume so."

"If anyone asks, it happened against my will," she said, and he smiled.

"This is the thanks I get for letting you tell Weaslette that we made hot, passionate love to each other all night?" he asked her, his tone deceptively innocent.

"While I appreciate that very, very miniscule favor, I think my debt has been paid," she said, gesturing to the meal before them.

Draco had been doing his damndest to spend more time on quality relationships. Specifically, the non-sexual kind. He hadn't recovered all that well from the episode with Astoria - from a healing standpoint, that is; she was a very talented witch - and really, he couldn't afford to be stung by any more conjured bees, so sex was really off the table. And since his male friends were married and his female friends didn't exist, that didn't leave him a lot of options.

As it turned out, Granger's company wasn't half bad. They'd realized at the pub that as fully matured adults, they ended up having a fair amount in common, and he was more pleased than surprised when she'd invited him out for coffee. It seemed her friends, too, were not as available as she would have liked.

Marriage, babies. They were the only ones left without any obvious prospects, and even though it was largely by choice, it was still difficult to be the only ones falling behind. He made a point to
never mock her for needing company.

"Maybe we should just have sex," he suggested, and she choked a little on her overlarge forkful of lettuce. "What could it hurt, really?"

"Haven't we already determined that we just ruin any relationship we have once it turns sexual?" she asked pointedly. "No. Thank you, but no."

"Harsh, Granger," he said, but he smiled. "Tough, though, you know. You've really pulled it together," he added, gesturing across the table at her overall appearance.

She rolled her eyes. "Stop."

"I mean it," he said. "Look at you. You look great."

Much to his disappointment, she remained regretfully unaffected by his flattery.

"You do too, but that's hardly the point," she reminded him, her tone so chastely academic that he couldn't even enjoy the compliment. "Don't even think about it."

"Don't think about sex?" he echoed, aghast. "Granger. I don't think you understand how impossible that is."

"Maybe we should come up with a code word," she suggested, taking a sip of gilly water. "You know. For if you're getting too . . ."

"Aroused?" he supplied, grinning.

She grimaced. "Yeah," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Would you use it too?" he asked, genuinely curious. "The code word?"

She shrugged. "Maybe," she said indifferently. "Never know."

He smirked at her, feeling triumphant. "Like what you see, Granger?"

"You're exhausting," she retorted, rolling her eyes.

"See? There's innuendo there," he said, gesturing. "It's arousing. I'm aroused."

"Stop saying aroused, first of all," she pronounced bossily. "And secondly, we can think of a code word. Like, I don't know. " She shrugged. "Treacle tart."

"Oof," he said, making a face. "All sweet and sticky? That's sexy. Too sexy."

She pretended to gag, and he laughed. "Fine," she said. "Devil's snare."

"Whoa!" he half-shouted, sitting back in his chair. "Sex. That has sex implied all over it."

"You're impossible," she said indignantly. "What do you suggest?"

"I don't know. Everything is sexy."

"Ugh." She paused. "Dick in a mousetrap."

"What?" he asked, alarmed. "What the fuck is a mousetrap?"
"It's a muggle contraption," she explained, putting her fork down and placing her hands together to mimic a snapping gesture. "To catch mice."

He pictured his dick in it and winced. "Fuck!" he exclaimed. "That is dark, Granger."

"Perfect," she declared. "You hate it, so mousetrap it is."

"You're really fucked up," he told her.

She smiled at him.

"Mousetrap," she said, shrugging, and then took an excessively large bite.

"I miss him," she admitted.

"Weasley?" Malfoy asked, scowling. "Gross."

"Stop!" she said, kicking him. They were having a drink at her house, sprawled out on her living room floor. "You're supposed to be understanding."

"Fine," he said, sighing dramatically. He sat up, looking at her curiously. "Why don't you just . . . I don't know." He shrugged. "Try telling me all the things you would say to him."

She made a face. "You won't like it."

"We're friends, right?" he said pointedly, and she bit her lip, considering. He caught the gesture.

"Oi! Mousetrap."

"Ugh," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Just try it."

"Fine," she conceded. She looked at his grey eyes, picturing Ron's blue ones. "I miss you."

"Okay," he said. "Not exactly earth-shattering. What else?"

She had to close her eyes for this one. "I miss your cock."

"Mousetrap," he grumbled. "Okay."

She opened one eye, glaring at him. "You said -"

"No, no, you're right. Keep going."

"I miss your cock. I miss the feel of your hands on my breasts. I miss the way your mouth feels on my -"

"Fucking hell, Granger, what is this?" he asked, and she laughed.

"You suggested it."

"I didn't realize you were going to be so . . . un-Granger," he told her. "I mean, doesn't it feel strange for you to say those things?" At her blank look, he made a face. "Feels so out of character for you."

She sighed wistfully. "He likes me to say those things," she admitted.
"Do you?" he asked pointedly, and she frowned.

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I do like the sex. And I miss it."

"How long has it been?"

She shrugged. "Months."

"When was your last orgasm?"

"Um." She looked down. "Well, since I can only have them with him - "

"No," he declared, jaw falling open. "You mean, you haven't - "

"Malfoy, you know perfectly well I'm not having sex right now - "

"Still!" he shouted, sitting upright. "You're not - you know. Masturbating?"

"Eh," she said, shrugging. "Doesn't feel as good. Feels . . . I don't know. Weird."

"You're probably doing it wrong," he decided. "I'll teach you."

"Whoa!" she exclaimed. "Mousetrap!"

"Calm down, Granger," he said quickly, scanning her living room. "Ah. Here."

He picked up a small jar and crawled over to sit next to her.

"So, for the purposes of this demonstration, this is your vagina," he said, gesturing to the jar. "Say hi."

"No thanks," she said, and he shrugged.

"Your loss," he said indifferently. "Okay, so first, take a finger" - he lifted his index finger, wiggling it in the air - "and put it inside you. You know, think of something sexy first. Whatever."

"Mousetrap," she sighed, but he ignored her.

"See how I'm curling my finger up, right here?" he asked, gesturing. "That spot, right here, it's your g-spot."

"Okay," she said, curious in spite of herself. "And then?"

"Then you want to kind of - feel around the squishy part back there. You'll tap the roof" - he tapped the jar's imaginary g-spot - "and kind of circle the opening back here. Don't know what it's called."

"Masterful," she said carefully, swallowing.

"Anyway, you'll start to get wet at this point. Or at least, if I were doing it, you would," he said, smirking, and he interrupted her before she opened her mouth. "I know, I know. Mousetrap."

"Definitely mousetrap," she warned.

"Anyway, at this point, you know, you'll want to sort of" - he slid his fingers out, rubbing them aggressively against the lip of the jar - "like this, you know? Against the clitoris."

"You can be rude to it, you know," he informed her. "The clitoris, that is. Don't need to be a lady."
He grinned at her. "Personally, I am never a gentleman to the clitoris."

"I believe you," she said, wondering how flushed her cheeks were.

"So, you know," he said, continuing to rub against the jar. "Just sort of . . . " he trailed off, still rubbing.

She met his darkened grey eyes.

"Mousetrap," they both said, and he leapt up.

"Bye," he said awkwardly, disapparating with a loud crack.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Sorry to cut it off here, but to do it justice, this needs a second installment. Hope you're enjoying!
She walked into her living room wrapped only in a towel and screeched abruptly at the unexpected presence.

"Malfoy!" she exclaimed, pulling the towel tight around her.

"Let me start by saying that this is your fault," he said quickly, immediately clapping his hands over his eyes. "You're the one who changed your wards to let me in here any time."

She scoffed loudly. "My mistake," she said grumpily. "Anything else you'd like to say?"

"Yes," he mumbled. "Mousetrap."

She shook her head, sighing. "Why are you in my house?" she demanded. "It's Saturday morning, Malfoy, I was going to have a bath and relax - "

"Mousetrap, mousetrap to all of this," he said, blindly waving one hand in her direction while the other remained over his eyes. "No, Granger, seriously. I need a favor. Please. Take pity on me."

"What is it?" she snapped indignantly. "And you can put your hand down, I'm covered."

"Barely," he said, though he obediently lowered his hand. "I need you to come with me to Theo's house."

She flashed him a highly dubious smirk.

"No," she said tightly. "Get out of my house."

"Please, Granger, please, I promise you, I'll do anything you want," he said, lunging forward and falling to his knees. "Anything." He took her hand in his, giving her a piteous look of utter devotion.

"Mousetrap," she groaned, and he smiled triumphantly. "Why can't you go alone?"

"It's the twins' birthday party and I'm their godfather," he explained.

"And?" she prompted wearily.

"Astoria's their godmother," he said, wincing.
Hermione shook her head. "You're an idiot."

"I'm your idiot." He kissed her hand soundly. "Please, Granger. Please don't make me do this alone."

"I doubt she's going to hex you at a children's birthday party," she told him, privately enjoying the groveling. "I hardly think you need a human shield."

"I thought she was going to be out of town, but Theo owled me this morning to warn me," Malfoy explained. "Apparently she's still rather . . . put out."

"As she should be!" Hermione exclaimed. "Bore me with the technicalities all you want, but if you had just kept it in your pants - "

He cocked his head at her, smirking. "I'm not sure we've been properly introduced," he said airily. "Pot, is it? I'm kettle."

She huffed. "Touché."

He grunted in discomfort, still groveling at her feet. "Can I stand, please?"

She shrugged. "I think I prefer you on your knees."

"Mousetrap!"

"Fine," she permitted, yanking him up. "Fine."

"So you'll come with me?" he asked, flashing her his most obnoxiously handsome smile.

"When is it?" she asked, pretending to consult her schedule.

"Now."

She gave him a look of supreme displeasure, the kind she normally saved for Harry and - at one time - for Ron. "You owe me."

"Ah!" he cried, pulling her into his arms. "Thank you, thank you." He planted a loud, dramatic kiss on her that landed somewhere near her ear. "You're a goddess, Hermione Granger. An absolute goddess."

"Let me get dressed," she said, sighing dramatically and dragging her way through her flat.

"Um," he said, hurrying forward. "Can I maybe take a look at your closet, you know, just to, er, see - "

She glared at him. "Are you suggesting I don't know how to dress myself?"

"No, no," he assured her tentatively. "I'm sure whatever you have will be suitable" - he trailed off a bit, starting to mutter regretfully to himself - "for a garden party at Nott Manor, thrown by the woman with the world's highest standards - "

"Fine," she said, crossing her arms in exasperation. "Go ahead."

"Goddess, you are," he told her apologetically, rushing ahead of her and racing to her room.

He picked out a tasteful summer dress for the occasion - one that she was surprised to find he
appreciated, as it had always been a favorite of hers - while she battled her hair, taming it into something resembling submission and then getting yanked into the Floo the moment she set down her mascara.

"Why are you so nervous?" she hissed, knocking into him as they hurriedly stepped out of the fireplace at Nott Manor.

"I just hate these things," he muttered. "The twins are fine, Theo's great, but the whole thing is sure to be stuffy and" - he cut himself off, seeing the hostess. "Daphne!"

"Oh, hi Draco," she said, shifting the little girl in her arms to her hip. "Hermione," she said, surprised, then turned back to the pale blond wizard beside her. "Draco, please tell me you didn't bring her here to rub it in Astoria's face - "

"No, no," Malfoy said quickly. "Granger and I are just friends - she's just here to, you know - " he faltered. "Keep things . . . calm," he decided, settling on a phrase. "And free of conjured bees."

"Oh please," Daphne scoffed. "You are such a baby," she added, smirking.

Hermione could see now why Malfoy had been concerned with her apparel; Daphne Greengrass - Daphne Nott, now, she supposed - was flawless, her auburn chignon perfectly in place and her dress both clearly expensive and almost unnaturally clean, considering the armful of toddler. Hermione had never seen Ginny be this pulled together since having James - and didn't this woman have twins?

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," Daphne said suddenly, interrupting her reverie. "I don't mean to be rude, it really is lovely to have you - "

"Granger!" Theo exclaimed, strutting over to them with his son tossed over his shoulder. "What a surprise!" He glanced at Malfoy and regarded him warily, his eyes darting pointedly between the two of them. "You two aren't - "

"No," Malfoy said, sighing. "We're just friends. Will you kindly refrain from your blind accusations?" He sniffed. "They offend."

"Fine, fine," Theo relented, smiling casually. "Well let's get the lady a drink, Daph, what do you think?"

"Will you please not toss our son around like he's a sack of potatoes?" Daphne said crossly, following after him and turning to call out to Hermione. "Wait here, Hermione, give me a moment - "

Hermione realized she was smiling. Something about Theo and Daphne was very relaxed - despite their obvious refinement - and the lump of dread that had formed in her stomach at the thought of being in the metaphorical den of snakes slowly loosened.

"The kids are cute," Hermione commented, watching as Daphne handed Theo his daughter. The moment his wife's back was turned, Theo promptly flipped the little girl upside down, letting her giggle shrilly as she dangled above the floor. "What are their names?"

"Alessia and Milo," Malfoy replied, and then grinned fondly at them, watching them cling to their father's legs as Daphne spun around, admonishing her husband at once to put them down, Theo, for heaven's sake!"They're good kids."

"Draco Malfoy," Hermione said, feigning shock. "I never took you for the type to enjoy spending
time with children."

He shot her a sideways glance, brow arched. "I could say the same."

"What!" she exclaimed, her forehead creasing. "I'm great with kids! James loves me."

"Not a convincing sample size," he joked, and she rolled her eyes.

"I feel like I am very maternal," she insisted, and he chuckled a little.

"That's true," he allowed, nodding. "I can just see it now - you with a baby on your hip, transfiguring things and filing legal briefs while you read your little frizzy mini-Granger a chapter on Ancient Runes . . . "

"Whereas your mini-Malfoy would be born with a permanent smirk and its nose in the air," she said, and he laughed.

"Enjoying yourself, are you, Draco?"

A very stunning Astoria Greengrass sidled up next to him and he jumped about a foot in the air.

"Ah, Astoria," he said, a little too brightly. "Good to see you! You look - "

"Save it," she snapped.

"Right," he said meekly. "I have to, um - " he glanced apologetically at Hermione before darting away. "Have to help Daphne with the drinks!"

Hermione sighed, and Astoria shook her head.

"Smooth," Hermione commented, and Astoria grimaced.

"Are you sleeping with him?" she asked tightly.

"No," Hermione proclaimed loudly, a derisive snort nearly escaping her. "No. Definitely not."

"Good," Astoria replied, her lips pressed together in a thin, impatient line. "Don't."

Upon reaching Daphne and Theo, Malfoy bent to open his arms to his godchildren and they squealed in delight, wrapping their arms around his neck and giggling in his ears.

"They're such happy kids," Hermione remarked.

Astoria nodded. "It helps that their father isn't a monumental twat," she said primly, still staring at Malfoy.

Malfoy held out his hand to tiny, adorable Alessia and kissed it politely, offering her a low, dramatic bow. The little girl - a perfect miniature of her mother - smiled up at him, her large eyes shining with adoration, and Hermione could tell Malfoy was enraptured.

"Mousetrap," she muttered under her breath.

"What was that?" Astoria asked, taking a sip of her beverage.

"Nothing," Hermione said vaguely.
"This hardly seems like a fair trade, Granger," Draco grumbled in her ear, placing a hand on her back to steer her towards an empty seat. "Everyone here hates me."

"I fended off your ex-girlfriend and hung out with a bunch of Slytherins for you," she reminded him. "How is that not a fair trade?"

"Well for one thing, neither of us wants to be here," he said irritably, taking a seat beside her. "Or are you going to pretend you're enjoying this?"

"I have to be here," she reminded him. "He's my best friend. I can't not go."

"I'm your best friend," Draco corrected her. "He's your ex, and a shitty one at that."

"Hush," she snapped, looking around. "You know I couldn't be here alone."

"I don't know why you couldn't have just skipped this altogether and settled for sending them a very mediocre gift," he muttered, orating an imaginary card. "Dear Ron and Lavender, have a happy fucking life together, here's a goddamn set of tea cups."

"Malfoy!" she scolded him, smacking his chest. "Don't be difficult." She sighed. "Please," she added.

He softened, adjusting to put his arm around her. "Fine," he said in her ear. "If it helps, you look fucking gorgeous." He leaned back to nod approvingly at her, grinning triumphantly. "Eat your heart out, Weasley."

She smiled weakly. "Mousetrap."

"Fuck yeah, mousetrap," he sniffed, smiling to himself as he settled back against the chair.

The wedding was tacky and unpleasant, though Draco had decided that it would be long before he'd even showed up. He'd already hated Weasley more than enough when they were younger, and now the simmering revulsion was practically unbridled on Granger's behalf.

Lavender soon-to-be Weasley's gown was horrific, too. Draco snuck a look at Granger, whose tasteful red dress was perfect. She would surely never wear such a cupcake monstrosity.

"Mousetrap," he scolded himself.

Draco was only barely able to hear Lavender's vows; she sobbed through the whole thing, making them utterly incomprehensible.

"Lav-lav," Weasley began, and Draco nearly gagged. "Over the last few years, we have come a long, long way together - "

Draco looked surreptitiously at Granger; she seemed . . . a tinge green.

" - I promise to love and cherish you for the rest of our lives, to be faithful to you, and to always put you above all others - "

What a twat, Draco thought, fuming on Granger's behalf, and then looked over to realize she was struggling to breathe, doubled over in her seat.

" - I stand here today with you, the love of my life, to tell you with absolute confidence that you are the only woman I have ever loved - "
Granger did not look good.

"Up, get up," he urged her, pushing her and then half-lifting her in his attempt to unseat her from her chair, hurrying her along the side of the large tent and getting her out of sight.

The moment they'd gotten around to the other side of the Burrow she promptly threw up, coughing and sputtering as he stroked her exposed back in small circles.

"It's okay, Granger, it's okay," he coaxed her, tucking a loose curl behind her ear. "You're okay. I've got you."

"Did you hear him?" she asked bitterly. "Did you hear him say she was the only woman he ever loved?"

"Fuck him," Draco spat, scowling. "He's even dumber than I thought."

"I shouldn't have left the ceremony," she said, sighing as she dragged the back of her hand across her mouth. "Now people will talk."

"Let them talk!" Draco insisted, taking her face between his palms and then smoothing his hands over her shoulders and down her arms. "Fuck Weasley, fuck Brown, fuck everyone. He was never good enough for you," Draco added. "Never."

She blinked back tears, and he realized they were holding hands.

"Are we in love with each other?" she asked him.

It probably should have been a more startling realization than it was, but the truth was that he'd already known that for quite some time.

"I think so," he informed her sadly.

She sighed. "But I'm a mess right now."

He nodded. "That's fine." He lifted her chin to get the full benefit of her overlarge brown eyes. "I've always been a mess."

"So . . . should we do nothing?" she asked, biting her lip.

"Probably best," he agreed, nodding. "For now."

She cocked her head at him. "You'll still dance with me at the reception, right?"

"We're staying?" he asked, throwing his head back in disbelief. "Fuck me, Granger."

She grinned at him. "Mousetrap."

"Hermione, I need you to come up to the aurors' offices, right now."

Hermione smirked a little, remembering Ginny's reference to Harry's ill-timed "deer-faced Patronus." Sure, Harry, of course she'd be right there, she wasn't busy at all, she could just come right up, couldn't she?

She sighed, collecting the papers on her desk, tucking them under her arm, and slowly making her way to the Ministry elevator. She figured she might as well finish up her work from home if she
was going to be interrupted this late in the day.

"What is it, Harry?" she sighed indignantly, opening the door to his office and striding in without a second glance. "Wait - "

Malfoy was there and so was Ron, who must have only just gotten back from his month long trip with Lavender; it took Hermione a moment to realize that Ron had a black eye and a broken nose, and Malfoy sported a deep gash across his cheek.

"What is this?" Hermione demanded, putting her hands on her hips. "What on earth - "

"I told you not to call her," Malfoy mumbled, crossing his arms over his chest and addressing Harry. "I take full responsibility, okay? I don't need her to bail me out - "

She shook her head, half-laughing. "What did you do now, Malfoy?"

"Bloody git just attacked me!" Ron said, wincing as his swollen, cut lip brushed against his teeth. "No reason whatsoever - "

"Yeah, no reason," Malfoy snarled. "Not because you're worthless piece of rubbish, certainly not that - "

Harry sidled over to Hermione, speaking directly in her ear as Malfoy and Ron continued to goad each other, restrained magically in their respective chairs.

"When I pulled them apart, Malfoy kept saying 'you hurt my girl'," Harry said, a slight tone of amusement reaching his voice. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"What happened?" Hermione asked, dazed. Malfoy was fuming silently now, his arms still crossed angrily over his chest. He seemed to have gotten quite a few hits in before Harry had separated them; Ron was certainly worse for wear.

"They ran into each other in the hallway," Harry explained. "Malfoy's here for a permit or something, and I guess he, um," Harry paused, running his hand through his hair and laughing a little. "Felt the need for a little vigilante justice."

Vigilante justice. Hm.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, looking questioningly at Harry. "Do you know something?"

"I know I'm definitely not planning on writing Malfoy up for anything," Harry said casually, offering her an ambivalent shrug. "Can't really blame him for losing his temper. But," he added, grinning mercilessly, "I also couldn't pass up a chance to watch him sweat a little."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine," she said faintly, looking at her hands. "Why didn't you tell me you knew about Ron?"

Harry shrugged. "He's my best friend, and you hadn't told me about it," he said. "It wasn't my place to intervene."

"It's over," Hermione insisted quickly. "Long, long over."

"Oh, I know," Harry assured her, nodding. "Still." He offered her a crooked smile. "Can't say I'm too upset that someone got a punch in, even if it had to be Malfoy."

She sighed, patting Harry's knee gratefully, before walking over to where Malfoy sat, crouching a
little to make eye contact with him.

"Is he good to go, Harry?" she called over her shoulder, and Harry nodded.

"What?" Ron sputtered. "But - but he just attacked me, out of bloody nowhere -"

"Before I set you loose," Hermione warned loudly, not taking her eyes off Malfoy's face, "I need to ask you a question."

He sighed, looking down sheepishly as though he expected a lecture. "Go for it, Granger."

"Draco," she said, and at that, he looked up in surprise. "Um - " she bit her lip.

"Mousetrap," he cautioned, and she smiled.

"Marry me," she demanded bluntly, and across the room, Ron let out a strangled gasp.

Malfoy blinked. "I'm . . . not totally sure that counts as a question, Granger," he said slowly, a small smile creeping over his face.

"Hermione," she corrected. "And fine. Will you marry me?"

He grinned at her. "Yes," he told her, nodding vigorously. "Yes, Hermione. Fuck yes."

"Good," she said, smiling, and then she flicked her wand, allowing him to gather her in his arms and sweep her off her feet, her toes dangling above his shoes as he swung her around Harry's office.

"This is a really, really big mousetrap," he told her, finally stopping and hugging her so tightly she thought she might burst. "The worst possible mousetrap."

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed, though she wasn't listening. "You can't marry him - he's - he's awful -"

"Shut up, Ron," Harry cut him off dreamily, smiling at her from where he leaned against his desk.

"Holy fucking shit, mousetrap," Draco gasped, walking into what would soon be their bedroom.

She grinned at him. "You like?" she asked, gesturing to her new lingerie. "I got it for after the wedding."

"I just - I can't even - " he gaped at her, his mouth opening and closing vacantly. "Just - fucking mousetrap."

"You don't have to say that anymore," she told him, sauntering over to him and kissing him chastely on the cheek. "In a few hours, you'll be married to me, and then you can have all the sex."

"All of it," he agreed. "I hope I don't disappoint you," he added, smirking at her. "Though I'm absurdly proud of us for waiting."

"Well, we'd already come so far," she said primly, though she smiled rather lasciviously when he put his hands on her waist.

Merlin, her tiny, perfect waist and all that lace -
"Um, Granger," he said, coughing. "I think I just need to - "

She grinned at him, pulling him forward and kissing him soundly.

"Yes?" she asked, still smiling at him when they broke apart.

He shook his head. "I love you," he said, a preface.

The truest thing he'd ever said. A thing he'd say every day. Forever.

"I love you too," she told him, and she had never been more beautiful, her face alit with pleasure.

Fuck it.

"Tell Harry we'll be late," he instructed gruffly, picking her up and tossing her on the bed.

"I already did," she told him, eagerly yanking him on top of her. He groaned appreciatively in response.

"Fucking mousetrap, Granger," he said again, dipping to kiss her neck.

"I think you mean Malfoy," she reminded him, and he smiled against her skin.

Yes.

Yes, he did.

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Chapter End Notes

a/n: I forgot to dedicate the NottGrass drabble, so this one is dedicated to UnicornShenanigans, the one who demands all the drabbles with all the grabby hands.

Thanks for reading!
Reparations

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: AU, canon-compliant up to Battle of Hogwarts

Rating: T for some implied violence, some graphic images

Summary: Voldemort won the war and after five years, the Order of the Phoenix is reduced to a chaotic band of troublemakers, struggling to survive without money or resources. Draco is sent to the Malfoy Manor vault to check on a mysterious presence, and what he sees will make him question everything.

"Draco." His mother stopped, throwing her hand out and reaching for him. "Did you feel that?"

He stopped, stiffening. "The vaults?" he asked, sensing the shift in presence. "Where's Father?"

"Out," Narcissa replied, frowning. She glanced warily at him. "Who else is in the house?"

"Nobody," he said, thinking. "Though I could be wrong." He shrugged. "Want me to take a look, Mother?"

She nodded regally. "If you wouldn't mind, darling," she said airily, patting his shoulder.

He gave her a curt nod and pivoted quickly, heading for the stairs to the vault. He could have apparated there, certainly, as he was given to do when he didn't feel like traversing the expansive, palatial estate that was Malfoy Manor - but life as a Death Eater had taught him it was generally safer to open a door and prepare a defense than to materialize in the midst of a trap.

His feet tapped against the stone as his long legs carried him down the stairs, following the winding and darkened path to the place where the Malfoys stored their treasures.

Draco paused abruptly, holding his breath as he jerked to a sudden halt. The door to the vault was open.

How was that possible?

His father was with the Dark Lord, he knew that; there was a mission of sorts happening. Whoever was here, they weren't welcome.

He edged closer to the door, peeking inside; a very small, petite form was quickly sorting through the gold, tossing handfuls of it into a tiny beaded bag - altered with an undetectable extension charm, Draco guessed - and then taking care to rearrange the piles, making the absence indiscernible.

That hair . . . but it couldn't be.

Could it?
"Granger?" Draco croaked, his heart thudding wildly in his chest.

She whipped around, gasping, and pointed her wand straight at his chest.

"Malfoy?" she echoed, free hand still grasping the open bag. She coughed loudly, tucking it behind her. "How are you, er - doing?"

He couldn't seem to find the words to speak. "How are you not dead?" he asked bluntly, finally settling on the only coherent thing that came to mind.

She paused, thinking. "Oh, I'm dead," she said seriously. "This is a fantasy. I'm not actually here."

He smirked at her. "You certainly give yourself a lot of credit, Granger," he declared loftily. "Sorry, but you're not really one of my fantasies."

"Ah, well," she said, shrugging. "I tried."

She'd changed. There was a lightness about her, even in the midst of the dystopia that was the Dark Lord's new world. Or maybe Draco was just consumed by darkness, and she had always been the light.

"How are you not dead?" he repeated. "And how did you get in my house?"

"You know, you purebloods think you're so smart," she said musically, taunting him a little with a twist of her pretty mouth. "Blood wards and all that. But you know how easy it is to fool a blood ward?"

She flashed him the inside of her wrist, which was gorily cut and smeared. "A little blood from Harry, a little from Ron, a little from Lavender - and oh, you know. Others here and there," she said casually, listing the sources of her grotesque concoction with a carelessness that nearly made Draco's stomach turn. "You're all related, you know," she said, tsking. "A little clever mixing and voilà - I'm a Malfoy."

She was grinning mercilessly at him. "Ironic, isn't it?" she asked him, her eyes flashing. "You always mocked me for my blood. And yet if I set a blood ward, I'd be perfectly safe."

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked her, a little dazed by her response.

"Because you're not going to catch me," she told him. "And if you come any closer, I'll just disapparate."

Fair.

"You're alive," he said again, still unable to process it. "And the others - they're alive?"

"Any information that you think you have, it's only because it's what I wanted you to think," she told him - rather smugly, in his opinion. "Funny how much easier it is being dead," she added, giving him a mocking bow and gesturing to the bag she'd filled with his family's gold.

"How long have you been stealing from us?" he asked, still partially in shock.

"Years," she said tightly. "Though not just you. That would be unfair," she added, flashing him an impish smile.

His jaw dropped. "You've been stealing from purebloods for years?"
"Yes," she replied, her chin raised haughtily as though she dared him to try and insult her. "I'm dead, remember? Everyone's dead. So the Ministry has control of all of our vaults and assets." She shrugged again. "We need to survive, you know."

"Everyone," Draco echoed. "So the Order - does it still exist?"

"Of course it exists," she said, shaking her head exasperatedly. "You really think it would be that easy? That You-Know-Who would just win and we'd all . . . go away?"

Well, yes.

"I thought that's exactly what happened," Draco replied, frowning. "But you're alive."

"And interestingly, I'm still alive," she said, pointing to his wand where he fingered it loosely in his hand.

He realized he had never even pointed it at her.

Hardly seemed any point in doing so now.

"How did you get caught?" he asked. "This isn't exactly careful. My mother felt you in the wards."

"You weren't supposed to be here," she pointed out. "Everyone was supposed to be out of the house."

"How did you know that?" he asked suspiciously, furrowing his brow.

"Well, as a reminder, I didn't," she said, gesturing to him again. "But don't you find it odd that an anonymous tip finds its way to you all every - oh, month or so?"

He shook his head slowly, laughing. "You draw us out of our homes and steal our gold," he said, nodding with understanding. "Wow."

She curtsied, ducking her head with a devilish grin.

"You certainly are different, aren't you?" he asked, looking at her. She was more confident somehow; fearless. Undaunted. Brassy and gritty, and stunning somehow in her conceit.

Perhaps a life of crime suited her sensibilities more than a life of virtuous martyrdom.

"So are you," she told him. She finally lowered her wand and brought her hands into view, and he caught a glimpse of the scar on her wrist.

_Mudblood._

"Not different enough," he said softly, feeling sick at the reminder of what he'd allowed to happen to her in his house.

She caught his glance and stiffened, tugging her sleeve down. "So why are you here, anyway?" she asked loudly, cutting through the tension.

"My mother isn't well," he told her. "I try to stay back with her when I can." He swallowed uncomfortably. "I'm not exactly a favorite of the Dark Lord," he added. "I don't quite have the stomach for . . . what he requires."

She hummed softly, nodding. "I thought as much," she said, biting her lip. She flashed him a
brilliant smile. "I'm glad I wasn't wrong about you."

The words went straight to the core of his soul.

He opened his mouth to answer, but stopped when he felt a shift in the wards.

"Someone's here," he said, his heart thudding loudly. He looked intently at her for a minute, considering his options.

"Obliviate me if you need to," he said, choosing a side.

_Hers._

Her face, which had been bordering on smug throughout the entire conversation, suddenly went pale, and he realized she was struggling with indecision.

"Do it," he said quickly, turning over his shoulder. "Someone's coming."

She lifted her wand and pointed it at his face; he closed his eyes.

"Nevermind," he heard her say, and he opened one eye to see her hesitate. "You won't catch me, anyway."

Then a soft crack, and she was gone.

Footsteps.

"Draco."

It was his father.

"Draco, your mother said you were down here," Lucius said, looking around. "Was someone here?"

"I think so," Draco managed faintly. "We should . . . probably change the wards."

Lucius shrugged. "By all means," he said, and left Draco to ponder what exactly had just happened.

__________________________

She was alive. All this time he thought she'd been dead. He thought they'd _all_ been dead - not that it mattered. Potter and Weasley and the others. Not that they mattered. _She_ was alive.

He had never forgotten her face. He'd lied to her, about the fantasies. He'd thought for a moment that that was precisely what she was.

She was alive. That changed everything. That meant there was hope, somewhere, a life different from _this_. Someone else could still win. Someone else could still triumph.

_She was alive._

_She changes everything._

__________________________

It took him almost three months before he found the Order's hideout. Or at least, the hideout belonging to what now seemed more like the Disorder of the Phoenix.

Her eyes were wide when he knocked on the door.
"How did you find me?" she snarled. "How?"

"Relax," he said, holding up a large bag of galleons and food. "Brought you something."

She snatched it out of his hands. "Why?" she asked, holding it protectively to her chest. He imagined she hadn't been eating much; she looked thinner than the last time he'd seen her, and he figured the last batch that she'd stolen had likely run out.

"You need it," he said, shrugging.

"How did you find me?" she repeated, not letting him in. He could see that there were people behind her; he assumed there were at least two other wands trained on him from somewhere he couldn't see.

"I know you," he reminded her. "You said I wouldn't be able to catch you. But I didn't want to catch you," he said. "And you obviously know that, or I'd already be dead."

It was true. She could have easily killed him by now.

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You set this place up like the Room of Requirement," he said airily. "The same way you did it in our fifth year, when you set up Dumbledore's Army. Only people who know what they're looking for can get in." He grinned at her. "Right?"

"Clearly not," she said bluntly, gesturing to where he stood in the doorway.

"There's an exception, of course, as I knew there would be," he informed her. "I was looking for you, but not to catch you," he explained, "which was a clever loophole in your wards." He nodded appreciatively at her. "Your idea, I presume."

"What makes you say that?" she asked stiffly, though he could tell by the look on her face that he'd been right.

"I know you, Granger," he repeated. "You wouldn't want to close off a sanctuary from people in need. You've still got that hero complex," he told her, then flashed her his arrogant smirk.

She growled a little. "You say that like it's a bad thing," she said grumpily.

He shook his head. "It's not."

They looked at each other for a long time.

"I'm sorry about your mother," she said softly.

He swallowed. The pain was still fresh.

"Shall I come back next week?" he asked, and she gave him a tentative nod. He turned slowly, beginning to walk away.

"Bring some chocolate, would you?" she called after him. "Any kind. I'm not picky."

He chuckled. "Sure," he said, smiling at her over his shoulder.

"You're sure?" Potter said, his green eyes flashing. "You're sure this will work?"
"Of course I'm sure," Draco replied, irritated. "I don't make a habit of rushing into things."

"It could work, Harry," Granger said, looking over Draco's notes. "If we can draw most of his forces here -"

She started motioning over Draco's hand drawn plans and he watched her, eyeing the way that even while she hesitantly bit her lip in thought, her gestures were firm and confident. Whatever had happened to her while she'd gone underground, it had managed to make her a leader. It made her self-assured and strong, comfortable in her skin in a way she'd never been at school.

She was beautiful, too. But then again, she always was.

"All I know is that he'll be there," Draco said. "His defenses will be down. He won't be traveling with as many Death Eaters."

"It makes sense," Granger commented, nodding slowly. "He's been taking so few precautions lately."

"He's gotten comfortable," Draco agreed. "You'll have a shot at him, and - " he glanced at Granger. "If you trust me, I'll have a shot at the snake."

Granger's eyes glittered as they met his. "I trust you," she said, and he lay awake that night replaying those precious words, clearing his mind of any thought but the sound of her voice in his ears.

More than one way to skin a snake. Draco did it with a sword.

He met Potter's eyes across the room. Both their faces were bloodied and bruised.

"Do it," he shouted.

Green eyes, a spell, and a flash of green light. Howling and cheering. Pain and celebration. Granger running towards him, his arms finally around her. A breath. A deep breath. A second breath, because he could take them now. As many as he wanted. As many as he could.

His arms finally around her.

*She changes everything.*

"This is so unfair," Granger huffed, straightening and brushing a curl out of her eyes. "You shouldn't have to do this."

"Reparations, Granger," Draco drawled, smiling at her. "I didn't realize you were suddenly so opposed to thievery."

She scowled at him. "That was different!" she insisted. "The purebloods had more than enough, and we - we were trying to survive -"
"I still have more than enough," he assured her. "I don't need all of this," he added, gesturing around him to everything in the vault. "And with Potter offering me a job with the aurors, I don't need a stockpile of gold. I can actually work for a living."

"You're really just going to get rid of everything?" she asked, pouting a little. "I don't think it's fair, I mean - we couldn't have won without you - "

"I have everything I need," he assured her, stepping in close and bending to kiss her.

_She changes everything._

"That's sweet," she breathed, her eyes closed. "But I'm still upset."

He laughed. "Well, I am planning on keeping one thing," he said, walking over to the part of the vault he'd intentionally left for last. "If you think I should."

She looked up, following him. "What is it?"

He picked up the small item, holding it out for her to see. "I don't know whether or not this is to your taste," he said carefully. "But it was my mother's, and I think I should keep it." He corrected himself. "I think _you_ should keep it."

She took the ring from him, her mouth falling open. "Malfoy, is this what I think it is?"

He shrugged. "If you want," he said quietly, taking it back from her and slipping it onto her finger.

A perfect fit.

"Looks like you did catch me after all," she said softly, and they both smiled.

_She changes everything._

Chapter End Notes

_a/n: I have recently begun trying to convince elleaeterna to write a Bonnie and Clyde style Dramione crime AU, and this was an idea that sparked from that conversation. If you like the concept of Dramione as partners in crime, go read her stuff and then bug her until she has no choice but to do that AU. Obviously, this drabble is for her._

. . . and coming soon, a Hinny (Harry x Ginny) by request.
Bachelorette, Part I

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: T for now, though that will likely change.

Summary: Part of what will likely be a lengthy series of drabbles based on the reality show "The Bachelorette," wherein eligible men in the wizarding world compete for Hermione Granger's affections five years after the war.

[Camera pans from a large, stately manor house to where Lee Jordan is holding a microphone, adjusting his suit.]

"Hello witches and wizards, and welcome to the post-war edition of the Bachelorette!"

[Studio applause; Lee starts walking]

"With You-Know-Who finally bested, it's time to focus on the things that really matter - life, love, and the pursuit of a beautiful witch!"

[Editor's cut:

Lee, reading a script and looking confused: "You really want me to say this?"

(Muttered response.)

Lee: "Okay. It's just, you know. Really stupid."]

"Let's meet our newest Bachelorette, shall we?"

[Lee joins Hermione, who is wearing a floor length red gown and looks both extremely beautiful and exceedingly uncomfortable.]

"Hermione Granger is widely regarded as the brightest witch of her age, and has recently been part of the tour de force that finally dethroned He Who Must Not Be Named. A close friend of Harry Potter, the infamous Boy Who Lived, Hermione enjoys curling up with a good book, long walks on the beach, and spending time with friends."

[Lee turns to Hermione.]

"So, Hermione, tell us - how do you feel?"

[She glares at him, her subsequent tone dripping with sarcasm.]

"Great. I'm living the dream."
"Kingsley. You can't be serious," Hermione said roughly, pausing to scoff. "You want me to be on a reality show in which men compete for my attention?"

"Look, it seems ridiculous, I know," Kingsley rumbled. "But test audiences show that the Ministry isn't exactly favored since it was - "

"- taken over by an Imperiused Minister and a psychopathic undersecretary?" Hermione interrupted, feigning surprise. "Color me astonished, sir."

Kingsley had the decency to flush slightly. "In any case, Miss Granger, the important thing here is that we need a trusted face to put before the public, and ideally, one that supports the Ministry."

"Don't you think I'm a little young to have people compete for my hand in marriage?" Hermione asked drily. "I mean, among the many other problems with this idea."

"It's entertainment, Miss Granger," Kingsley insisted, unswayed. "You won't be held to any obligations upon completion of filming."

"This seems very bread-and-circus to me, sir," Hermione said bitterly. "How stupid do you think the general public is, exactly, that watching a dating show about me will distract them from the multitude of political problems?"

Kingsley hesitated. "Well, I would hardly say a multitude - "

Hermione pursed her lips primly, raising her hand to enumerate the factors on her slender, unpolished fingers. "There's the fact that the former Death Eaters are still being publicly shamed in the midst of their prosecution, there's the many families struggling from losses from the war, there's the fact that nobody trusts the Ministry - "


"I think this is fruitless," Hermione insisted loftily. "I'm not interested in being part of this . . . sham."

She turned swiftly to exit the room.

"Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter have agreed to participate as competitors," Kingsley called after her, and she pivoted slowly to face him.

"What?" she exclaimed, aghast. "No. They didn't."

"They did," Kingsley replied evenly. "As have many other eligible wizards from your class at Hogwarts."

"What?" Hermione screeched. "Like who?"

Kingsley's smile stretched slowly across his face.

"I thought you didn't want any part of it?" he asked demurely, flashing her an irritating smirk.

She sighed, taking a seat and allowing her ankle to dance agitatedly as she fidgeted, legs crossed.
"Who?" she repeated tightly, an unspoken concession.

[Camera focuses on Lee.]

"Our first contestant, who is undoubtedly the most famous person to ever be featured on the show, is none other than Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived!"

[Harry appears, straightening his dress robes and smiling amicably at the host.]

"Hi Lee! Good to see you."

[They shake hands - camera cuts to interview segment.]

Interviewer (off-screen): "So, Harry, why did you decide to submit yourself as a candidate on The Bachelorette?"

Harry, fidgeting and laughing nervously: "Well, it was a few things, really. Things hadn't really been working out too well with my love life lately. My life in general, if I'm being quite honest."

[Screen fills with slow motion images of Harry looking downtrodden, staring at the ocean and skipping rocks from a high, rocky cliff.]

Harry voiceover: "It's not easy being the Boy Who Lived, you know. I can't exactly live a normal life, and neither can the person I'm with."

[Images of Harry and his ex-girlfriend Ginny Weasley during happier times flash across the screen in a montage.]

Harry voiceover: "My last relationship ended rather terribly, you know - well. [laughs] Everybody knows. Another fun aspect of being such a public figure."

[Close up shot of Harry looking somber.]

Harry voiceover: "In a way, that's what makes me want to consider this. I mean, if anyone is going to understand what it's like for me, it's Hermione. We've been close for years, and maybe there's something there that I overlooked."

[Hopeful music plays.]

Harry voiceover: "I'm looking forward to giving it a chance. Who knows? [shrugs] Maybe it will be . . . magical."

[Camera returns to Lee and Harry.]

Lee: "Well, Harry, I know we all want what's best for you. [Clasps shoulder] Are you ready to say hello to Hermione?"

Harry, looking relaxed and chipper: "Ready as I'll ever be!"

Lee: "Excellent. Well, you head on in, and we'll check back with you after we meet the rest of our contestants!"

Harry: "Thanks, Lee. [Nods encouragingly] Wish me luck!"

Lee, to camera: "What a rascal - like he needs luck! [Shakes head] Odds-on favorite for sure."
Lee: "Next up: Ron Weasley!"

Lee, suddenly very serious: "Now, Ron, you and Hermione have a history together."

Ron, nodding: "Yes. That's true."

Lee, grinning mercilessly: "So this should be quite fun to watch, then! Let's see what Ron has to say."

Ron voiceover: "You know, I don't think the timing was ever great, and after she decided to go back to Hogwarts and I went into the Auror program at the Ministry, we didn't see as much of each other."

Ron, noticeably uncomfortable: "Of course I have some reservations, but Harry and I are mates, and it's all in good fun."

Ron, smugly: "Whoever Hermione's meant to be with will probably become clear early on."

Lee, enthusiastically: "Well, it sounds like you see yourself in the running for the First Impression Rose!"

Ron, shrugging but clearly quite confident: "I think I have a fair chance. There was always something between us, after all."

Lee: "Of course. [grins] "Better head in then, and we'll check in with you later!"

[Camera cuts back to where Lee and Ron are standing.]
"Let's see who else will be joining us on this season of the Bachelorette! Will the one to win Hermione's heart be the lovable Irishman with arsonist tendencies?"

[Seamus Finnigan appears on the screen, crossing his arms and grinning widely.]

"Will it be the witty Slytherin with the heart of gold?"

[A shot of Theo Nott, obviously trying to be cool but abruptly laughing at something from behind the camera.]

"Or perhaps the handsome charmer with the silver tongue?"

[Blaise Zabini offers the camera a smoldering pout.]

"And coming up after the break - is there someone from Hermione's past that could throw a wrench in her happy ending?"

[Ominous music plays; a clip of a pale hand reaches to open a door.]

Lee, animatedly: "See who it is - and more - coming up next on The Bachelorette!"

"When you say this is compulsory for me," Draco said through his teeth, "I can only assume you are misremembering the definition of the word compulsory."

"I am not," Narcissa snapped loftily. "Draco. You will participate."

"You understand that this is Hermione Granger, correct?" Draco snapped, thrusting his shoulders back. "The muggle-born?"

"That's not what's important anymore," Narcissa scolded him. "Draco. You know perfectly well what has happened to us since the end of the war -"

" - yes, and?"

" - and this is our ticket back into the public's good graces!" Narcissa insisted. "If you can manage to appear likable for one single cocktail party -"

"That's giving me an awful lot of credit," Draco grumbled.

" - that would make a considerable difference for us!" she continued, ignoring him.

Narcissa reached for her son, placing her hands coolly on either side of his face.

"Listen to me, Draco, I want what's best for you," she reminded him. "Trust me. If you can just show up, be a gentleman, play the game for a bit -"

Draco feigned an elaborate, dramatic series of gagging motions.

" - I really think that would open up a world of opportunity for you," she concluded wearily. "Who knows? Maybe she'll take to you." She stroked his hair fondly. "You are quite wonderful when you allow yourself to be, you know."

"She hates me," Draco muttered. "And it's mutual."
"Doesn't matter," Narcissa declared. "Love and hate can look eerily similar."

"*Love* is quite a stretch, Mother," Draco argued, making a face. "Besides, there's no way she'd want to keep me around. I doubt she trusts me in the slightest."

"Fine," Narcissa said, shrugging daintily. "But if you can make a good impression at the start, I really do think that would be helpful for all of us." She looked pointedly at her son. "Are we in agreement?"

Draco sighed. His mother was an exceedingly skilled tactician, and she made an excellent point. He *would* very much like to be able to enter a wizard establishment again without facing an instant haze of distrustful silence, or be able to further his own business pursuits without having doors slammed in his face.

"Yes," he grumbled, feeling an instant plummeting in his gut. "Fine. I'll do it."

"That's my charming son," Narcissa said affectionately, kissing his cheek.

[Camera pans to Lee, who is now waiting for the final contestant to arrive.]

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment you've all been waiting for - this season's resident bad boy, Draco Malfoy!"

[Editor's cut:

Draco, making a face of pure revulsion: "Do you really need to call me the 'resident bad boy'?"

(Muttered reply.)

Draco: "Seems . . . gratuitous."

(More mutters.)

Draco, sighing: "I know I signed a contract, but still - " ]

Lee, gesturing: "Come on out, Draco!"

[Camera shows Draco walking through door, forcing a smile.]

Draco, gallantly: "Hi, Lee."

Lee: "Good to see you, Draco!" [They shake hands.] "Are you ready for this?"

Draco, fighting a grimace: "Absolutely."

[Camera cuts to interview.]

Interviewer, off-screen: "So, Draco. Everyone is pretty aware of your somewhat dark and prejudicial past."

Draco, looking exceptionally handsome in a fitted dark wool jumper: "Yes, but hopefully people are also aware that it's just that - my past. I'm hoping that Gr- er, Hermione will be able to see that I've come a long way from who I once was."

[Dramatic piano music plays.]
Draco: "I've clearly made a lot of mistakes in my past, and I had the wrong idea about a lot of things."

[Camera cuts to Draco looking broodily out the window while the camera conspicuously focus on his left wrist.]

Draco: "But I'm willing to admit that I was wrong, and I've put that behind me. And I'm just - I'm really looking forward to seeing Hermione again." [His sincerity is questionable.]

Interviewer: "When was the last time you spoke to her?"

Draco, swallowing uncomfortably: "Um. Not any time that I imagine she looks back on fondly."

[He shifts in his seat.] "But I really am here to start over, and I hope she feels the same way."

"What do you mean Draco Malfoy is going to be on the show?" Hermione insisted. "Surely he knows he's going to be one of the first to go," she muttered, scowling.

"Actually, we'd prefer you kept him on for a while," Kingsley informed her smoothly. "It would help with easing the tension on former Death Eaters, and we think it would make for a compelling story."

"Kingsley!" Hermione snapped, whirling to face him where he sat. "I agreed to do this when I thought I was just going to - I don't know," she fumbled lamely, fully aware she was whining like a child, "Just - hang out with people who don't openly despise me."

She started pacing the room. "But now you want me to pretend to be interested in Draco Malfoy?"

She was sputtering in anger. "You know what he calls me, right?"

"Times have changed, Miss Granger," Kingsley told her solemnly. "He doesn't need to be your final selection. We would just prefer that you not eliminate him immediately."

She clenched her fists tightly in agitation. "But -"

"Early test audiences indicate that he might be very successful for the show," Kingsley added. "And the more popular it is, the better job you're doing, I might add."

Hermione huffed. "I don't care about the show," she insisted stubbornly. "But I do care about my integrity!"

"Fine," Kingsley said, unmoved. "You can employ your integrity."

"Thank you," she said, sniffling.


[Camera shows clips of Hermione mingling with her guests, smiling politely. She seems happiest to see Harry, whom she greets with a warm embrace, and slightly less comfortable about seeing Ron. He pulls her aside, and the camera follows.]

Ron: "How are you?"

Hermione, not making eye contact: "Fine. And you?"

Ron: "It's good to see you."
His eyes flick nervously to the camera.

Hermione, awkwardly: "Right. Sure."

[Camera cuts to interview with Hermione.]

Hermione: "What's the deal with Ron? Well, it's really not that interesting a story." [She blushes.] "We have some romantic history."

Interviewer, off-screen: "Was there some fallout from the breakup?"

Hermione, hastily: "Oh no! Nothing like that." [She shrugs.] "We just sort of... faded away after a bit. We were focusing on other things in our lives, I think." [She pauses, looking thoughtful.] "We never even technically broke up. I hope I'm not cheating!" [She laughs.] "Oh god." [She stops, startled.] "I maybe should have checked on that."

[Camera cuts back to her and Ron.]

Hermione: "Well, I guess I should... you know. Mingle."

Ron, openly disappointed: "Right."

[They wander off separately. Camera cuts back to interview with Hermione.]

Hermione: "Am I planning to kiss someone tonight?" [Laughs.] "I hardly think I would plan on that. I don't know. If the moment demands it, I suppose."

[Camera pans to Ron looking longingly at Hermione as she attempts to talk to Seamus, who is drunk and has removed his shirt.]

Hermione slipped into the kitchen of the mansion they were using for filming, pausing to take a much needed bite of food. She took a bite of a canape and closed her eyes, savoring it. She had been too nervous prior to the events of the night to actually manage to eat much.

There was a cough from her left. "That's the most aroused you've looked all night."

She choked a little, turning to glare angrily at the interruption. "Malfoy!" she exclaimed. "Could you not... skulk around?"

"I'm not skulking," he replied evenly, pulling out a kitchen stool next to hers and sitting down. "I was here first."

"Still," she insisted warily. "You could have - I don't know. Announced your presence."

He shrugged. "Why not let bygones be bygones," he suggested, smirking a little.

She let her eyes travel over his dress robes, trying not to note the way he pleasantly filled out his perfectly tasteful attire.

"Is that an apology?" she asked pointedly.

"Oh, come on, Granger," he retorted. "Read between the lines. You're smart enough."

"I am," she agreed. "But I'd rather hear the words."
She watched his tongue drag lightly over his lips.

"I'll save it for the cameras, then, if you want a show," he said, his entire countenance aloof and disinterested.

He looked good. She hated to admit it, but he really did.

"It's probably best we're running into each other this way," she countered loftily, shoving aside her observation of his physicality. "I've just spoken to Ron and it was a bit of a mess."

"Best to air our issues out now, don't you think?" Malfoy agreed. "Put on a convincing show."

She wrinkled her nose. "So you've been told to act too, then?"

"Of course," Malfoy replied, rolling his eyes. "You can't possibly think this was my first choice of activity."

"I hear they're calling you the 'resident bad boy,'" she said, giggling a little. "You wear it well, Malfoy."

His nose wrinkled distastefully at that, though he chose to overlook it. "You should probably call me Draco," he corrected her. "Better for both of us, I think, if we just agree we're both miserable and put on a convincing show."

"Kind of you," she said wryly, grabbing a carrot and biting down daintily. "Man of my dreams, you are."

"Just you wait," he said, and she thought he saw the corner of his mouth twitch upwards in a smile.

One of the staff assistants poked their head in. "Hermione, ready to come back out?"

"Yes," she sighed, popping a cherry tomato in her mouth and heading out. "See you out there?" she asked, pausing to turn to Draco.

He was looking at her strangely, as though an idea had just occurred to him.

"See you soon," he said, and now he was definitely smirking at her.

It gave her an odd flutter in her chest that she quickly and violently suppressed.

"Indeed," she said formally, turning and strutting out of the room.

[Camera focuses on Hermione, who is talking to Blaise and fighting a yawn. Behind her, Draco enters the room.]

Draco, to Blaise: "Excuse me." [Nods politely at Blaise.] "Do you mind giving me a moment with the lady?"

Blaise, nodding: "Sure. Nice talking to you, Hermione." [He leans in to kiss her cheek and she allows it, coolly turning towards him.]

Hermione, to Blaise: "Of course."

[Blaise leaves; Draco offers Hermione his arm.]
Draco: "Let's talk privately, shall we? I think I have some things I need to tell you."

Hermione, hesitantly: "Sure." [She takes his arm.] "I think the garden is available."

Draco, nodding: "The garden it is."

[They walk out together; everyone else has noticed, and all conversation stops as the other contestants gather around a window, watching.]

Hermione: "So."

Draco, unnaturally calm: "So."

Hermione: "You had some things to tell me?"

Draco: "I did." [He nods.] "But there's something I want to do first."

Hermione, nervously biting her lip: "Yes?"

[Draco halts abruptly and yanks her toward him by the waist, kissing her firmly. She gasps slightly against his mouth but slowly relaxes in his grip, putting her hands on his upper arms and letting him support her. The kiss goes on for a surprisingly long time. An unreasonably long time, all things considered.]

Hermione, breaking away: "What the hell was that?"

Draco, murmuring to her: "Listen, I've done a lot of terrible things in my life, and one of those things was pretending I didn't care for you all these years. I'm not going to let another moment go by without letting you know how I feel." [He kisses her again and she seems to melt in spite of herself.] "I owe you a thousand apologies, and I'm going to start making it up to you now."

Hermione, stunned: "Um - "

[She looks at the camera, panic in her eyes. Camera cuts to interview with Hermione.]

Hermione: "Is he being sincere? I don't know. Of course I don't know." [She shakes her head.] "I can't possibly know what's going on his head after that."

Interviewer, off-screen: "You didn't know he had feelings for you in the past?"

Hermione: "No, no, of course not." [She raises a hand to her lips, looking dazed.]

Interviewer: "Did you enjoy it?"

Hermione: [Is silent.]

Interviewer: "Hermione?"

Hermione looks up, startled: "Hm? Did you say something?"

[Camera cuts back to Hermione and Draco.]

Hermione, whispering: "What do you want from me?"

Draco: "Nothing." [Kisses her again, and this time Hermione is visibly receptive, putting her arms around his neck.]
Hermione, stuttering: "We - um. We should go back."

Draco, no less confident: "If that's what you want."

Draco: "Have a good night, Hermione."

Hermione: "I - you - "

"Ladies and gentlemen, the evening is now coming to a close! Who will get the First Impression Rose? Who will not be returning to the mansion? Find out next on The Bachelorette!"

"Owls are flying in like crazy," Mafalda said breathlessly. "People are raving about the kiss."

"Is it as we expected?" Kingsley asked, looking up from his desk.

"Audiences were fairly typical from the start," Mafalda admitted. "But as soon as Draco kissed Hermione, people have been writing in like mad!"

"Hm," Kingsley muttered to himself, then quickly started scrawling on a scrap of paper. "Get this to Lee as soon as possible," he said, finishing the note with a flourish and handing it to his assistant.

"What do you mean, I have to give it to Ron or Draco?" Hermione said, stomping her tired foot. It was well into the middle of the night.

Lee shrugged. "Look, those are just my instructions," he said wearily. "You have to cut two people and you have to give Ron or Draco the rose."

"But - " she stammered in her exhaustion. "But I really enjoyed talking to Theo, you know, and - and Terry Boot is quite interesting - "

"Hermione," Lee said, sighing. "Just pick one and let's go home."

She groaned, aiming a swift kick at a nearby table leg.

"Fine," she snapped. "Let's go."

"Gentlemen, there are ten roses available and twelve of you. Two of you must go home today, while the others will continue to stay in the mansion and battle it out for Hermione's heart."

[A pregnant pause. Hermione steps into view, looking nervous and exhausted.]
Lee: "Hermione. Are you ready?"

Hermione, tentatively: "Yes."

Lee: "The first rose is the First Impression Rose, which will go to the contestant that you had the strongest connection with tonight. That contestant will be safe from elimination tonight and for one additional week. Have you decided who that is?"

Hermione: [exhales shakily] "Yes." [She picks up the rose and looks up, her eyes scanning the crowd.]

[Intense orchestral music plays. The moment drags on for much too long.]

Lee: "Hermione?"

Hermione: [Looks instantly regretful.] "Draco."

[A gasp escapes the crowd. Draco smirks, stepping forward to stand entirely too close to Hermione's face. The sexual tension is palpable.]

Hermione, sounding very rehearsed: "Draco. Do you accept this rose?"

Draco: "I do."

[He leans towards her and her eyes widen in anticipation, but he gives her a brief embrace and quickly saunters back to the group.]

Lee: "Okay, Hermione. Are you ready to give out the other nine roses?"

Hermione: [nods] "Yes."

[She picks the roses up and distributes them one by one. The final rose sits on the table, with Ernie MacMillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Michael Corner remaining.]

Hermione: [takes a deep breath] "Michael."

[Michael looks relieved; Ernie and Justin are clearly disappointed. Hermione hugs them both but looks rather relieved to have it all done with. She and Draco lock eyes and quickly look away.]

Lee: "Congratulations, gentlemen, on being Hermione's choice!" [Turns to camera] "And now, a look at some scenes from later this season on the Bachelorette!"

[Clips of Hermione laughing with the various candidates.]

Ron voiceover: "I don't know, I thought we had something, but I'm not sure." [Camera cuts to him looking bitter.] "I hope it's not too late to change things."

Seamus voiceover: "I definitely thought it would be an easy win for Ron, but that might not be the case."

[Clip of Hermione holding hands with Theo, smiling.]

Theo: "Sure, she's having fun." [He shrugs.] "But so am I."

[Camera cuts to Draco interview. He is openly frustrated.]
Draco: "Did I get the first impression rose? Sure. But am I thrilled she kissed Potter? No. No, of course not."

[Clip of Hermione laughing as Harry picks her up, honeymoon-style, and carries her inside the mansion.]

Harry: [shrugs innocently] "Hey, it's about Hermione, isn't it? That's who I'm here for." [He shakes his head.] None of these other jokers."

[Camera returns to Lee, who is grinning.]

"All of that and more this season, on . . . The Bachelorette!"

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Are we done now? Please tell me we're done now."

(Muttered response.)

Lee: [tears microphone off collar, throws it on the ground] "Merlin's tits, what a long fucking day -"

Exits screen view.]

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Obviously this is utter nonsense but hopefully you have fun. The updates to this will probably not be consecutive, as the actual show is done in 10 installments and even though I will not do ten of these, I don't know yet how many it will take. I am still doing the Hinny for MahoganyJinx (as soon as Harry and Ginny start speaking to me again) but this one is for my love DrSallySparrow, who might appreciate the absurdity (I hope).
Toothbrush

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Toothbrush

Pairing: Hinny (Harry x Ginny)

Universe: Potterverse, canon-compliant

Rating: T

Summary: Honestly, this isn't really about anything. Pairing requested by UnicornMist.

"Harry," Ginny mumbled, stumbling past him into the bathroom. "I'm so late - I really need you to move -"

Harry reluctantly obliged, his eyes drawn to the flick of her red hair as she tossed it over her shoulder, his t-shirt barely covering the top of her legs. Her lips were still swollen, her feet still bare, her entire countenance flushed and frantic.

She was beautiful.

"Mum's going to kill me," she muttered, shoving him aside to gain access to the sink. "Not to mention Ron, if he catches me downstairs," she added, splashing water on her face and then reaching out a hand, wordlessly demanding a towel.

"It's not like this would be a surprise to him," Harry reminded her, turning to grab one and then placing it lightly in her waiting palm.

"Still," she said, roughly patting her face dry and flipping her hair, tousling it to undo the kinks from her usual restless, sheet-dominating sleep. "I'm not sure he'd be thrilled to know this is where I go every night, particularly considering he lives here." She scowled. "I wish you'd chosen Hermione as a roommate," she added, flashing Harry an impertinent glare. "She's much more reasonable."

Harry shrugged, his eyes on the curve of her arse that was now visible as she pulled her hair up into a ponytail. "She wanted her own flat," he murmured by way of explanation. "I guess privacy is important to some people," he added, grinning knowingly as she made a face.

It was, after all, her idea to keep things quiet between them now that she had finished at Hogwarts. She was set to join the Harpies for the season and, to her credit, she didn't want her relationship with Harry to be "a distraction."

So instead, it was . . . not a secret, exactly, as there were no secrets when it came to the Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived, the hero who saved the wizarding world from the Dark Lord, etcetera - but she had seen fit to keep things light between them. Ginny Weasley was not in a hurry for marriage or commitment; she was not particularly in a hurry for much, really, except a quaffle in her hands and a World Cup title. Harry understood that.

And yet it was a week out from her N.E.W.T.s, and she had yet to spend a single night at the
Burrow. Not that anyone knew that, of course.

Privacy. It was the principle of the thing.

"Don't," she instructed, pursing her lips. She looked around the bathroom, brow furrowed as she strained to remember something.

Her still unworn pants, possibly; not that Harry was in a hurry to remedy the situation.

"I got you something," he said, remembering. He reached into a drawer, pulling out the innocuous item he'd thrown in as an afterthought. "Here," he said, offering her the toothbrush.

She took it from him, scowling with skepticism. "What's this?"

"A horcrux," he said, shrugging.

She smacked him, hard, directly across the shoulder. "Harry!"

"Ouch!" he insisted, pouting. "It's a toothbrush, you - "

She glared at him.

" - you beautiful, lovely, kind-hearted witch," he finished helplessly, raising his hands in defeat.

"Why?" she demanded, putting her hands on her hips.

He gaped at her, unable to fathom the source of her fiercely adverse reaction.

"It's for oral hygiene, see - "

"Harry!" she smacked him again. "Answer the question!"

He sighed, always imprisoned by his own need to satisfy the fiery sprite that he'd chosen. "I just thought you'd want one," he said, somewhat defeatedly. "You know, to leave here," he explained weakly, waving his hand at the generally sparse bathroom counter.

"Why?" she snapped again, hands on her diminutive hips. "I don't need to leave a toothbrush behind, Harry, I'm a witch. Watch - "

She picked up her wand from the counter, raising it and tapping the bar of soap that sat on the lip of the sink. "Toothbrush," she said, gesturing to the now transfigured item.

She waved her wand at the towel that lay draped across the faucet. "Toothbrush," she said pointedly, flashing him a look. One of those truly Ginny looks, the kind that always stopped him in his tracks, his breath caught in his throat just from her unholy mix of utter loveliness and supreme, unfailing stubbornness.

She grabbed his wrist, gesturing to his watch. "Toothbrush - "

"That's enough," he said hastily, yanking his hand out of her grasp. "Honestly, Gin," he sighed resignedly. "I was just trying to be helpful - "

"But why?" she repeated firmly, her withering gaze questioning.

Harry could not, for the life of him, understand the absurdity of her reaction. But, he reminded himself with a grimace, she would not be Ginny Weasley, Girl Almighty, if she did not spend the
majority of his time driving him to a state of complete insanity and impenetrable confusion.

"Well," he said slowly, "I figure if you're going to be around a lot, you know, then . . . I thought I'd just try to give you the things that you need."

Which was true, of course. He was perfectly fine with waiting for her to be ready to be with him; after all, she'd certainly done plenty of waiting for him, hadn't she? The lying to her mother, the sneaking around behind his best friend's back - that was all fine. He could be patient.

The toothbrush was just an offering. Perhaps she would want the toothbrush. Perhaps not. But either way, wasn't it best that she knew it was available?

More than available, really. Wasn't it best that she knew it was hers?

She opened her mouth to respond and then stopped abruptly, her eyes narrowing as she considered him.

"Is this a toothbrush, Harry?" she asked, her voice uncharacteristically hesitant. "Or is it a metaphor?"

"It's a toothbrush," he assured her. "I think," he qualified, suddenly confused.

She paused for a moment, her eyes wide as she considered his answer.

And then she suddenly knocked his hands aside, tossing the multitude of toothbrushes he was now holding onto the floor and careening into his arms, filling his nose with the smell of her hair as her lips gently grazed the side of his neck.

"You're an idiot," she told him, turning to kiss him firmly on the cheek.

"Um," he grunted in bewilderment, his eyes following her as she bounded away into his bedroom. "So - do you want it?"

"Sure," she called, her voice muffled as she tore his shirt over her shoulders and slipped quickly into her own clothes. Harry, in turn, watched with regretful disappointment as the freckles that dusted her shoulders, the ones he made a point to memorize each night that she was in his bed, disappeared under the soft material of her shirt. "Leave it in the bathroom for me, will you?"

She appeared in the doorway, her smile radiant. "I'll need it tonight," she said softly.

He smiled.

It seemed, for once, he'd managed to do something right.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Dedicated to MahoganyJinx. Sorry for the delay, and the brevity . . . but this thing was honestly going to kill me.

Bachelorette, Pt. II will be available soon! Probably Saturday, as Marked (my longer WIP) will end on Friday.
Bachelorette, Part II

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: M for language, possible smut later

Summary: Part II of the drabble series based on the reality show "The Bachelorette," wherein eligible men in the wizarding world compete for Hermione Granger's affections. (Part I is Chapter 5)

[Black screen; Lee voiceover.]

"Last week on . . . The Bachelorette!"

[Screen cuts to various images of Draco and Hermione kissing.]

Draco voiceover: "I've done a lot of terrible things in my life, and one of those things was pretending I didn't care for you all these years. I'm not going to let another moment go by without letting you know how I feel."

[Gratuitous close-up of Draco's hand as it slips conspicuously from Hermione's waist to her lower back.]

Theo voiceover: "Hey, I mean . . . he's Draco." [His tone is casual, possibly even smug.] "I'm not really surprised."

[Cuts to interview with Ron]

Ron: "It's ridiculous." [Crosses arms tightly.] "She can't possibly think Draco Malfoy is the right person for her."

[Camera pans unsteadily as Ron, Dean, and Seamus are talking together in a low voice, alone in the kitchen; they clearly do not know they're being filmed.]

Seamus: "Who d'you reckon is the biggest competition, mate?"

Dean, drinking a beer and shrugging: "Obvious, in't it?"

Ron: [Looks startled.] "You think Malfoy's got a shot?"

Dean: "No." [Looks confused.] "It's got to be Potter - right?"

[Shot of Harry and Hermione laughing, she reaches forward to touch his arm as he tells a story, and it's all very charming and adorable.]

Harry voiceover: "Hermione's always been so important to me, and I don't know. I guess I've never
looked at her this way, but maybe I should have."

[Hermione at the most recent rose ceremony, looking glum.]

Hermione: "This is so difficult. I've established such a lovely connection with all of you." [It is pretty clear that she is lying, though she seems genuinely distressed.] "But this last rose is for Blaise."

[Blaise looks relieved; Neville looks crestfallen.]

Hermione voiceover: "It's just so hard. I hate having to disappoint people." [She sniffs audibly.] "I can't even imagine how I'm going to have to keep sending people home."

[Camera pans to Lee, who is once again standing in front of the elaborate manor home.]

Lee: "And tonight - with nine suitors remaining, who will Hermione choose? Will she rekindle her romance with a former flame?"

[A shot of Ron and Hermione sharing a private joke.]

Lee voiceover: "Will she find love in the arms of her former nemesis?"

[Draco and Hermione kiss as fireworks go off in the distance.]

Lee voiceover: "Or will she discover something new with an old friend?"

[Harry has an eyelash on his cheek; Hermione brushes it away and they both blush like they've gotten away with murder.]

Lee voiceover: "All that and more, coming up on the Bachelorette!"

"You're going to need to cut either Terry or Michael this week," Lee said, squinting at the note in his hand. "People don't care for them, and they can't tell them apart."

"Why, because they're both Ravenclaws who are capable of making intelligent conversation?" Hermione grunted, putting her feet up on the coffee table. "Great."

Lee gave her a withering look. "It's not like you particularly care for them, either," he remarked, recalling the vacuous look she usually adopted when speaking to either contestant.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Are you invested in my imaginary romance now, too?" she asked quizzically. "You know this isn't real, right?"

"Well I have to watch, don't I?" he sniped back, though he instantly looked regretful. "Sorry," he muttered, rubbing his eyes. "Tired."

"Of course you're tired," she replied in a low murmur. "It's after midnight and I'm finding it horribly difficult to muster any interest in this whatsoever."

"Oh, that's hardly accurate," Lee scoffed, rolling his eyes. "You're really going to tell me you don't legitimately like any of these blokes?"

"Well that's not the point, is it?" she asked primly, sitting up to glare at him. "And anyway, what exactly are you saying?"
"Oh please," he said, making a face. "Don't pretend like you didn't fully enjoy snogging Draco."

"It's a charade and you know it," she retorted, though he noted that she didn't meet his eye. "And anyway, he took me completely by surprise," she added defensively.

"The first time," Lee said pointedly, fighting a laugh. "But exactly how many times did he pull you aside this time? Three times?"

"Twice," she corrected, then flinched. "Fine," she conceded, sighing. "I see your point."

"Right," he agreed, nodding.

"It's for the cameras," she reminded him firmly. "You're the one who told me I had to give him the First Impression rose, anyway."

"Actually, I said you could give it to him or Ron," Lee said pointedly. "You could easily have given it to, you know . . . the person you actually like."

"Well, Ron wouldn't have been at all convincing!" she argued, crossing her arms. "You were there. You saw." She shook her head. "The lack of chemistry was laughable."

Lee smirked. "I thought you didn't care about the show?"

He guessed she was reaching for a particularly disgruntled look, though she seemed too exhausted to muster it.

"I'm going to have a life after this, you know," she admonished him wearily. "I can at least not try to not ruin my own reputation in the process."

"And Draco Malfoy is good for your reputation?" Lee barked, throwing his head back with a laugh. "Sure."

"He's really not that bad," she murmured, closing her eyes. "Though don't tell him I said that."

[Camera focuses first on Harry, who is chatting happily with Ron, Dean, Seamus, and Theo; then pans out the window to Draco, who is sitting alone outside and reading.]

Interviewer voiceover: "So how is your relationship with the others in the house?"

[Cuts to Draco interview]

Draco: "It's fine." [He shrugs.] "I'm not actually that concerned what they think of me."

Interviewer, off-screen: "Do you have friends in the house?"

Draco: "Of course. Blaise and Theo are here." [He makes a careless hand gesture.] "But this isn't really about friendship, is it?"

Interviewer, off-screen: "What's it about?"

Draco: "Hermione, obviously." [He seems momentarily distracted, as though something has just crossed his mind.] "Obviously."

Interviewer, off-screen: "It doesn't bother you that the other candidates have been forming alliances among themselves?"
Draco: "No." [The statement rings with falsehood.] "I don't need an alliance. After all, only one of us can win." [He shrugs.]

"Hey," Granger said, taking a seat beside him.

He instantly leapt to his feet, moving to take her in his arms. "Hey," he replied, taking care to growl sensually as he burrowed his face into her neck.

She laughed at him, shoving him away playfully. "There's no cameras."

"Oh." He released her quickly, sitting back down and picking up the book he'd hastily discarded. "Fucking hell, Granger, you've made me lose my page."

"Ah, young love," she remarked. "Budge over, would you?"

"Fine," he agreed courteously, making room for her on the patio furniture. She took a deep breath and sighed, closing her eyes and enjoying the sun on her face.

"This is nice," she said softly.

"It was nice," he pointed out, and she opened one eye to glare at him. "Before you so rudely interrupted my solitude."

"Oh please, Malfoy," she said, waving her hand irritably. "Aren't you sick of being by yourself?"

"What is this, an interview segment?" he countered, carefully avoiding the question. "And what are you doing here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be . . . I don't know," he guessed. "Elsewhere?"

"I'm bored," she said, her tone abnormally petulant. "I'm not allowed to see anyone else."

"You're not allowed to see me, either," he said pointedly. "Seems like you're not actually that constricted by the rules."

"Oh, you won't tell," she said carelessly, smirking as she closed her eyes again. "You're always by yourself."

"It's that or chance being filmed with the lot of them," he sniffed, gesturing inside the house where he was sure the cameras were catching Seamus make his fourth sandwich of the day, or interviewing Weasley as he mooned over Granger.

"You know, if you're trying to rehabilitate your image, this isn't the best way to do it," she said, her pretty mouth twisting into a little frown as she admonished him. "You should - I don't know." She shrugged, shading her eyes with the flat of her hand. "Make friends?"

"Why do people keep saying that?" he said exasperatedly, tossing the book onto the side table. Obviously reading was now hopeless. "I have friends."

"Yeah, but not the right ones," she reminded him. "Theo and Blaise are great, but they're not exactly influential."

"You're saying to make friends with Potter," he grunted, then made a face. "No."

"Oh come on," she laughed, nudging him. "You've made friends with me."

"Not sure this counts as friendship," he muttered back. "Seeing as I'll have to snog you the instant
the cameras show up.

"Speaking of that." She sat up slightly, her expression prim. "You should consider grabbing my arse next time," she suggested. "The kissing is fine, you know, but you have to keep it interesting."

"Fucking hell Granger," he groaned. "Is this for the show, or for you?"

"Oh rats," she said, leaping off the chaise and ducking behind it. "Cover me, would you?"

He looked over, catching the camera lens as it focused on them from inside the house.

"Fine," he grumbled, though he smiled a little as he picked up his book and continued pretending to read.

[Camera pans around living room, where the various candidates are sitting around in casual clothing, looking generally haggard and scruffy. Harry enters.]

Harry, holding an envelope: "Guys, owl's just arrived." [He flips the envelope over, looking at it.] "It's a date card."

Theo, taking it from him: "Date card?" [Looks up.] "Someone get Draco, would you?"

[Blaise nods, stepping outside and then returning.]

Harry, taking it back from Theo: "Looks like a group date."

[Editor's cut:

Hermione: "What is it you need me to write on the card?"

Muttered response.

Hermione, scoffing: "A poem? No. I'm not writing a poem.”]

Harry, reading: "Before you catch my heart, let's see you catch a quaffle."

Blaise: "Who's on the date?"

Harry: [Flips note over.] "Dean, Seamus, Ron, Draco, Theo, Michael, Terry, and Blaise." [He frowns.] "What about me?"

Seamus: "I think that means you get the first one-on-one, mate!" [Claps Harry on the shoulder. The others look at him with deep confusion.] "What?" [Shrugs] "Me mum loves this show."

Harry, confused: "One-on-one?"

Ron: "Does that mean it's just you and Mione?" [Glares sulkily.]

Seamus: "Yeah." [Nods eagerly.] "You get to be the first one to go on a date alone with Hermione."

Harry, brightly: "Oh!" [Looks pleased.]

[Camera pans to Draco, whose lips are pressed together tightly as he stares at the ground.]
Ron approached Harry in their shared bathroom, casually reaching over him for a towel.

"So," he said evenly. "A date with Hermione."

"Yeah," Harry said, shrugging. "Seems weird to think of it that way."

"But that's what it is," Ron said pointedly.

Harry paused, giving him a scrutinizing look. "We talked about this," he said slowly. "I thought you were okay with it?"

_I was when I thought she was going to choose me_, Ron thought vigorously.

"No, of course," he said, shaking his head. "It's fine."

"Good," Harry breathed, relieved. "It's just a date, anyway." He shrugged again. "It's stupid, and you know Hermione's not taking this seriously."

"Right," Ron said faintly, lagging behind as Harry ambled out into the hall.

[Dean, Seamus, Ron, Draco, Theo, Michael, Terry, and Blaise are waiting in the living room, all looking impeccably groomed compared to how they'd been dressed that morning. Lee enters, looking chipper.]

Lee: "Ready for your group date, gents?"

[All nod; camera focuses on Dean and Seamus, whose gazes are flicking nervously to each other.]

Lee: "You'll be meeting Hermione out on the pitch." [Gestures.] "Come on, then."

[Camera cuts to Blaise interview]

Blaise, looking bored: "We're going to play quidditch with her? Call me crazy, but that can't have been her idea."

[Editor's cut:

_Hermione: "You want me to play quidditch with them?"

Muttered response.

_Hermione: "Oh, that's funny. That's hysterical."

Mutters._

_Hermione: "Oh, I hate you." ]

[Editor's cut:

[Exports to Draco interview]

Draco: "We all know Granger isn't exactly the most adept at flying." [Looks at fingernails, shrugging.] "Then again, we all know I am, particularly with Potter not coming."

Interviewer, off-screen: "How do you feel about Harry getting the first one-on-one date?"

[Editor's cut:
Draco: "She picked Potter? Oh that's excellent. That is absolutely excellent. I can't wait to see the look on Weasley's face."

Draco: "I'm devastated, of course." [There is a mischievous twinkle in his eye that indicates otherwise.] "But if there is a rose to be gained on this date, I suspect she'll find it difficult to give to anyone else."

[Camera pans to Hermione, who is walking onto the quidditch pitch looking rather surly.]

Lee: "Hi Hermione!" [kisses her cheek.] "Ready for this group date?"

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Is it possible for you to look slightly less miserable?"

Hermione: "No."

Lee: "Cool, cool, just checking."]

Hermione: "Can't wait." [Her lie could not be more obvious; she looks over Lee's shoulder to the contestants.] "Hello."

[One by one they give her a hug; the camera zooms in as Draco reaches her last.]

Draco, murmuring in her ear: "Hi, stranger." [He yanks her in quickly and her eyes widen, but he only grips her momentarily. She appears vaguely disappointed.]

Hermione: "Hi." [She is breathless; she turns to the other candidates, who are glaring at Draco.] "So. As you may know, I'm not the best at flying."

Theo: [dashes forward gallantly] "Here." [He holds up the broom for her.] "Let me help you."

[Camera cuts to Draco interview]

Draco, smirking: "The fact that Theo would attempt to teach Hermione to fly is honestly quite hilarious."

[Cuts to Blaise interview]

Blaise: "All I could think in that moment was just - Theo is truly terrible on a broom. I was honestly thinking 'I have to do something or she might die'."

[Camera returns to group date; Blaise has rushed forward to help and Hermione is now glancing awkwardly between him and Theo.]

Hermione: "Um."

Draco: [Steps forward smoothly, interrupting.] "Perhaps something a little different?" [He looks smug.] "Maybe we should play a little four-a-side, and the winning team can earn some extra time with Hermione?"

Hermione, looking relieved: "Yes." [She promptly drops the broom.] "Maybe Draco, Ron, Terry, and Dean, versus Seamus, Theo, Michael, and Blaise?"

[The men glare at each other, though Hermione looks pleased with herself.]
Ron: "Fine."

They take to their brooms, splitting up. The game is filled with egos; Draco and Ron find it difficult to play together, each becoming more showy with the quaffle, until Theo manages to score the winning point.

Theo: "Point us!" [He lands on the pitch and scoops up Hermione; she giggles in spite of herself.] "A kiss for the winner, m'lady?"

Hermione, blushing: "Alright." [She kisses Theo's cheek and he promptly turns his head, surprising her by kissing her soundly on the lips.] "Oh!"

Ron: [Mimicking her to Seamus] "Oh!" [He sees the camera and turns away, embarrassed.]

Lee walks onto the pitch

Lee: "So, Hermione. Are you ready to give out the group date rose?"

Hermione: "Sure." [She is still winded from surprise, and Theo regretfully releases her.] "I guess . . ." [She looks around.] "I guess it'll have to go to Theo."

Theo: [Smirks at her] "Guess so."

Camera cuts to Theo interview

Theo, grinning: "Nailed it." [Offers to bump fists with interviewer, who grudgingly accepts.]

Draco wandered over to where Granger was chatting with Seamus, offering her his hand.

"My turn?" he asked pleasantly.

"Sure," she agreed, standing. "Thanks, Seamus!"

He gave her a cheerful salute and she took Draco's hand, leaning in to whisper in his ear. "Cameras," she said pointedly, gesturing.

As soon as they were out of the room, he shoved her against the wall, bending his head to whisper in her ear. "Are they still filming?" he asked, careful to keep his voice low.

She nodded, stretching out against him. "Yep."

He brought his hand to her waist, grasping it tightly. "How are things with Theo?" he muttered, and she wriggled under his grip, fighting to block the visual of her mouth moving.

"They're good," she murmured back, letting her hips sway towards him. "He's fun."

"He is fun," Draco agreed, giving her another teasing shove backwards and kissing her roughly. "Careful."

"Why?" she gasped, putting her hands on either side of his face.

Draco flipped her around, letting his mouth linger at the nape of her neck. "He likes to have his fun," he said softly. "So does Blaise."

She leaned back to talk into his ear, disguising the movement with a kiss against his neck. "Blaise
isn't going to work out," she said. "He likes himself more than me."

"Don't get rid of Blaise," Draco protested, flipping her back to the wall and tucking her hair behind her ear. "I'll be so outnumbered," he whispered, and she let out a purposeful feminine sigh.

"I'm going to keep Theo," she said, and he kissed her again, slipping his tongue into her mouth for emphasis. "I like him."

"I can tell," he chuckled, thinking of how he'd caught her kissing Theo only moments earlier. "Hey," he warned, as she let her hands slip indiscreetly to his belt loops. "Careful."

"Cameras," she reminded him sternly. "It's called a convincing show, Malfoy."

"I can only control my dick so much," he grunted, removing her hands and lacing his fingers in hers to distract her.

"Careful, or you might actually fall in love with me," she laughed.

"Shut up," he retorted, shoving her back against the wall.

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[Lee voiceover as the camera shows Harry getting ready]

Lee: "Are you ready for this?"

Harry voiceover: "I think so."

[He looks quite nervous; camera cuts to Harry interview]

Harry: "I mean, obviously I've spent a lot of time with Hermione, I mean - we were alone together in a tent for months." [He laughs a little.] "At the time I'm not sure I was seeing her properly."

Interviewer, off-screen: "What do you mean by that?"

Harry: "Er." [Scratches his head, thinking; as a result, his untamed hair becomes even more unkempt.] "I was occupied with other things at the time, and she was just there, you know? Just my best friend Hermione."

Interviewer, off-screen: "Has anything changed?"

Harry: [looks pensive] "She's always been beautiful, and kind. And smart, of course." [Smiles to himself] "But I think we needed each other as friends before. Anything more than that would have been too much at the time."

Interviewer, off-screen: "And now?"

Harry: [Bows his head, thinking about something.] "You know, she really is beautiful, isn't she?" [He looks up at the camera, smiling widely.]

There was a flutter in her chest as he approached; they hadn't been alone for several months, and even then, it hadn't been anything like this.

"What made you choose him?" Lee said, leaning over to speak in her ear while the cameras were still on Harry.
"He's my best friend," she returned easily. "No pressure." She shrugged. "If there's nothing between us, it's still a full day hanging out with one of the people I love most."

"And if there is?" Lee asked, grinning.

She felt her lips twist up in a smirk. "None of your business," she said loftily, raising her chin and squaring her shoulders.

Mafalda burst into Kingsley's office. "Sir!"

He looked up, his spectacles slipping down his nose. "Yes?"

"Harry and Hermione are hitting it off beautifully," she gushed. "Conversation is flowing, they keep having these - these moments where they look at each other, and it's just - " she paused, stammering. "It's just magical - "

"Mafalda," Kingsley cut her off swiftly. "This show is not meant to distract you from your work."

"Right," she acknowledged hastily, realizing her mistake and starting to back out of his office. "Right you are, sir, apologies - "

But Kingsley smiled to himself, rubbing his temple. "Turn it on in here, would you?"

She made a tiny squeak of agreement. "Yes, sir," she managed, fumbling for her wand.

[Camera focuses on Hermione and Harry, who are having dinner alone together.]

Harry: " - and then she just says 'have a biscuit, Potter,' and it was the most amazing plot twist." [Looks up to see if Hermione is laughing; she is.]

Hermione: "I can't believe you never told me that!" [She is clutching her side with laughter.] "Oh, that is too good." [She takes a sip of wine, still smiling.]

Harry: [Looks at her for a moment.] "I had a really great time today, Hermione."

Hermione: "Me too." [She seems surprised, but genuine.] "I mean, I knew I would, but - "

Harry: "I know." [They smile at each other.] "It makes me wonder if maybe we've been missing something all this time." [He sets his glass down near her hand; the opportunity is there for him to take hold of hers, and he does.]

Hermione: [Looks down at where Harry is holding her hand, and brushes her thumb lightly across his knuckles.] "Can I be honest?"

Harry, looking surprised: "Of course."

Hermione: [hesitates] "I actually used to wonder that a lot, about us. If we were missing something" [She shifts uncomfortably.] "I mean, do you remember that time - "

Harry: "Yes." [He looks very serious.] "I almost kissed you."

Hermione: [Quickly, as though she is nervous about his reaction.] "I mean, I know we were both sad, and stressed - "
Harry: [Shakes his head.] "It was more than that." [He stares at her.] "There was more to it than that."

Hermione: [Looks relieved.] "I'm glad I wasn't wrong." [She sighs, looking down at the rose by her hand as though she has just remembered it exists.] "Okay, so, if I give you this rose -"

Harry: [Jumps out of his seat, pulling her into his arms and kissing her, cutting her off mid-sentence.]

[Hermione puts her hands on his chest, kissing him back slowly before they both pull away, eyes closed.]

Hermione: "Um, so." [She clears her throat and he slides his nose gently along hers, nuzzling her. The gesture is very intimate.] "The rose."

Harry, eyes still closed: "Just give me the damn rose, Hermione."

Hermione: [Laughs, putting her arms around his neck.] "Alright. If you insist."

[Editor's cut:]

Lee: [Is sniffling, holding himself tightly.]

Muttered response.

Lee: "Oh please." [Looks irritated] "Don't pretend you don't think this is fucking beautiful."

More mutters.

Lee: "They're best friends! And now they're -" [Breaks off, overcome with emotion.] "If you don't think this is beautiful, you're a monster."

"Have you gotten ahold of yourself?" Hermione asked Lee, smirking at him as she adjusted her gown.

"Yes," he replied irritably, wiping his eyes furiously. "You ready?"

"Of course I'm ready," she retorted, gesturing again to her gown and emphasizing her perfect chignon. "What are my instructions today?"

"Keep Harry," he said instantly, and she rolled her eyes.

"Anything else?"

"Viewers still love Draco," he said, checking his latest owl. "They like Theo, too -"

"I'm not cutting Theo," Hermione interrupted, and Lee raised his hands innocently.

"Okay, okay," he said quickly. "Fine, Theo stays." He grinned at her. "Maybe you're finding a little too much love on this show."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped, placing her hands on her hips with a primtsk-ing sound. "It's not love. I just like him." She paused, thinking. "And Harry." She sighed. "Fine, and Draco."

"Mm," Lee said, winking. "True love indeed."
[Camera pans to Hermione, who is holding the final rose.]

Hermione: [Takes a deep breath] "The final rose tonight is for . . . " [She trails off.]

[Editor's cut:]

Hermione: "Do I really need to pause for 30 seconds every time?"

Muttered response.

Hermione, stomping her foot in irritation: "Oh, for Godric's sake."

[Camera pans between Terry and Ron, who are the only two remaining.]

Hermione: "Ron."

[Ron sighs with relief while Terry looks disappointed; she hugs him warmly after pinning the rose on him. Lee steps into camera view.]

Lee: "Thank you, gentlemen." [Turns to camera.] "And now, scenes from later this season on The Bachelorette!"

[Camera cuts to montage of Seamus and Dean; in every shot, both men are shirtless.]

Hermione, in interview: "Am I crazy, or are Dean and Seamus not really that interested in me?"

[Camera cuts to her and Theo; she is sitting in his lap and laughing as he tells a story.]

Theo voiceover: "Are things moving too quickly with Hermione? I certainly wouldn't say that."

[Cuts to interview; Theo is smirking relentlessly.] "Personally, I rather like the pace."

[Clips of Hermione with Harry, holding hands as they talk animatedly.]

Ron voiceover: "No, I'm not jealous." [His voice is very stiff.] "I'm not jealous at all."

[Scene of Ron and Hermione sitting at a date, looking awkward.]

Hermione, in interview: "Chemistry is a bit uneven, I would say. It's definitely . . . more tangible with some than with others."

[Clips of Hermione and Draco making eyes at each other from across the room as she gives Blaise a dispassionate hug.]

Draco: "Who's going to be the first to say I love you? I don't know." [Shrugs] "Won't be me."

[Cut to Hermione and Draco dancing; he dips her dramatically, clearly unable to take his eyes off her as she laughs.]

Draco voiceover: "I love you, Hermione. I'm falling in love with you, and it's terrifying. I'm terrified."

Hermione voiceover: "Draco, I - "

[Cuts abruptly to Lee.]

Lee, grinning: "All that and more coming up on . . . The Bachelorette!"
[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Seriously, am I the only one that's Team Harry here? Come on. Team Harry, right?"

Muttered response.

Lee: "Oh, we're still rolling? Fuck me."]

Chapter End Notes

a/n: I am thinking 4 parts total. This one is for brigittar!

To those of you who have finished Marked - yes, there will be a drabble in here that will serve as an epilogue of sorts. Likely not for a couple of weeks, but it will eventually exist, I promise.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Story

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: This World or Any Other Storyverse (Clean/Marked)

Rating: T

Summary: This was previously posted as a standalone one-shot about two months ago but I decided I wanted to move it in here. If you have read Clean, this is an expanded one-shot from Day 4 of Chapter 14: The Seven, in which Draco and Hermione are working on their potion together. If not, it can be read separately.

Thanks to Dr. Sally for naming the Clean/Marked/Youth series: This World or Any Other.

Hermione Granger, exceptional student though she was, had found it difficult to concentrate for most of that day. Her seat next to Draco Malfoy in Defense Against the Dark Arts was particularly distracting, considering the unexpected pleasantness that had somehow developed between them over the duration of their heavily time-consuming potion assignment. She found that the thought of having only four days left, after a full moon cycle of being left alone with Malfoy, night after night, had left her dizzied with confusion - not to mention without a proper outlet for the troubling thoughts she was so unaccustomed to having.

They were exceedingly troubling thoughts. Thoughts like the oddly fascinating color of Malfoy's eyes - the precise shade of grey, like the eye of an impending storm. Thoughts like the distinct bow of his lips. The sharp curve of his jaw. The way she caught him looking at her every now and then, and the startling leap of her heart right before she pretended not to notice.

Thoughts like the way his eyes changed when he was thinking about something, the stormy greys flashing under his artfully furrowed brow. The way a tingle raced up the back of her neck when she felt his eyes on her, following her fingers as she tucked a curl behind her ear or the hem of her skirt as she crossed her legs under her desk.

Thoughts like the sharp outline of his collarbone when his shirt gapped ever so slightly, the smooth protrusion of his chest evident when he wearily rid himself of his uniform details as he met her after dark. The way he pulled his tie roughly over his head and tossed it aside, increasingly comfortable in her presence. The way he nonchalantly freed his top buttons, unconcerned where her darkened eyes fell. The way he stood over their potion, his trim hips shifting gracefully to angle him towards her, wherever she was in the room. The way he ran his hand through his pale blond hair, enviously blind to the way her chest rose and fell as she recalled their previous breathless indiscretions. All his thoughtless, careless practices that had become her nightly staples, haunting her with those thoughts.

Thoughts like the way his lips had captured hers once before - directing them, caressing them. Possessing them.

She shivered, watching him smooth his hair back and lean casually onto his elbows from where he
perched on the desk across the room. Did he have any idea, even an *inkling*, what he was doing to her?

"Tell me a story," she suggested, breaking the silence as they watched the potion simmer. It would be a while, at least an hour, before the remainder of the evening's incantations would be required.

He tossed her an impatient scowl. "No."

"Malfoy!" she exclaimed, crossing her arms. "Come on. Entertain me."

He seemed to be toying with her now, purposely eyeing his fingernails with a brush of mild indifference dancing across his faintly pouted lips. "Why?" he asked coolly, and she rolled her eyes.

"Because we're going to be here for hours," she said matter-of-factly. "And if you don't talk to me, I'll have to find some other way to amuse myself." She hopped off the desk, pretending to keep a wary eye on their simmering potion. "Maybe I'll just read my notes out loud."

He sighed loudly. "You'll have to be more specific," he said crisply, and she smiled. His ongoing attempts at pretense had become increasingly transparent with each day they were forced to work together.

"About what?" she asked innocently. "Which notes to read?"

"No," he said, raising an eyebrow. "Which story to tell."

She bit her lip, concealing her grin of satisfaction. "Fine," she conceded, pausing to think for a moment. "Tell me about your favorite place you've traveled."

"My family has villas all over Europe," he said impatiently, frowning as his eyes wandered listlessly up to the ceiling. "None of them are interesting."

She fought back a skeptical eye roll. "Fine," she said again, her voice clipped. "What about - I don't know. Hobbies? Activities? Things you like to do?"

"Quidditch," he replied curtly. "End of story."

She growled a little. "Malfoy -"

"Don't take that tone with me, Granger," he said shortly, though she caught a lilt of amusement in his voice. "If you want to hear an interesting story, you'll have to think of an interesting prompt."

She huffed irritably. "You're impossible," she said, making a face. "You know that, right?"

He tilted his chin slightly to look down his nose at her from where he sat. "I disagree, Granger," he sniffed. "As I understand it, I'm really quite a treasure."

She pressed her fingers to her temple. "I don't even know what to say to that," she groaned, and she watched his grey eyes dance as he grinned mercilessly at her, swinging his long legs back and forth and waiting for her next move. She couldn't help but feel that talking to him was a bit like a game; it somehow felt as though there were rules, and she only vaguely understood them.

*No*, she realized, correcting herself. *Not like a game*. It was more like an artfully choreographed dance.

Hermione took a deep breath, a thought coming to her. "Tell me . . . tell me about the first time you
did magic."

She watched as the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Ah," she said brightly. "Finally. I've piqued your interest."

"Don't get carried away, Granger," he said briskly.

She arched her brow carefully. "Well?" she asked, prodding him.

He slid forward forward on the desk before planting both of his feet on the floor, and she had to make a concerted effort not to let her eyes follow the trail of his hips.

"I lit my grandfather on fire," he pronounced flatly, and she blinked twice.

"You did what?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"I lit him on fire," he repeated, shrugging. "Well, his robes, anyway. I was not thrilled with his decision not to give me his wand."

"Malfoy!"

"What?" he said, raising his hands and offering her a beatific smile. "I was a child."

"Still," she said, laughing in spite of herself. "You really were painfully spoiled, weren't you?"

"I'm offended," he announced, drawing himself up to his full height. "And I certainly wasn't as bad as I could have been."

She let a delicate snort escape her. "That doesn't make it okay."

"I promise," he said solemnly. "Theo was much worse."

"Impossible," she replied, scoffing in disbelief. "There's no way Theo Nott was worse than you. You were a pompous arse before you even set foot in this castle!"

"Once again, I am injured by your hasty presumptions," he informed her, and she hoped he didn't notice her sharp inhalation as he suddenly moved in her direction.

He took a calculated step into her personal space, making a somewhat more convincing show than she had done of glancing at their potion. "You judge me so harshly, Granger," he said quietly, and she felt a strange jolt in her chest at finding herself intimately aware of the precise location of his mouth - more specifically, that it was within inches of hers.

"I - I don't," she sputtered, taking a hasty step back before steeling herself. "You have to admit," she admonished him, reminding herself to breathe as he fixed his grey eyes on hers, "you weren't exactly a walk in the park."

He flashed her an arrogant smirk. "Parks are for people without private gardens, Granger."

To her horror, she found herself starting to giggle shrilly. "Malfoy," she managed after a moment, squinting at him while he watched with amusement, "you sound ridiculous."

She didn't know what she expected his reaction to be, but found herself pleasantly surprised when he broke into a broad smile.
"Don't laugh, Granger," he scolded her, and somehow his tone set her off again. "Granger! I'm telling you. I could have been much worse."

"I don't see how," she said honestly, biting her lip to fight her laughter.

What was happening to her? To her, the logical, brilliant, brightest-witch-of-her-age Hermione Granger, who seemed to be inexplicably dissolving into a fit of girlish tittering? It was rather late; perhaps she was just tired.

"You did just admit to setting your grandfather on fire," she reminded him.

"I've already told you," he said indignantly, though even she could tell that his already fractured formality was beginning to deteriorate. "Theo was much worse. Theo was worse to my own grandfather, even."

Something about the urgency surrounding his ongoing effort to convince her that he was really not so bad was contributing to her overall amusement. "Oh?"

"Yes, oh," he repeated, and she laughed again as he made a face. "I'll have you know that Theo Nott was a prolific thief as a child."

"No!" she said, bringing a hand to her mouth dramatically.

He bit back a laugh. "Oh yes," he said, nodding conspiratorially as he leaned towards her. "There was one time in particular. My grandfather was at my house, and so was Theo - it was one of the usual Malfoy dinner parties -"

"Usual dinner parties?" she echoed, smiling. "Tell me, Malfoy, exactly how many sets of dress robes do you own?"

"Don't interrupt, Granger," he chided her quickly, and the absurdly impatient look that flashed over his features launched her into a renewed fit of smothered laughter. "Anyway - Theo was at my house and we were - I don't know, ten years old, maybe -"

"You were ten years old at a dinner party?" she asked, bewildered at the thought.

"Well yes - it was my birthday party," he said, a brief moment of confusion etched into his face as though he expected this would be obvious.

They looked at each other for a few seconds before she suddenly burst out laughing.

"Your birthday party?" she asked. "Your tenth birthday party? You're joking. You're joking."

"What else would I have done?" he protested, watching her with utter bemusement.

"I don't know," she asked helplessly. "Had a party with your friends?"

"Theo was there," he insisted defensively. "Are you even listening -"

"But maybe you could have done something that - I don't know, that children like to do?" she suggested, and the blank look on his face seemed somehow even more entertaining than before. "Nevermind. Carry on."

"Fine," he said suspiciously, though he seemed keen to continue. "Anyway - my grandfather fell asleep in our sitting room after his digestif -"
"- did you actually know the term 'digestif' when you were ten years old?"

"Granger, what did I tell you about interrupting?" he scolded, and she placed her hand innocently over her lips, smiling. "Theo and I didn't have wands yet, but obviously we already knew we were wizards - "

"- obviously - "

"- so Theo decided we should have a contest, to see which of us could get my grandfather's eyeglasses off of his face." He frowned slightly, his hand motions suddenly becoming very frantic. "You have to understand - my grandfather is one of those old, distinguished types, and his glasses" - here Malfoy stopped, bringing his hands to his face in large circles as to indicate the size of the lenses - "were so large - "

He looked so unspeakably ridiculous holding his makeshift glasses to his face that she couldn't help but laugh at his earnestness, bringing her hand to her chest. "That's - " she said, struggling, "That's such a good look for you, Malfoy - "

He started to laugh too, seeming to realize how he must have looked to her. "I just want you to understand," he pressed, dropping one hand to reach out and grip her wrist, "it is imperative to the story that you understand the true nature of these spectacles - "

"- I get it, Malfoy - "

"- do you, though, are you sure - "

"- put your hands down, Malfoy, I can't take you seriously - "

"Anyway," he erupted loudly, struggling through his attempt to regain a vaguely dignified solemnity, "Theo tried to levitate the glasses off my grandfather's face, but at first they sort of - they slipped - "

"They slipped?" she asked, her hand coming anxiously to her mouth. "Did he wake up?"

"No!" he exclaimed, and at that point, even Malfoy couldn't prevent a smile from slipping across his face. "He was still just sitting there snoring, totally oblivious - "

"Where were your parents?" she exclaimed, pressing her hands to her face. Her cheeks felt rather tingly and warm, presumably a combination of her ongoing fit of laughter and her unnerving proximity to Malfoy as he spoke. The normally standoffish Slytherin was suddenly engaging with her in a way he never had before, and she found it was making her a bit lightheaded.

"I don't know - busy," he said, making a careless shooing motion with his hand as though to redirect her attention. He seemed to grow increasingly at ease as the story continued, his voice and hand motions becoming more and more animated as he continued to talk. "So Theo manages to levitate them ever so slightly, and he runs over and snatches them out of the air, and we - we just take off, running for our lives - "

"So that's it? He just stole your grandfather's glasses off his face?"

Malfoy's eyes got wide, as though he was suddenly remembering something. "No," he realized, bringing his hand to his forehead. "No - I'd forgotten - Theo actually started to wear them around."

"What?!" Theo Nott had always been oddly tall and slender; she recalled suddenly her initial impression of him in their first year, and his distinct resemblance to a series of paper clips. "He
"Yes," he said, and finally the last traces of inhibition started to crack as laughter reached his flashing grey eyes. "Yes, and my grandfather was so stubborn - he just refused to get another pair, he wouldn't admit to losing them - so for weeks, Theo would show up at my house wearing the glasses while my grandfather just stumbled around, blaming house elves for rearranging the furniture whenever he tripped over something - "

"He blamed the house elves?"

"I don't think you understand, Granger," he told her, and she caught for the first time a mischievous glint in his eye that would have rivaled Ron's or Harry's. "I'm a Malfoy. We are eternally without fault."

She gave him such a stark look of naked skepticism that they were silent for less than a moment before simultaneously erupting in laughter. It was utter ludicrous, and he knew it.

"Did he ever find them?" she asked, rubbing her eyes where moisture had started to pool in the corners.

"Well," he rasped, his eyes bright with the memory. "My mother held another dinner, not too long after, and of course, Theo was supposed to come - "

"No," she gasped. "Don't tell me he - "

"Shush Granger, you're impossible," he snapped indignantly, his tone of haughty self-importance setting her off yet again. "Stop laughing - "

Tears of laughter were streaming down her face, and he was gasping for air, too out of breath to finish the story. The strange flirtation, the building tension had been unexpected enough - but was it now possible that she was actually having fun with Draco Malfoy?

"You stop laughing!"

"Shush," he repeated, though his face reddened with the significant effort it took to continue the story. "So then, Theo shows up" – he paused as she let out another preemptive peal of laughter – "and he's wearing my grandfather Abraxas's spectacles" – another pause, this time accommodating his own braying interruption – "and he's – "

She cut him off. "Does Theo" – laughter – "even wear glasses?"

"No!" – laughter – "and he comes into my grandfather's study, ten years old wearing a ninety year old man's oversized bifocals" – extended laughter, lasting at least two minutes – "and my grandfather says, 'Son, are those my glasses?'"

"He didn't!" she howled. "Ouch, my stomach – "

"He did, and Theo says" – pause while he choked out a wheezing cough – "Hold on, I can't breathe – "

"My face actually hurts – "

"Theo says 'Sir, these are obviously my glasses – are you blind?!'"

It took at least ten minutes for them to be able to sit up straight without clutching their sides from
laughter; she was wiping tears from her cheeks while he kept pulling at his mouth, trying to relax his overtired smile.

"I can't believe he did that," she said, still grinning.

"Theo and I were constantly up to no good," he said, running his hands through his hair, smiling at the memory. "We both got away with so much, too. For a while, anyway."

"It's hard to think of Theodore Nott as good-humored," she commented, smirking.

"Theo is actually quite charming," he assured her. "But – the circumstances were never right for you to know that."

"Why did you always spend all your time with Crabbe and Goyle, then?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

He shrugged. "Foolish youth," he said simply. "They made me feel important, I suppose. Theo wouldn't have put up with it."

"I'm surprised anybody could," she said, giggling. "You were such a prat."

"Well, I appreciate the past tense, Granger," he said, tipping an imaginary hat to her.

She sighed. "Could you have been like this, always?"

"Like what?"

"Like you are now, with me," she said, gifting him with a charming smile. "Maybe we all could have been friends –"

"Who, you and me?"

"Well, yes," she said. "Yes, of course, but I meant all of us – Harry, Ron, Theo –"

"Well, if you recall," he said quickly, correcting her. "Potter is the reason we're not friends, not me."

"You were so rude to Ron!"

"So? Weasley was rude to you, at first!" he retorted quickly. "He was awful to you, and you decided it was best to just go ahead and fall in love with him."

"Oh, stop, that was different," she insisted. "You were such a snob already –"

"Yeah, well I was also eleven years old," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "With no siblings or cousins or anything. I just assumed he'd want to be my friend. And then – he didn't. And I didn't understand."

Despite his admission, she smiled at him. "Little Malfoy not used to being rejected, hmm?" she teased. "Poor little rich boy."

He shoved her playfully. "The point is, I don't think we were meant to be friends, Granger."

"Just as well," she said, shrugging. "I'm not sure you and Ron were meant to get along under any circumstances."
"I take that as a compliment," he sniffed.

He turned back to their potion and she bit her lip, hiding a smile. Was it really so easy, letting her guard down around Draco Malfoy? She found she hardly recognized him. She barely recognized herself, she realized, pressing her hands to her cheeks. She was flushed and breathless. When had she last laughed like this?

She let her eyes follow his movements as he raised his wand, smiling absentmindedly to himself as he gave their potion a testing stir. She couldn't help but experience a moment of blissful satisfaction, colored only by a faint curiosity; she wondered whether he, too, experienced the same troubling flood of foreign thoughts - about her. About her eyes. Her hands. Her mouth.

She couldn't have known, of course, though perhaps she'd have found some solace - some comfort - in knowing that unlike her, Draco Malfoy's normally feverish mind had actually calmed. In fact, it pulsed with a only a single, consuming, and inexplicably motivating thought.

The thought that for once - for a single, gratifying moment - he felt freer; the thought that the restricting chains that bound his heart had loosened, somehow, by having been the one to make Hermione Granger laugh, and the strangely liberating realization that suddenly, he couldn't stand to go another day without it. Without her.

"Counterclockwise?" she prompted, gesturing to the potion.

"Counterclockwise," he confirmed, nodding, and she smiled.

That was the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: If you've already read this, no need to reflect; just doing some housekeeping. This was originally written for LittleChmura and remains hers!
Bachelorette, Part III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bachelorette, Part III

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: M for language, definite smut later

Summary: Part III of the drabble series based on the reality show "The Bachelorette," wherein eligible men in the wizarding world compete for Hermione Granger's affections.

Additional note: Bachelorette/Bachelor seasons follow a pattern once they get down to the final four. The final four episode is called Hometowns, wherein the Bachelorette visits the homes of each contestant and meets their parents. The final three is called Fantasy Suites and is a real thing where the Bachelorette gets to have a night in a hotel suite with each of them with no cameras allowed. (Yeah. And you think this is ridiculous?)

This portion of the drabble encompasses the previous weeks as well as Hometowns. Fantasy Suites and the final decision will be Part IV.

[Black screen; Lee voiceover.]

"Here's what you missed on . . . The Bachelorette!"

[Dean and Seamus are sitting together in an interview, holding hands.]

Dean: "It's stupid, frankly."

Seamus: [nods] "It really is. I can't believe we didn't see it coming."

Dean: "I think it caught everyone by surprise, honestly."

[Cuts to Ron interview.]

Ron: [Staring at the camera.] "Are you serious?" [Shakes head.] "I have never been less surprised in probably my entire life."

[Cuts to Harry interview.]

Harry: "I mean, I lived with them." [Shrugs] "I've seen stuff."

[Cut to scene of them informing Hermione at one of the cocktail parties.]

Dean: "It's nothing to do with you, of course."

Seamus: "Well, your lack of dick, potentially."

Hermione, faintly: "Right."
Hermione: "I'm happy for them, really!" [She seems sincere after having recovered from her initial confusion.] "It absolutely thrills me that I'm not the only one finding love on this show!"

Lee: "Hermione and Theo heat up on their first one-on-one date."

Lee voiceover as shots of Hermione and the other contestants fill the screen.

Lee: "Hermione and Theo heat up on their first one-on-one date."

Lee interview.

Lee, enthusiastically: "I like her." [Grins widely.] "I like her quite a bit."

[Cut to scenes from group date; she and Ron have a moment as he offers her a piece of cake, getting frosting on her lip and using it as an excuse to kiss her. She kisses him back, though her eyes stray warily to Harry, who is watching.]

Hermione voiceover: "Things with Harry are definitely more passionate than I expected."

Harry voiceover: "There is definitely something between us."

Harry interview.

Interviewer, off-screen: "Are you finding yourself at odds with any of the other candidates?"

Harry: "Er." [Shifts uneasily.] "Ron and I aren't doing so well."

[Clips of Harry and Ron occasionally bumping shoulders as they pass, glaring at each other as Hermione casually chats with other people.]

Harry: "Ron, could you pass the - "

Ron: [Throws salt shaker at him.]

Harry, teeth gritted: "Thanks."

[Clips of Harry and Ron occasionally bumping shoulders as they pass, glaring at each other as Hermione casually chats with other people.]
Harry: "What's been really unexpected is that with things being shaky with Ron, I've actually been hanging out with Malfoy a bit more."

[Harry and Draco are alone in the manor house's library, reading in silence together; Draco glances over at Harry.]

Draco: "Drink?"

Harry: [Looks up, surprised.] "Sure."

[Back to Harry interview.]

Harry: "I mean, it's not much, but it's . . . something, I guess." [He suddenly becomes very animated.] "And it's weird, really, because if there's anyone Hermione's getting close to that might be skeptical of me, shouldn't it be Draco?"

[Cuts to Blaise reading a date card.]

Blaise, reading Hermione's note: "Blaise and Draco." [He pauses.] "What? Two of us?"

[Cuts to Lee explaining.]

Lee: "Gentlemen, a two-on-one is simple. You both go on a date with Hermione, but." [Pauses, grinning mercilessly.] "One of you will be sent home immediately, while the other will receive the rose that keeps them safe from elimination."

[Scenes from the date follow on the screen; Hermione can't stop looking at Draco, and when he pulls her aside for a moment alone, she sighs with relief. Scene then cuts to the end of the date; Hermione is sitting at a table with Draco and Blaise.]

Hermione: "I hate having to do this, as I've gotten so close to both of you . . ." [Pauses, letting her eyes flick to Draco.] "But this rose is for Draco."

Blaise voiceover: "It was pretty obvious. I'm not too terribly upset, though she is a lovely girl."

[Cuts to scene of Hermione and Draco talking alone in a dimly lit corner during the date; they do not appear to know they are being filmed from afar.]

Hermione: [Indistinct whispering.]

Draco: "I know." [Lifts her chin to kiss her softly.] "It's okay."

Hermione: [Whispers something; at his nod of reassurance, she wraps her arms around his neck.]

[Cuts to Draco interview.]

Draco: "We . . . get each other." [ Shrugs.] "I don't know how else to explain it."

[Cuts to Lee, who is again standing in front of the manor house.]

Lee: "And on tonight's episode - Hometowns!"

[A montage of the various candidates' family homes cut across the screen.]

Lee: "How will Hermione fare after spending a day in each remaining contestant's hometown? Will she feel right at home at the Burrow?"
"Ladies - ladies, what is happening?" Minerva exclaimed, rushing over to the corner of the Great Hall where the two fourth years were arguing, their fists clenched tightly around their wands.

"She's being crazy -"

"I am not crazy, you're blind!"

Minerva looked up, gesturing across the room to the girls' Heads of House. "Professor Sprout, Professor Flitwick," she said frantically. "Please get your house members under control -"

"What's the problem?" Filius squeaked, rushing over to stand beside the young Ravenclaw as Pomona hurried in his wake.

"My mum's just owled me the results of last week's Bachelorette," the Hufflepuff explained, huffing. "Which, by the way, we only missed because she insisted the rest of us had to wait for her -"

"I had quidditch!" the Ravenclaw replied angrily, glaring. "And she thinks it's going to be Harry that Hermione chooses, which is absolute rubbish -"

"Like you would know!" the Hufflepuff squawked gracelessly, needing to be restrained by a very flustered Pomona. "You're Team Theo, which doesn't even make sense -"

"This is about that ridiculous Bachelorette competition?" Minerva exclaimed, aghast. "Ladies, this is a school - you should be focusing on your studies -"

They each shuffled under her disappointment, loath to meet her eyes. "Yes, Headmistress," they groaned in unison, shooting each other angry glares.

"Ten points each from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff," Minerva declared, crossing her arms. "Now run off and forget all this nonsense."

They both nodded quickly, pausing to offer apologetic nods to their respective Heads of House before scurrying away, appearing to mutter quietly to each other as the argument continued.

Minerva sighed. "This Bachelorette nonsense has to stop," she proclaimed warily. "This is the fourth time this week I've had to listen to them go on about that insipid farce."

"Oh, I don't know, Minerva," Filius said kindly. "I mean, Miss Davenport did have a point - Miss Granger does seem quite likely to choose Potter -"
"What?" Pomona exclaimed, affronted. "Filius, have you gone mad?"

Filius crossed his arms, a quiet challenge. "Don't tell me you really think Nott will be Miss Granger's choice?" he scoffed. "After teaching them both?"

"No," Pomona retorted quickly, defensive in her disagreement. "I am quite sure it will be Weasley; there's history there, you know, and they were so obvious while they were in school." She turned to Minerva, who rubbed her temples in exhaustion. "Surely you agree, Minerva!"

"I do not," Minerva snapped. "I think this is a waste of energy to consider," she said, raising her chin haughtily, "and don't think I haven't heard about the faculty pool you're all part of!"

They looked away guiltily, but Minerva pressed on. "Frankly, you could both do with a reminder that you have a much higher purpose than expending any effort guessing who Miss Granger may or may not choose to marry within the confines of a superficial competition!"

Both Filius and Pomona looked sheepish, giving her the same look the young fourth years had only just tossed her way.

"Besides," Minerva added, squaring her shoulders and starting to walk away. "Seeing as I was Miss Granger's Head of House, I am quite confident that you're both incorrect."

She paused just before exiting the hall.

"Put me down for five galleons on Mr. Malfoy," she instructed briskly, brushing some nonexistent dust off her robes before she swept out of the room.

"Granger."

His voice was a low growl as he followed her down the hall and she turned to face him, startled.

"Draco," she said, bringing her hand to her chest to slow her thudding pulse. "You scared me."

"How dare you?" he said bluntly, standing too close to her and looking down from his rather intimidating height. "How fucking dare you?"

"Malfoy!" she hissed warningly, looking around. There were no cameras, but they could arrive at any given moment; she yanked him into the bathroom behind her.

"What is this about?" she snapped, adjusting the straps of her gold evening gown as the door shut behind them. "What on earth has gotten into you?"

"A two-on-one?" he demanded, his grey eyes flashing. "You picked me for a two-on-one?"

"You knew I wasn't going to eliminate you!" she exclaimed, still not clear on the source of his apparent frustration. "I was always going to choose you - "

"I don't care, Granger!" he half-shouted, his arms motioning widely. "You'll be alone with Potter and Theo, but not with me?"

She gaped at him. "Are you - jealous?" she sputtered, completely bewildered by his sudden fiery response. "Draco, I - you - " she paused, stumbling. "You can't be serious."

"I'm not jealous," he spat unconvincingly, beginning to pace the master bath. "It's not jealousy - but I don't understand it," he admitted, his lips pursed tightly. "Why not me?"
His voice had softened and now he was looking at her with a sincerity stripped so bare she felt an incomprehensible shiver thunder up her spine.

"Why not me?" he asked again, his chest rising and falling as he struggled against his more impervious nature.

"Draco." She took a step towards him, taking hold of his suit lapel and shaking him playfully. "Draco, I didn't need to waste a one-on-one to know for sure I want to keep you here." She shook her head, finding herself surprised at the candidness of her own response. "I didn't know about Harry, or Theo, so I had to spend time alone with them - but you - I know exactly where I stand with you, you can't really think there was a question - "

He was shaking his head, looking down in a humbling mix of humiliation and relief.

"And for Hometowns I get a whole day with you," she reminded him softly, nudging his chin up with her hand to meet his grey eyes. "A whole day."

"Right," he croaked, nodding. "Right." He sighed, taking a step away from her. "I'd forgotten."

They were quiet for a moment, until the absurdity of the situation finally hit her.

"Did you really say 'how dare you'?" she asked, smirking at him. "So dramatic, Malfoy."

He opened his mouth to respond and she lifted her chin defiantly as she waited, anticipating a "Shut up, Granger," or even "You give yourself too much credit" - but instead, he picked her up roughly and sat her against the lip of the sink, kissing her fiercely, his breath ragged in her mouth.

"Fine," he said finally, pulling away. "Wear the black dress to meet my mother," he added briskly, stepping out of her reach and slipping quickly out of the room.

He left her staring at the door, her hand held numbly against her lips for almost five full minutes after he walked away.

[Camera pans to Lee, who is standing outside of the Burrow.]

Lee: "Welcome to the Burrow, the family home of Ron Weasley! In an unprecedented move, Harry and Ron will both be using the Burrow for this very unique episode of Hometowns."

[Cuts to interview with Harry.]

Harry: "Well, I grew up with muggles, but I certainly wouldn't subject Hermione to any time with them. [Shrugs.] "And really, the Burrow feels more like home anyway."

[Ron interview; Ron has his arms crossed tightly and looks more than a little upset.]

Ron: "This is bloody ridiculous."

[Cuts back to Lee, who is standing at the front door with Hermione.]

Lee: "Ready to meet your potential future in-laws?"

[Editor's cut:

Hermione: "You know that I know them, like, really well. Right?"
}
Muttered response.

Hermione: "I feel like you haven't really thought this through, if I'm being honest."

Mutters.

Hermione: "Okay great, so we're on the same page."

Hermione: [Sighs deeply] "Yes, let's do it."

[Lee knocks and the door opens, revealing a very enthusiastic Molly Weasley.]

Molly: "Hermione!" [Embraces the young witch warmly, her eyes straying to the camera.]

[Cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "Am I surprised by her reaction? A bit." [She bites her lip nervously.] "She didn't react well at all to the rumors about me being with Harry during the Triwizard Tournament, so I didn't think she'd be happy to see me."

Interviewer, off-screen: "Were you worried about her reaction?"

Hermione: "Definitely. To be honest, I'm not even sure whether she would prefer I choose Harry or Ron."

[Cuts to Molly interview.]

Molly: [Preening a bit for the camera.] "Honestly, I'm torn. Obviously Ron is my son, but . . . " [She hesitates.] "She does look quite good with Harry, doesn't she?"

[Cuts back to Hermione hugging Molly.]

Hermione: "Hi, Mrs. Weasley." [Looks up to see Arthur.] "Hi Mr. Weasley!"

Arthur: "Hello, Hermione." [Hugs her warmly.] "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

Molly, aghast: "Arthur!" [She glances nervously to the camera.] "It's for the show, remember? For Harry and Ron?"

Arthur, bemused: "Ah." [Shrugs, walking back into the house and calling over his shoulder.] "Carry on, then. I'll be in the garage if you need me!"

Hermione stood uncomfortably in the kitchen of the Burrow; she could only guess at the number of household cleaning charms Mrs. Weasley had had to use, considering she'd never seen the place so clean - not even for Bill and Fleur's wedding. Hermione supposed having all her children out of the nest might have been part of it, but still, Molly Weasley had always been a bit of a hoarder of sorts. At least half of the house's possessions were likely stored elsewhere; the garage, Hermione could only guess. Arthur made exceptions for undetectable extension charms when it came to the happiness of his wife.

Not a bad thing to have learned from a father, she reminded herself, eyeing Ron where he was gazing rather sulkily into space. Beside him, Harry also stood rigid with discomfort, and Hermione wondered yet again what had possessed them to decide to share ownership of this particular family and dwelling. It seemed The Bachelorette had driven them all to inarguable madness.
"So," she ventured uncomfortably, fidgeting in front of the camera. "Any plans?"

Ron and Harry opened their mouths at the same time to answer, and then only glared at each other.

"Ah," Hermione said, fighting the impulse to rub her temple wearily.

That was only the beginning, of course. Molly had prepared a vast spread - far more than she would normally have done, even with her generally ample cooking - but it was difficult to appreciate her enormous effort. The food was difficult to taste over the stiff tension between her two best friends.

"How's it going?" Lee whispered in a low voice, pulling her aside.

"Not well at all," she replied, which was obvious. Lee grimaced.

"I just got instructions for this week's elimination," he said regretfully, and Hermione sighed, knowing what was coming. She lifted her chin, gesturing to a quieter spot in the house.

"I have to cut either Ron or Harry, don't I?" she whispered, her face falling once they were safely out of earshot.

"Yes," he said, anxiously picking at his fingernails. "I'm so sorry, Hermione."

"It's really better for all of us," she remarked, trying to be logical about it. "We're supposed to be best friends, and I know they'll get over this eventually, they always do, but - " she sighed. "It can't go on like this."

"Well, you know my thoughts on the matter," Lee said wryly. "I have my favorites."

"I saw you tear up last week," she reminded him. "I'm perfectly aware."

"I'm very invested," he insisted, shrugging.

"What if I just walked away now and didn't pick anyone?" Hermione said hopefully. "Dean and Seamus had the right idea." She paused, then looked up at Lee with a start. "There's no chance you want to marry me, is there?"

He glared at her.

"Fair enough," she sighed, turning to rejoin her hosts.

[Camera pans across the stately facade of Malfoy Manor; Lee steps into view.]

Lee: "Welcome to Malfoy Manor, the elegant home of the Malfoy family." [He gestures to Hermione, who joins him. She is wearing a tasteful and elegant black dress.] "Hermione, as we all know, there are some bad memories here."

[Editor's cut:

Hermione: "'Bad memories'? That's what you're going with?"

Muttered response.

Hermione: "It doesn't strike you as, I don't know - the understatement of the century?"]"
Hermione: "Yes." *[Her voice is strained and she has never looked more nervous.]* "A long time ago, of course. Practically a different world."

Lee: "Certainly." *[Forges ahead awkwardly.]* "Do you have any reservations about this day?"

*Editor's cut:*

_Hermione, in interview: "Do I have reservations? DO I HAVE RESERVATIONS?"

Hermione: "I'm sure everything will be fine." *[Her knees buckle slightly and she has the distinct look of someone who may take off running at any given moment.]* "It's Draco. It'll be fine."

*The door opens, revealing an elegantly garbed Narcissa Malfoy and an unusually relaxed Draco, whose attire is uncharacteristically casual; he is wearing a soft sweater, dark trousers, and his hair is swept back as though he has recently been flying."

Narcissa: "Miss Granger." *[She opens her arms and Hermione enters, giving her what is perhaps the world's most awkward embrace.]* "Such a pleasure to meet you."

Hermione, coolly despite her frantic expression: "Likewise." *[She turns to Draco, looking relieved to see him.]* "Draco."

Draco: "Hermione." *[He pulls her in and kisses her softly; Hermione is surprised, her glance drifting immediately to Narcissa, but Narcissa has a surprising look of contentment on her face.]*

Hermione, breathlessly: "Hi." *[Draco tucks a stray hair behind her ear and Hermione finally seems to relax a bit at the contact.]* "Shall we go inside?" *[She is still somewhat hesitant.]*

Narcissa: "Actually, I thought the garden would be better."

*Cuts to Narcissa interview.*

Narcissa: "I may never forgive myself for what happened to that poor girl in my house. She hardly needs a tour." *[She shivers.]* "And why keep up the gardenias if nobody sees them?"

---

Tea with Narcissa seemed to put Granger vaguely at ease, Draco noted, keeping an eye on her and watching the weight slowly lift from her shoulders as time went on. He reached for her hand on occasion, lightly massaging her knuckles with his thumb as he considered his mother's advice.

"I understand what you have to do," Narcissa had reminded him. "You have to woo her, Draco." She squared her shoulders as they waited for Lee's knock, ever the aristocrat. "Be sure to kiss her, darling. Women want affection."

"In front of you?" he'd asked, startled. "Doesn't that seem . . . disrespectful?"

"You think I am that easily disrespected?" she countered, giving him a look. "Please do me the kindness of not underestimating me, Draco. It offends."

"But - "

"Woo her," Narcissa commanded again, sweeping over to the entry table to rearrange some freshly cut lilies. "I trust you've not forgotten the purpose to all this."

"No," he'd permitted glumly, watching her fuss over a nonexistent mess. "She's really not so bad, though," he admitted, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop himself. "I don't
think you need to worry so much."

At that, Narcissa had promptly straightened, turning sharply to glance at him over her shoulder.

"Draco," she'd said slowly. "Is there something I should know?"


"No," Narcissa chided him, waving her hand as though to shoo away his unsatisfactory response. "Is there something I should know about you?"

He'd been silent, not wanting to give her the answer she was looking for. Feeding Narcissa information was always a gamble; she was a master manipulator, after all, a consummate Slytherin. She was not unkind, but she certainly had no shortage of agenda.

But despite his best efforts, she was still his mother, and it was difficult not to confess.

"She's not that bad," he grumbled, looking at the floor.

"Do not mumble to yourself, Draco," she scolded, and he fought his childish protestations. "If you like the girl, just say so." She softened, coming over to rest her hands warmly on his shoulders. "Women do enjoy being liked, you know," she assured him. "This one is surely no exception."

"It's Granger," he argued, eyeing her with unconcealed skepticism. "Are you really telling me you've no qualms about that?"

"Darling, I am not so one-dimensional that I cannot evolve with the times," she returned stiffly. "What's important to me is you, Draco, and only you." She paused. "And shoes. I care a great deal about shoes."

"You're not bothered by her birth?" he echoed, vaguely amused.

"Don't get carried away, darling," she sniffed, fussing with a speck of dust on her bodice. "Her birth may not be an issue, but there are a great many other things I could be bothered by." She looked up, thinking. "Her manners, perhaps; or the noise level of her chewing - "

"I think all of that will be fine, Mother," Draco interrupted, unable to prevent a covert eye roll. "She's not a barbarian."

"Then I expect we'll get along swimmingly," she declared, and in typical Narcissa fashion, that was that.

Draco turned to Granger now, his own lips twisting into a smile as she laughed at a story from Draco's youth. He would normally have been embarrassed by his mother's choice of story, but there was something slightly wonderful about the way Granger leaned forward, hanging on every word as though she wished to lay claim to the memory itself.

"Darling," Narcissa said after a while, her eyes traveling knowingly to Draco's. "Perhaps you might show her the ballroom?"

A woman likes to be courted, Draco.

Of course she wanted him to dance.

Granger was a surprisingly decent dancer, he determined, though perhaps he shouldn't have been surprised. He was a particularly well trained lead - all Narcissa's doing, of course - and Granger
was almost shockingly coordinated. The music in the ballroom, which was charmed to change with the dancers' steps, prompted a particularly beautiful melody, and he felt a renewed surge of confidence as he watched Granger's eyes glimmer appreciatively.

"Cameras," she whispered to him, and he dipped her carefully, his eyes helplessly following the line of her neck as she slowly allowed herself to be brought back to his level.

"And my mother's not watching," he muttered back in her ear, pulling her into his chest.

A knowing smile spread across her lips and he lifted her up, his hands tangled in her hair as she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist.

"Convincing show," she murmured, and he pulled her lips to his.

[Camera pans the front of Nott Manor, which is very similar to Malfoy Manor in extravagance and age. Lee once again steps into view, Hermione on his arm.]

Lee: "Welcome to the final Hometown destination - Nott Manor." [He turns to Hermione.] "How are you feeling?"

[Editor's Cut:
Hermione: "Seriously, stop asking how I'm feeling."
Lee: "But - "
Hermione: "It's not good, Lee. It's never good."
Lee: "But - "
Hermione: "If you ask me too many times I'll have to start being honest, and I swear, if I tell the truth, you'll be out of a job."
Lee, resignedly: "Fair enough."

Hermione: "I'm great." [Looks at Lee as though she may very well strangle him.]

Lee, appearing to sense danger: "Okay, let's just go in then, shall we - "

[Theo opens the front door a crack and darts out, rushing towards them.]

Theo: "Hi, hi, apologies."

Hermione: "Oh?" [She looks startled.] "What - "

Theo: "Come on." [He gestures for her to come towards him; Lee tosses the camera a helpless 'what can you do' look, and Hermione hesitantly joins Theo.] "It'll be fun, I promise."

[Cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "Not sure how I feel about surprises at an estate that once belonged to a notorious Death Eater." [She looks queasy.] "I don't even like surprises much to begin with, but this seems particularly questionable. 'Fun' would not be my terminology of choice."

[Cuts back to Theo, who is holding his hands over her eyes.]
Theo, gleefully: "Ready?"

Hermione, the opposite of gleefully: "Sure."

[Theo nudges the door open and pushes her inside; the camera pans first to Hermione's look of complete surprise, and then to the interior of the house. The entry hall is filled with brightly colored balloons and a large banner that is blurred for explicit content but very clearly reads 'Fuck parents.]

Theo: "My parents are dead!" [He is practically shouting with unbridled enthusiasm, and Hermione can barely contain her entertainment.] "It's just you and me!"

[Cuts to Hermione in an interview segment, who is practically crying with relief.]

Hermione: "I had a wonderful time at Malfoy Manor and at the Burrow, but frankly, this is just what I needed."

[Camera cuts back to Theo and Hermione; Theo has grabbed Hermione and is kissing her, his arms wrapped around her waist.]

Lee: "Uh, so." [He looks uncomfortably at the camera.] "This - um."

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Honestly, am I just supposed to watch them snog all over this house?"

Muttered response.

Lee: "Okay, but have you seen how big this house is?"]

Kingsley stared at the scroll before him, determined to finish the paperwork that littered his desk despite his unrelenting headache.

"Mafalda," he called, but to no response. He frowned, rising to his feet. It was possible she had gone home, as it was well after work hours, but she normally stayed behind when he did, and he was surprised she did not scurry in at his beckoning.

He walked out of his office to the location of her desk, discovering that at least four other members of the department were crouched around her workspace, with Mafalda herself at their center. He entered the fray quietly, glancing over their shoulders; The Bachelorette was playing on a tiny, charmed screen, and they all seemed to be enraptured, unconcerned by his presence.

Kingsley squinted at the scene that was playing, nearly leaping back in shock as he caught a close-up of the Nott boy's hands on Hermione's upper thigh.

"That's a bit gratuitous, don't you think?" he rumbled softly, a little scandalized. The other ministry workers jumped about a foot in the air, hastily stepping away and eyeing their feet as they returned to their desks.

"I have to say, Theo's grown on me," Mafalda remarked, unaware of what had happened behind her. "I dare say if things don't work out with Hermione, I can always make myself available -"

"Mafalda," Kingsley exclaimed in alarm, and she turned slowly, her face nearly purple.

"Sir," she managed, her voice inhumanly high.
He bit back a grin. "He does seem to know what he's doing," Kingsley conceded, pivoting quickly to re-enter his office.

[Camera pans across the remaining four contestants and then down to the three roses that have been placed beside Hermione; she is wearing a long navy gown, and her hands are shaking as she picks up the roses.]

Hermione: "Draco."

[Draco steps forward and she seems to cling to him nervously; he holds her a beat longer than he should, but then returns to the others.]

Hermione: [Swallows and looks terrified.] "Harry."

[Harry looks relieved and gives her a comforting squeeze; she nods once and sighs, as though reassured by her choice. Harry rejoins the other candidates and chooses to stand beside Draco, who gives him a curt nod. The interaction is surprisingly amicable.]

[The music becomes dramatic and intense as the camera zooms in on the only remaining rose.]

Hermione: "This is the hardest rose so far, and I hope you'll forgive me." [She starts rubbing anxiously at her clavicle as though she is struggling to breathe.] "This rose is for . . ."

[She trails off and the music is excessively dramatic.]

Hermione: [Takes a deep breath.] "This rose is for Theo."

[Theo grins rather knowingly at her and she sags a little in his arms; he kisses her cheek and joins Harry and Draco, leaving her to face Ron.]

Hermione: "I'm so sorry." [She is whispering and a tear slips down her cheek.] "I'm so, so sorry."

Ron: [Looks a bit shell-shocked, but nods.] "I just want you to be happy."

Hermione: [sobs] "I want that for you, too."

[Cuts to Ron interview.]

Ron: "Look, I'm upset, but I think I know as well as she does that we weren't going to work out." [He gazes out the window; slow, soft violin music plays.] "We tried it before and it didn't work then, so it's okay if it doesn't work now. She's great, you know." [He manages a smile with difficulty.] "Any of these guys will be lucky to have her."

Interviewer, off-screen: "Do you have any particular preference for who she might choose of the remaining contestants?"

Ron: [chuckles.] "Well, as weird as it is for me to say this, Harry really is the best guy there." [He shrugs somewhat cheerfully; he seems to be much happier now that he has been eliminated.] "I'm always going to be on his team."

[Cuts back to a shot of the manor as Lee steps into view.]

Lee: "And next week on The Bachelorette . . . Fantasy Suites!"

[Cuts to scenes of an elaborate tropical hotel.]
Hermione voiceover: "Fantasy Suites is the first time I get to be alone with these guys and, I don't know. I'm quite nervous."

[Cut to Draco interview.]

Draco: "Of course I'm not in love with her." [He does not look like he believes this.] "How could I be? It's only been a couple of months!" [He buries his head in his hands, sighing as though he knows he is losing this battle.]

[Cut to Harry interview.]

Harry: "Do I love Hermione? I've always loved Hermione." [He looks startled.] "Dear god, do I love Hermione?" [He doubles over, mumbling to himself.] "Oh no. Oh no. What is happening."

[Cut to Theo interview.]

Theo: "Sure, I love her." [He shrugs.] "What's not to love?"

[Cut back to a smiling Lee.]

Lee: "All that and more coming up next time on . . . The Bachelorette! And don't forget to stay tuned for our new series, 'Newlyweds: Dean and Seamus Take on the Wizarding World.'"

[Editor's Cut:

Lee: "Oh, I've got an owl from my mum, hold on."

[He opens it and makes a face.]

Lee: "She doesn't even ask how I am. She just wants to know if I have any insider information for her book club pool." [He shakes his head.] "Godric's teeth, do I not exist?"

Muttered response.

Lee, yelling: "HAVE I DIED OR SOMETHING?"

Chapter End Notes

a/n: The absurdity never ends. This one is for Shayalonnie, who for whatever reason is reading this (YES, I KNOW, I HAVE ARRIVED) and has gone as far as to put it on her rec list.

I know. I'm as surprised as you are.
Epilogue

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: This World or Any Other storyverse (Clean and Marked)

Rating: M for language, though mostly just because Marked is M

Summary: This is the drabble that will serve as an epilogue for Marked. I am not generally a believer in epilogues (Joanne Rowling taught me that a terrible epilogue can ruin a story) and as far as I am concerned, that story is complete as it was written. That being said, for those of you who wondered what happened to the other characters, or who want a glimpse of what Draco and Hermione's life is like together, this drabble is my gift to you.

It wasn't long before they began to piece things back together, fixing each other like they were playing with a puzzle of pieces they couldn't see. He started with her.

"Granger," he said, watching her stare at nothing. "For fuck's sake."

"Mm?" she replied, startled, fixing him with a hasty look of innocence. "What?"

"You haven't moved in several minutes," he informed her, setting down his quill and crossing their office to take a seat at her desk. "What is it?"

"Oh," she said, running the tip of her quill across her lips. "Nothing, really."

It had only been a few months but he knew better than to accept that as an answer. He knew her gaps and rhythms like he knew his own pulse.

"What kind of nothing?" he asked, kicking his feet out in front of him and nudging her under the desk.

She sighed. "It's my parents' anniversary," she said quietly.

He already knew where they were: Australia. Knew what happened to them: she couldn't undo the memory charm. He knew there was almost nothing he could do to fix it for her, but he also knew something about himself: he'd watch the world burn before he gave up trying.
"Get up," he instructed, walking around the desk to take her by the hand and pull her along behind him. "We've been in the office too long anyway."

"Where are we going?" she squawked helplessly, dragging her feet behind him.

"Australia," he replied curtly, tossing her things in her bag and rummaging through his desk for his own necessities.

"But - "

He looked up, catching the startled glimmer in her golden brown eyes.

"I'd like to meet them, Granger," he explained stiffly. "They don't need to know why."

Her lip trembled, but he had not yet progressed to the point of knowing whether that was a good or bad sign.

"But," she said, choking out her reservations. "But they're, they're - " she bit her lip. "They're m- "

Muggles. He was still having to teach her that such things no longer mattered to him; only she did, in the end.

"Don't dawdle, Granger," he instructed, tucking an arm around her waist and leading her out of the office. "We have places to be."

Wendell and Monica Wilkins had been going on long jogs on Saturday mornings for as long as memory served; though, in all fairness, memory did not serve them particularly well. It was a common joke among their friends, that neither of them seemed to be able to recall things from their distant past; though everything was clear enough from the last three-odd years.

Better diet, Monica supposed. After all, everyone was saying such things about gluten.

"Hurry up," she called over her shoulder to Wendell, who appeared a little dazed. "Is everything quite alright?"

"Um," he said, reaching back to feel the back of his head. "I - "

"What is it?" she asked, circling back to jog alongside him. "Something wrong?"

"I just thought I felt something," he said, frowning, bringing his hand forward as though examining it for damage. "I think I'm fine, though - "

"Excuse me," a young man called, waving to them from a short ways behind. He was accompanied by a rather petite girl with wild brown hair, and Monica, normally quite serious with her exercise, came to a sudden stop at the sight of a nervous glimmer in the girl's warm brown eyes, a sparkle that was somehow both slightly familiar and hauntingly distant.

"Hi," the young man said, a little breathless as he caught up to them. He had an exceedingly posh British accent and startlingly pale hair; quite handsome overall, though perhaps in his mid-twenties. "So sorry to bother you, but my, er - " he looked down at the girl, whose eyes were wide with indecision - "my wife and I are here on holiday, and we're a bit lost - "

"Draco," Monica said suddenly, and then clapped her hand over her mouth, startled by the violent hurtling of a memory she couldn't explain.
She knew him, this boy - he had been younger, she was quite sure, and in her kitchen - but not her kitchen at all, was it? A conversation about pasta - which she didn't even eat -

"What?" he asked, rattled, his face paling in shock. Beside him, his partner's mouth had fallen open, and Monica turned to find Wendell was looking at her much the same way.

"I - I'm so sorry," Monica said, her voice shaking as she tried to clear her head. "I don't know what's come over me, but - " she squinted at the young man. "We have met before, haven't we?"

"I - " he hesitated, looking down at his lovely young wife, who seemed familiar to Monica as well, though there was some kind of obstruction in the way; a blockage of sorts, and the more she strained for recognition, the less she could identify the feeling. "I am Draco, yes, but - "

"I'm quite sure we've never met," the girl cut in slowly, her fingers tightening around his arm. "After all," she asserted, straightening. "This is our first time in Australia."

The blow of the girl's particular shade of brown eyes nearly sent Monica reeling. "Not Australia," she said faintly, though she couldn't imagine why. She had never remembered living anywhere else, despite the mockery she received for her distinct London accent -

"Nevermind," Monica declared, shaking her head as Wendell moved to pat her shoulder comfortably.

"Everything alright?" he murmured to her, though she could see there was something odd in his expression as well.

"So sorry," the young man - Draco - said kindly, extending his hand with the kind of formality normally afforded to Victorian society, or so Monica imagined. "I'm Draco, and this" - he looked at her, offering a reassuring smile - "this is Hermione."

"Hermione," Wendell said, and there was a throaty humming sound to his voice, a vibration that poured into the name like honey. "Daughter of Helen." He smiled. "Beautiful."

The girl looked as though she might cry. "Thank you," she whispered, offering him a shaky hand.

"Wendell," he said quickly, taking her proffered grip and appearing to realize with a start that he'd entirely abandoned proper manners. "And my wife, Monica," he added, placing a hand on her shoulder as the four of them exchanged greetings.

"Lovely to meet you both," Draco said, his tone taking on a caress of warmth that Monica guessed did not come easily to him. He had a certain coolness to him, a glacial impassivity of sorts that she couldn't quite identify, but she attributed something to him; a comfort, perhaps. Something like that.

"You said you're lost?" Monica recalled, looking around. They must have gone pretty far out of their way to end up here.

"We tried to, you know, get off the map a bit," Draco suggested airily, shrugging his arm across his wife's shoulders. "But if you could help us - "

"How about a coffee?" Wendell suggested, gesturing to a place he and Monica usually passed, just up the road. He nudged his wife with a grin. "If this one is willing to forego the rest of the run, of course."

"I suppose," Monica permitted, leaning into his touch. "Yes," she decided, nodding slowly at first,
and then resolutely. "Yes. Let's stop and have a chat," she determined firmly. "We're quite good hosts, after all, aren't we?"

Wendell nodded, ever the pleasant extrovert.

"Excellent," Draco said firmly, a smile secured on his face. He looked down at his wife, who looked joyfully relieved even as she tentatively nipped at her lip.

"Thank you," the girl said softly, and they all began to walk.

"You're a lovely couple," Wendell added, turning over his shoulder to address them before nudging Monica, stepping ahead to lead them up the road.

Monica walked quietly beside Wendell, finding it difficult not to repeatedly sneak looks behind her at the girl, Hermione. There was something about her; her eyes, mostly. The familiarity in them was startling. And her hair was quite like Wendell's had been, once - when he was much younger, of course. Monica remembered the way it felt under her fingers, how it had been scratchy against her face the moment she woke in their first apartment; how it had been so helplessly askew and the rest of him not much better, still wearing the clothes they'd fallen asleep in the night before, the whole place badly lit and horribly decorated -

Monica stopped mid-stride. She had never remembered that far back before.

"Everything okay?" Hermione asked gently, and Monica felt herself smile even as her heart continued to pound.

"Fine," she said quickly, taking in the hopeful expression on the young girl's face. "I think everything's going to be fine."

"I'm surprised you wanted to come to this," Draco said quietly in her ear, brushing a kiss against her cheek as he gestured for her to sit. "I'm happy you did, of course - "

"It's only fair," Hermione assured him, though she felt considerably less confident than she sounded. "You've met my parents, after all, and it is her birthday - "

"She'll love you," Draco cut in smoothly, tucking a stray curl behind her ear.

Hermione sighed. If only she and Narcissa could have had the great fortune of being able to meet as strangers the way her parents and Draco had; if only Hermione didn't still feel so small, so insignificant in this world that she knew without question would never have welcomed her. It was a strange, paradoxical reversal of how she normally felt at work. In the stately gardens of the very vigorously - vigorously - renovated Malfoy Manor, seated among the very people she was so often called on to defend, she only felt trapped in their bubble of propriety, dwarfed by the eminence of their venerable old ways.

Hermione let her gaze flick nervously to the stunning older witch where she stood only a few feet away, wondering what the two of them might ever have in common. Narcissa Malfoy was the picture of elegance, the pinnacle of poise, and by comparison, Hermione felt like a strange, nonsensical afterthought; she was grateful Draco had not left her side.

Had not left her side yet, in any case, though she should have known it was coming.

"Darling," Narcissa said, calling to Draco as she approached. "I wonder if you might say hello to your Aunt Andromeda," she suggested, gesturing to a woman across the gardens that nearly gave
Hermione a disturbing start; Andromeda Tonks, while decidedly not Bellatrix Lestrange, certainly carried a strong resemblance, alike in nearly every way aside from the general aura of being entirely unhinged.

Initial shock aside, Hermione was surprised to hear that such a reconciliation between severed sisters had been attempted, though by the look on Draco's face - a nod of placid understanding, in stark contrast to her own startled gaping - it was not entirely out of character for Narcissa. Hermione felt a sudden leap in her chest, a wild hope that clanged around inside her at the thought; perhaps things were not as bad as she had expected.

Perhaps Narcissa was not at all what she had expected.

"I've tried to convince her to join the fray, but she's a bit hesitant," Narcissa added, her tone taking on a steady, somewhat facetious musing, like the idea had just occurred to her and was not, as was much more likely, a broader manipulation. "I thought you might make her feel welcome."

Narcissa was smiling fondly at her son, but Hermione could see with alarming certainty that this was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a request with the option of denial.

"Yes, Mother," Draco said, dutifully rising to his feet and gesturing for Hermione to join him, offering her his arm. She reached up to take it, but Narcissa made a gentle cough of disagreement.

"Perhaps Miss Granger might prefer to remain in the shade with me," Narcissa ventured, though this, too, was no request. "Andromeda and I have only recently reconciled, you know, and it's perhaps best not to overwhelm her."

Likely not entirely true, though not necessarily disingenuous, either, Hermione noted. Narcissa's expression was delicately guarded, artfully dispassionate; there was no territorialism there, no skepticism. In short, nothing Hermione might have expected from the courtly Lady Malfoy, and as much as her first instinct was to question the other witch's intentions, she felt a strange sense of calm.

Some sense of unspoken assurance, some unsubstantial figment in her mind, whispered to her that this would be okay.

"I'm intrigued, Mother," Draco noted, not unkindly, though he was hesitant to leave Hermione's side. "Surely you don't mean to tell me that you initiated the relationship."

"She's my sister," Narcissa insisted firmly, glancing quickly at where Andromeda stood apart from the other guests. Hermione thought she could sense something in Narcissa's tone, a subtle veneration that served to indicate that perhaps the older witch had longed for the reunion for a considerably long time. "And," Narcissa added, lifting her chin as she made her point, "times have changed."

It was a challenge, Hermione realized, watching Narcissa's stance as she straightened. Times have changed, Narcissa had said, but what she meant was I have changed - and let no one question my choices.

Hermione found herself rather impressed.

"They certainly have," Draco replied, his voice colored with amusement.

He bent to kiss Hermione, stroking his thumb against her jaw with a slow, easy reverence; it was a surprisingly intimate gesture, particularly given the audience, and Hermione couldn't help a glance at Narcissa, giving in to a nervous impulse to see if she was bothered by Draco's show of affection.
Hermione stiffened in preparation for a look of haughty disapproval, but found she needn't have bothered. Instead, she was surprised to find a faint smile on the lovely witch's face.

*Don't be ashamed of the savagery with which you love, or the fierceness of your heart.*

She heard the whisper in her mind, familiar and out of reach, and she felt herself relax, the breaths coming a little bit easier.

"I've learned that forgiveness comes easily enough if you only make the effort to ask for it," Narcissa said once Draco took a step towards her, reaching up to touch the pale blond strands of his hair. "I had an excellent role model for that," she added, her eyes straying to Hermione's.

Even that statement, as confessionary as it was, as vulnerable as it might have been, sounded like a fact that was not to be questioned when delivered with Narcissa's inarguable poise, and Hermione met her gaze easily. There was a sincerity to the statement, an essence of truth, and it struck Hermione as trustworthy. A truce, of sorts.

Slowly, Hermione's doubts seemed to ebb, left only with a trace of curiosity as to who she really was, the enigma wrapped in elegance that was Narcissa Malfoy.

Draco nodded once, his glance following his mother's to Hermione - are you okay? he seemed to ask; I'm fine, she assured him - before he turned away, beginning to cross through the gardens.

"He's softer than he seems, you know." Narcissa murmured once he'd gone, taking a seat beside Hermione and letting her eyes follow her son's long strides. "More loving than he reveals to others." She straightened, clearing her throat as though ridding herself of her pesky sentimentality. "He looks and behaves quite like his father, of course, but his inner nature is far more like mine, I'm afraid."

Hermione couldn't help a tentative smile, watching as Draco smoothed his hair back absentmindedly, preparing to tap his unsuspecting aunt on the shoulder. "Is that such a bad thing?"

"Ah, well, he's secretly a romantic," Narcissa assured her. "And it must be my doing." Her lovely face became somehow even lovelier, the affection for her son catching the light and blossoming in her features. "I used to tell him this foolish story - Lucius would always get so angry with me." She shook her head, laughing a little at the memory. "Said it would make him soft."

"What was the story?" Hermione asked, leaning forward with a smile.

Narcissa opened her mouth, but then, to Hermione's disappointment, clamped it shut again, resolute in her stoic aristocracy. "It's foolish," she repeated unconvincingly, and she moved to turn away.

"Please," Hermione said, and before she realized what she was doing, she'd reached out to rest her palm against the older witch's arm, stopping her in her tracks. "I'd love to hear it."

The motion, as unexpected as it was, had a vague sense of familiarity to it that they both seemed to recognize at the same time. For a moment, Narcissa looked as though she might protest, but at Hermione's touch, she softened.

*Promise me.*

Hermione drew her hand away, but the lingering comfort remained.

*I promise.*
"It's not really a story," Narcissa amended. "Just something my mother used to say."

Hermione waited. If Draco was as similar to Narcissa as she claimed, it was best to allow space for her thoughts; she was rewarded for her patience when Narcissa spoke again.

"My mother wasn't particularly warm," Narcissa ventured, and there was something girlish in her voice that Hermione recognized; a yearning of some kind, a lonely kind of craving that Hermione herself had once known quite well.

"Andromeda was mother to us all, mostly, though Mother did have one thing," Narcissa said carefully. "One thing she always said."

Hermione nodded, feeling the caress of a cool breeze, content with waiting. Narcissa, after a moment of pause, let her hand rest beside Hermione's, cutting the space between them.

"My mother used to tell us about an invisible red thread of fate," she explained softly, and Hermione could see it was a story she'd never shared outside of her son; a hidden lining of sorts, concealed by her polished exterior. "I don't know how the thread was both red and invisible, of course - "

"Of course," Hermione agreed, smiling.

" - but she told me that the thread bound two people from birth. Soulmates, you know," Narcissa added wistfully.

"It was a beautiful thought," Narcissa went on, looking at Hermione as though to beg forgiveness for her whimsy. "That the thread could twist and wind and pull but never break, so that regardless of time or place or circumstance, those who were connected by the thread would find each other."

This life or any other.

"I think I've heard that story before," Hermione whispered, and Narcissa squeezed her hand tightly.

Across the garden, Andromeda pulled Draco into an embrace, and all the worlds collided.

Their friends had been different, of course, and both easier and more difficult.

Harry had been first, as it was hard to avoid him; he seemed to prowl Grimmauld Place at all hours of the day and night, and the very first morning that Draco and Hermione had stumbled into the kitchen, sleep-deprived and satiated, he had been there, coffee in hand.

"Oh," Draco said, and Harry lifted an eyebrow.

"You two are not very covert," Harry noted, glancing between them and then letting his eyes travel first from the empty wine glasses on the table to the coats that lay in a crumpled heap on the floor.

"Lack of auror training, I expect," Hermione attempted faintly, and Harry snorted softly in response, removing a mug from the cupboard and handing it to her.

"Give us a minute, would you?" Harry suggested, not taking his eyes off Draco.

Hermione emitted a muted squeak of protest, but Draco's expression never wavered.

"We're fine, Granger," he said tersely, crossing his arms.
She sighed. "No curses," she warned them, but she quietly backed away.

As it was Harry's house, Draco was gallant enough to give him the first blow, jutting his chin in challenge.

"Go ahead," he said simply.

Harry poured a cup of coffee, handing it to him; Draco accepted it, though he couldn't help sniffing it preemptively.

"I'm not poisoning you, Malfoy," Harry said, smirking. "Have some coffee."

"Shall I make myself comfortable, then?" Draco asked drily, taking a conciliatory sip.

"First," Harry said, taking a sip of his own, "tell me why you love her."

Draco sensed that had this been another time, or perhaps some other life, he might have done nothing more than scoff at the question; at the ridiculous notion that such a question could be answered, firstly, and then a secondary scoff at the idea that Potter merited an answer. As it was, however, Draco was a little exhausted at the thought of pretense; he'd hidden enough things in his lifetime to know that Hermione Granger needn't be one, and so the answer came easily.

"How could I not?" he offered weakly, shrugging in defeat.

To his surprise, Harry seemed to accept this explanation, nodding slowly in response.

"I suspect that if the circumstances were any different, I might put up more of a fight," Harry proposed, and Draco fought a smile at the harmonious parallelism of their respective reactions. "But she's different now, you know," Harry noted. "Happier."

Draco sensed something in the sentiment - something that rattled around in the timbre of the bespectacled wizard's voice, unable to stay hidden despite his best efforts. If Draco had been any less skeptical, he might have guessed it was gratitude.

"I'm not going to get in the way of that," Harry concluded after a moment, and then there was no mistaking the white flag.

Still, Draco never liked a quick surrender. He let a fair amount of silence pass between them, taking several sips before he responded.

"Good," he replied simply, and Harry cracked a smile.

"Now you can make yourself comfortable," the dark-haired wizard pronounced, and Draco rolled his eyes.

"Friends now, are we?" he drawled, taking another audible sip.

"Unfortunately," Harry replied, his voice resigned and grim.

From just outside the door, Hermione ducked her head to cover a smile.

"Hermione and Draco are dating," Harry said casually, and Ron looked up from his dinner.

"Oh," said Ron, managing a swallow with difficulty. "Hm."
He squinted into nothing for a moment.

"Feels sort of normal," he grunted, his brow furrowed. "Sort of like I already knew that."

Harry nodded, and they both returned to their meal.

"So," Draco said, settling himself down beside Theo. "What do you think?"

"I like her more than you already," Theo replied.

In truth, there had always been something strange about Granger; not necessarily about her, per se, but something that surrounded her. When Draco had first brought it up - casually, and slipping it into conversation as though he were asking Theo to pass the salt - he had felt some kind of settling in his brain, some unidentifiable sense of ah yes, that's right, a sigh of recognition that had soothed him as much as it startled him. Like a piece of him could finally rest.

He wasn't sure he could explain it, and there were even more strange occurrences over time. Like, for example, the time Theo just happened to know that Hermione preferred Earl Grey in the afternoons, and that she liked it taken with lemon; he swore up and down that she must have told him that at one point, but she insisted it had never come up. There was the time, too, that Hermione seemed to know that a room in Nott Manor had once been a library before his father's death, though Theo knew for certain she had never been there. And of course there was no overlooking the very strange time that Draco asked for Theo's help in choosing Hermione's birthday gift; inexplicably, his first thought was to suggest transfiguring Draco's signet ring to a pendant, and the moment the words were out of his mouth, he realized the idea had just been lounging in his brain, waiting to be invited out for conversation. Once she started wearing it, Theo realized he couldn't imagine her without it.

And she called him Lancelot, once. It seemed innocent enough, though he had still looked accusingly to Draco; not even Daphne knew about that. The other man only shrugged, insisting he'd never said anything, and for whatever reason, Theo was inclined to believe him. There were certainly a number of very strange things about Granger.

Though, mostly, it was how quickly she felt like family.

"Ah," Draco said, entering the kitchen at Grimmauld Place and nodding. "You're up."

"Always," Harry replied, grinning. "Going to be weird when I'm the only one."

"You should consider sleep potion," Draco suggested loftily, taking a seat across from him. "You need your beauty sleep, Potter."

"I do pretty well without it," Harry countered and Draco chuckled. "Besides, it's really only like this when Ginny's with the team." He looked up, giving Draco a knowing glance. "You, on the other hand, are nocturnal all the time."

Not exactly true. In reality, Draco had grown quite comfortable with the late night chats in the kitchen, and it had felt like a habit long before it had actually been habit; he suspected that without the option of Harry's company, he would sleep just fine in their new flat, though he would likely never admit it.

He shrugged.
"What's this?" Draco asked, eyeing the parchment in front of Harry.

"Guest list," Harry said tersely, frowning. "Ginny needs me to decide who I want to invite." He rolled his eyes. "And apparently it needs to be done tonight."

"Hardly fair to blame her," Draco pointed out, thinking of the witch's positively violent opposition to wedding planning. "That's got Molly written all over it."

"True," Harry conceded, making a face. "I hate this."

"Oh, don't act like it's so difficult, Potter," Draco said, feigning irritation. "Besides me, Theo, and the Weasel clan, who do you even know?"

"You should really stop calling them that," Harry admonished him, though Draco could see he was fighting a smile. "You're just still upset Molly forced you into a jumper last Christmas."

"As if I can be expected to participate in matching jumpers," Draco grumbled, still not fully recovered from the horrifying ordeal. "And in Gryffindor colors, honestly?"

"I thought you looked lovely," Harry said, his face reddening with contained laughter.

"I did," Draco sniffed. "But that's hardly the point."

Harry's festering laughter continued. "Honestly, I'm not sure anything beats your mum's reaction to it - "

"She has truly never looked so revolted in her entire life, I'm sure," Draco agreed, picturing the blanched look on Narcissa's face. "I think she might have had Granger obliviate her after seeing me in it."

"You should get her to join in this year instead of splitting the holiday," Harry pointed out. "I'm sure Molly can make one more - "

"Don't you dare threaten my saint of a mother with one of those monstrosities," Draco warned stiffly, and Harry's laughter erupted in peals. "I think she might've burned mine - "

"I just hope Ron gets Pansy in one this year," Harry choked out. "Can you imagine?"

"Fuck, that would be ideal," Draco agreed, picturing the look on her face and mimicking her. "Weasley, you twat, I'll kill myself and you before I let you put that on me - "

Harry was practically convulsing with laughter, and Draco smothered a chuckle, pleased with himself.

"Anyway," Draco said, once Harry regained his ability to breathe. "What's the issue with the guest list?"

"Well," Harry said, removing his glasses to wipe the mirthful tears from his eyes. "I'm not sure whether I should invite my cousin."

"The muggle one?" Draco asked, feeling a faint tug in his mind at the thought. "What was his name?"

"Dudley," said Harry, and a hazy image formed in Draco's mind.

"I think you should," Draco pronounced slowly. "Just a feeling."
"My, my, Draco Malfoy," Harry drawled mockingly. "How very progressive of you."

"Just a feeling," Draco grunted back, but Harry seemed pleased with his answer.

"Dudley it is," he murmured, scribbling the name on the parchment.


"Godmother?" Hermione echoed. "Really?"

Daphne opened her mouth to answer, but Theo cut her off.

"Fucking obviously, Granger," Theo said, shaking his head.

"I'd have gone for something more like 'of course,' or, 'who else would be better,' but that works just as well, I suppose," Daphne murmured, shaking her head in amusement.

"Draco is obviously godfather," Theo pointed out, jutting out his chin to reference him.

"Obviously," Draco drawled, eying his fingernails, and Theo turned back to Hermione.

"And you're, you know - " Theo faltered helplessly.

Draco was his best friend, of course, had always been; but Hermione was something to him too, and of her own accord. Theo had quite enjoyed being independently wealthy for a time, but found that ultimately there were too many demons to wrangle and far too much free time. It had been Hermione who'd convinced him to start writing, to comment one day that his thoughts merited recording, and in a bizarre twist of successfully taking someone else's advice, Theo had complied.

It was Hermione who had patiently read his drafts, listened to his thoughts, encouraged his madness. Draco had saved his life but it had been Hermione who helped him learn how to live it, who'd recognized something in him and trusted it, believed in it with a confidence that Theo would never understand. She seemed to know things about him that nobody else had ever comprehended; she was the one to convince him that even his dark thoughts, twisted and abhorrent as they were, were still somehow beautiful.

_The way it feels to hurt someone_, he told her, nervous at first. _It's -_

_Like your soul is ripping_, she finished for him, a strange glimmer appearing in her eye.

She was the one to teach him that everyone had light and dark, and he had only to choose the brush with which he painted.

Hermione coughed quietly, looking expectantly at him. "I'm what?" she prodded.

"You're my lawyer," Theo declared, finally settling on a term as his wife rolled her eyes.

"You're important to us," Daphne supplied kindly, reaching out to pat her husband's knee.

Hermione smiled, leaning in as Draco kissed her temple. "I can't wait to meet to meet our godchild," she said, radiant at the thought.

Theo and Daphne exchanged glances.

Dudley Dursley saw the owl approaching and felt a stirring in his chest; it had been such a long time, he thought, wondering what had happened to his cousin Harry's owl. He thought about the stack of Daily Prophets that he kept in a box in the back of the linen closet and considered digging them out, wondering whether it was worth going back for another read.

Well, not read, exactly, he thought, recalling his fascination with the pictures.

"Stepping outside for a minute," he called to Gabrielle, attempting to intercept the owl before she saw it. He wondered if it might startle her; he hadn't told her about the circumstances of his cousin - hadn't told anyone, of course, for who would even believe him? - and he certainly wasn't about to start now.

"Here," he muttered to the owl, waving it down awkwardly as he stepped onto the balcony of his flat. The owl, a brown one he'd never seen before, landed gracefully on the railing, a letter tied to its leg.

"Thanks," Dudley muttered, giving it an awkward pat. "Can you, er - wait?"

Either the owl nodded at him, or Dudley was going mad; he chose to believe the former.

"Thanks," he said again, tearing open the envelope and scanning it quickly.

_You are cordially invited to attend the wedding of Mr. Harry James Potter and Miss Ginevra Molly Weasley -_

"Dudley!"

He spun around quickly, hiding the letter behind his back. "Yes?" he asked sheepishly, reticent to meet the dark blue eyes of his stunningly beautiful girlfriend.

"Dudley," she said again, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Is zat - "

"Nothing, nothing," he mumbled incoherently, shuffling his feet. "Just an, um - " he swallowed, looking to the owl, who was no help at all.

"But you are not - " Gabrielle herself seemed to be at a loss for words. "You are not a wizard, are you?"

Dudley gaped at her. "Not me," he managed weakly, and she stepped forward, holding her hand out in her very commanding way.

"Show me," she instructed. "Show me zis."

He sighed; he was never really able to resist her. He handed her the invitation, watching as her eyes went wide.

"'Arry!" she exclaimed, nearly squealing with excitement. "'Arry Potter? You know 'im?"

"Do you?" Dudley asked incredulously, squinting at her.

"Yes, yes!" she seemed ecstatic, her accent thickening. "Oui, I know 'im!" She faltered. "But, you - you are not - "
"No," Dudley cut in sadly. *Just a muggle,* he reminded himself, sighing. "Harry's my cousin but I'm . . . not." He stepped forward, taking Gabrielle's small hands in his. "But - you?"

"I am a witch," Gabrielle confirmed slowly, giving him a tentative smile.

Before he could stop himself, Dudley burst into a line of manic questioning. "You can do magic?" he said excitedly, and she blessed him with her tinkling laugh. "Can you make things fly? Do you have an owl? Did you go to Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes, yes, yes, and *non,*" she said, her pretty lips curled in an utterly bewitching smile. "Not 'ogwarts, I attended Beauxbatons - "

"There's another school?" he interrupted happily, grasping her face in his hands and kissing her soundly. "Tell me *everything,*" he insisted, and she let out another deliciously enticing laugh.

"They've offered me a seat on the Wizengamot," Hermione said breathlessly, her eyes the size of saucers as she scanned the letter. "I'd be the youngest member in at least a *century* - "

"Take it," Draco said simply, eyeing her from across the room. "Accept. Right now."

She frowned. "But - "

"Take it," he repeated, giving her one of his silencing glares.

"But why me?" she insisted, standing up to pace their office. "*You* should be on it - "

"Take it," he said again, his tone bored as he bent to flip the pages of the case law before him.

"But - "

"Take it."

" - I've no experience, and really, I - "

"Take it."

" - can't imagine this is a good idea - "

"Take it."

" - you *know* how I hate politics - "

"Well you'd better get used to them," Draco interrupted, abandoning his work with an audible sigh and crossing the room to put his hands on her shoulders. "I fully expect to live a comfortable life as the husband of the Minister for Magic someday, you know - "

"You'd better find someone qualified to marry, then," Hermione teased, putting her arms around his neck and nuzzling into his chest.

"Funny you should say that," Draco commented wryly, and she pulled back to look at him. "I mean, considering that I've been carrying a *very* heavy engagement ring around in my pocket for several weeks now."

Hermione seemed like her first instinct was to laugh, but she cut herself off abruptly as she caught the seriousness of his expression.
"What?" she said blankly, blinking at him. "Really?"

"Yes," he replied, tightening his grip around her waist with one arm as he reached into his pocket with the other. "Haven't found the right time to ask," he explained, holding the small box in front of her.

The look on her face was torturously entertaining, but he managed to fight back a laugh.

"And" - Hermione swallowed, her throat seemingly quite dry - "you decided this was the right time?"

"Well, I'd hoped to use it as an opportunity to steal someone else's thunder out from under them," he replied airily. "The birth of Theo's twins was my first thought - "

"Oh Draco - "

"Harry and Ginny's wedding was my next idea - I was thinking mid-ceremony - "

"Draco!"

"Well, I didn't, did I?" he insisted pointedly, grinning devilishly at her. "So, now that I've found a natural segue - "

"And to think your mother considers you a romantic," Hermione grumbled, shaking her head as she mimicked his dispassionate expression. "Natural segue - "

"I'm not not romantic," Draco murmured, kissing her cheek. "You know what today is?"

"Thursday?" she guessed, and he flashed her a disapproving glare.

"Today marks two years from the moment I knew I loved you," he informed her, and at her softened expression, he broke out in a triumphant smirk. "Bet you feel like a real dickhead now," he added snottily. "Don't you, Granger?"

"Two years ago was our first day here," she remembered, ignoring his snarky comment as a smile flitted its way across her lips. "Did you really know even then?"

"Didn't you?" he prompted.

Her eyes gave him the answer. He heard her voice in his soul.

Yes.

"So," he managed hoarsely, after a minute or two of silently taking in the way her golden brown eyes caught the light. "What do you think, Granger?"

This life or any other.

"Not to be indelicate," Hermione replied, fighting a smile. "But I think I'm going to marry the fuck out of you."

Chapter End Notes
a/n: Not to be excessively Joanne, but this is for you - for taking this whole journey with me.

(Also, at the time I am writing this, DrSallySparrow is about to post a Theomione that I can't stop squealing about, so be sure to follow her and keep an eye out for Nyctophilia on FFN.)
Wedding Dates

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wedding Dates

**Pairing:** PottGrass (Harry Potter x Daphne Greengrass) and Ronsy (Ron Weasley x Pansy Parkinson)

**Universe:** Post-Hogwarts, EWE

**Rating:** M for language, sexual references

**Summary:** Based VERY loosely on the film "Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates" (only in premise; the events/plot are not even remotely the same). When Hermione tells Harry and Ron they need to find dates to her upcoming wedding, they decide to hedge their bets and place an ad in the Daily Prophet. They get a little more than they bargained for when Daphne and Pansy answer the call. A little OOC, but, as always, try to have fun with it.

"So," Hermione said primly, fixing each of them with a stern glare. "Considering how poorly each of the last large social gatherings have been - "

"Don't know what you're talking about," Ron mumbled, and Draco glared at him.

"Sure you do," he replied coolly, removing his arm from around Hermione's shoulders to enumerate the events on his fingers. "I'd say it starts with the time Potter, here, broke up with Ginny via screaming match in the middle of my mother's birthday party - "

" - on a table, no less," Hermione interrupted, her teeth clenched.

" - and then when Weasley got caught having sex in a coat closet during the Ministry gala we hosted at the Manor - "

"I don't remember that," Ron cut in.

"We know," Hermione sniffed coolly, shooting daggers at him.

"Then, of course," Draco continued, "there was the vacation we all tried to take in Aruba - "

"Well, wait," Harry interjected weakly. "I didn't know that the Wildfire Whiz-bangs were going to go off like that - "

"Yeah," Ron agreed, puffing his chest out defensively. "That was hardly our fault - "

"Ah, yes, of course not," Draco agreed facetiously, frowning. "And yet I was the one who had to obliviate the muggle Minister for Eco-Tourism - "

"Enough," Hermione snapped wearily, and Draco tucked her protectively under his arm. "Listen," she said, her eyes darting between her two best friends. "I can't have our wedding fall apart like all those other times, okay? I just can't - "

She let out a tearful squeak and buried her face in Draco's chest.
"Look what you've already done!" Draco accused, jabbing a finger in the air at both of them. "This is the deal, you prats. You're bringing dates to the wedding," he declared, his darkened grey eyes daring them to argue. "Nice girls, too," he clarified stiffly. "Find someone who'll keep you both in line."

"But that's Mione's job," Ron suggested weakly, and Hermione let out a frustrated wail.

"She'll be quite busy, I think," Draco snapped, clutching her. "Getting married and all that - "

"Fine," Harry interrupted, coming forward to rest his hand gently against Hermione's shoulder as the petite witch sniffed a little, eyes wide. "It's fine, Hermione," he said again, giving Ron a meaningful look. "We'll find dates, won't we, Ron?"

"Yes," Ron agreed, sighing. "If that's what you want, Mione."

"It is," she said, biting her lip and looking up at Draco. "I just really want our wedding to be perfect, you know?"

"They know," Draco assured her, turning to glare at them. "You do know that," he seethed, "right, arseholes?"

"Right," Harry agreed sheepishly, and Ron felt his shoulders droop in resignation.

"Anything for you, Mione," he sighed.

"So," Ron said, tossing the quaffle in the air and playing a rather sad game of catch with himself. "Who do we know that we can take to the Granger-Malfoy Wedding Extravaganza?"

"No one," Harry muttered, collapsing against the sofa. "We're fucked. Everyone's either married or we've already fucked it up with them - "

"I presume you're talking about Ginny again," Ron said tightly, "and friend to friend, I wish you would stop."

"Ginny aside," Harry said loudly, flinching at her name, "there's nobody else. Luna's married, both Patils are married, Lavender's engaged - "

"Ridiculous," Ron declared, rolling his eyes. "And here we are, a couple of dashing, unattached war heroes, bossed around by our tiny friend and her ferret fiance - "

"Who wouldn't want us?" Harry lamented in jest, smirking as he sat up. "It should be so much easier than this."

"Maybe it is," Ron suggested, letting the quaffle fall to the ground with a loud thud. "Why don't we just - I don't know, place an ad in the paper or something?"

"Isn't that kind of desperate?" Harry said hesitantly, his face blanching at the thought. "It feels very sad and pathetic."

"Not if we make it a contest," Ron pointed out. "I mean, the wedding is in France, we could pass it off as, I don't know, some kind of prize - "

"That's not a bad idea," Harry said, frowning in consideration. "Even better if we make it seem somehow charitable - "
"We make a donation to their charity of choice on behalf of Hermione and Malfoy," Ron suggested excitedly. "Then we look like fucking philanthropists!"

Harry snapped his fingers. "Brilliant," he trilled. "Grab a quill, Ron. We're owling Rita for a favor."

"Daph," Pansy shouted, running through their flat. "Daph, fucking - " she looked around. "Where the fuck are you?"

Daphne popped up from the couch, her auburn hair splayed around her shoulders as she poked her head out from under a massive pile of clothes.

"What?" she murmured sleepily, and Pansy sighed.

"I see you finally did laundry," Pansy said carefully, noting the mess. "And then you decided to take a little nap, did you?"

"No," Daphne said faintly, though she looked away. "I was folding the laundry and then I found the underwear Blaise bought me for our anniversary, and then I - "

She stopped, her large hazel eyes filling with tears. "And - and then I - "

"No!" Pansy roared, crossing the room and yanking Daphne up from the cushions. "Not this again, Daphne, it's been three months - "

"I can't help it," she sobbed, burying her face in Pansy's shoulder. "I thought he was going to propose, Pans, and then he just - "

"I know, I know," Pansy cooed, running her fingers through her best friend's silky - albeit horribly tangled and unwashed - hair. "Well, listen. This makes what I was going to tell you even better."

"What is it?" Daphne sniffed, rubbing her red-rimmed eyes.

"This," Pansy said triumphantly, holding up the Daily Prophet. "Fucking Weasley and Potter are looking for dates to Draco's wedding in France - "

"So?" Daphne asked.

"So!" Pansy exclaimed, reaching out to shake Daphne. "So, we should be their dates!" At Daphne's instant look of pain, Pansy shook her head. "No, listen, Daph, what you need is a vacation - something to help get" - she coughed, not wanting to bring him up again - "to get him off your mind - "

"A wedding, though?" Daphne asked, hiccuping. "Do you really think it's best for me to be surrounded by - " she stopped, stammering. "By people, and - and love - "

"It's in France, Daphne, you'll hardly notice it's a wedding!" Pansy insisted.

"But why would they even take us?" Daphne protested. "We're Slytherins - they hate us - "

"I'll tell you why," Pansy replied primly, flipping to one of the social pages of the paper. "This is why."

Daphne grabbed the page from her, her eyes scanning the words.

_Harpies star Ginny Weasley's unexpected romance heats up with local Casanova, Blaise Zabini._
The pair were spotted traipsing about Diagon Alley, arm in arm, many sources report -

"Ginny Weasley," she seethed, and Pansy nodded.

"Fucking Ginny Weasley," she declared triumphantly.

"I haven't totally worked it out yet," Ron said slowly, his eyes narrowed as he took in the unpleasantness of Pansy's exceedingly forced smile. "But I have the distinct feeling that we're somehow being tricked."

"No trick," Pansy said sweetly, her teeth gritted slightly from effort. "We just want to offer our services, you know, as nice, well-bred ladies - "

"Cut the crap, Parkinson," Harry interrupted loudly, crossing his arms. "What's your angle?"

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Fine," she said, her expression changing drastically as she dropped her act of goodwill, allowing her signature haughty smirk to return to her features.

"I now feel both safer and much more in danger," Ron noted, leaning over to mutter in Harry's ear.

"Look, here's the deal," Pansy said stiffly. "We want to go on vacation, and this is a convenient time." She shrugged. "We'll look and act the part of proper wedding dates and all that, of course," she assured him, though she didn't bother to sound anything less than bored. "So don't worry about that."

"What would possibly possess you to think we would agree to this?" Harry countered, his mouth agape. "This is ridiculous, you once fucking tried to turn me over to Voldemort - "

"Well, I wouldn't be your date," Pansy said, batting her eyelashes in mock coquettishness. "You'd go with Daphne."

Ron let out a startled squeak.

"Harry," he whispered. "Harry, I'm frightened - "

Harry ignored him. "Why?" he said again, unmoved.

"Because the guy who's fucking your ex just fucked over Daphne," Pansy said bluntly, coolly inspecting her perfectly manicured fingernails. "And if you show up with Daphne, people might finally remember you're the Boy Who Lived and stop talking about how you're the Boy Who Got Brutally Dumped and Publicly Humiliated - "

"That's enough," Harry cut her off, swallowing uncomfortably. "I think I get where you're going with that."

"I just want to point out that this is my sister you're talking about," Ron broached, raising a finger.

"Shut up," Pansy snapped, and Ron nodded weakly.

"Sure, sure," he muttered, glancing nervously at Harry. "Sounds delightful, Harry, can't wait."

"So you'll do it?" Pansy said brightly, smirking again, and Ron glared at her.

"Fuck no - "
"Yes," Harry cut in, grimacing as he nodded. "Yes. Fine. We'll do it."

"What?" Ron squawked, throwing his hands in the air. "Harry, she'll - she'll try to, I don't know, poison me, or - "

"Put you on a spit and serve you at a barbecue," Pansy supplied, grinning.

Ron made an incoherent squeak, gesturing wildly. "That!" he exclaimed, and Harry sighed.

"Listen," he said, pulling Ron aside. "She's right, Daphne really is my best bet for this - " he sighed. "She's really, really hot, Ron, I need Ginny to see me with her - "

Ron buried his face in his hands. "I should never have given you two my blessing," he grumbled. "My sister is ruining my life - "

Harry looked over at Pansy. "Tell Daphne we're in," he announced, and Ron let out a wail.

"Did you say Ginny would be there?" Pansy asked, startled. "So - Blaise would be, too?"

"I thought that was the point," Harry said slowly, his forehead wrinkling as he considered her sudden hesitation. "Is there a problem?"

Pansy grimaced. "No," she replied faintly. "Nothing I can't fix."

"Okay," Pansy said merrily, dropping her two large bags on the floor of their flat and startling Daphne out of her reverie. "I've got everything we need."

"For what?" Daphne asked, looking inside the bags and enumerating the items. "Ice cream, chocolate frosting, crisps, firewhiskey - " she frowned. "Is this a birthday cake?"

"First we're going to get you cleaned up," Pansy said, removing a piece of lettuce from Daphne's hair, "and then we're going to light things on fire and eat everything in these bags."

"Why?" Daphne asked blankly, giving Pansy her baby deer look of utter confusion.

"Because we're going to have to get you over Zabini a lot faster than I thought," Pansy sighed. She made an effort not to look too distressed, hoping that Daphne would not pick up on her concern.

"So," Pansy pronounced, forcing yet another smile. "Let's get to work."

"Do I look okay?" Daphne fretted, fussing over her dress.

"Daph, you look amazing," Pansy whispered to her. "That's what happens, you know, when you actually shower - "

"Hey girls," Harry said, reaching them.

"Hey!" Daphne said, her voice several octaves too high. "Hey," she amended, coughing.

"Hi," Ron muttered, his ears red.

"Hey," Pansy said, winking at him. He shuddered in response.

They each shifted in the awkward silence.
"Well," Harry said, running his hands through his messy black hair. "This'll be fun," he said hesitantly, glancing over at Ron, who clearly disagreed.

Daphne looked nervously to Pansy. "Am I smiling?" she whispered, trying not to move her mouth.

"Yes," Pansy replied, brows furrowed in confusion.

"Oh good," Daphne said, anxiously smoothing the pleat of her dress for the hundredth time. "Just checking."

"Wait," Draco said slowly. "So what you're saying is, we told them to bring nice girls to our wedding, and they took that to mean Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass?"

"Yes," Hermione said tightly, fidgeting with her engagement ring.

"Wonderful," Draco said, throwing his hands in the air. "I'll just owl the French Minister for Magic now, then, shall I?" he suggested. "To warn him in advance of the chance of mass environmental damage - "

"Draco," Hermione said soothingly, patting him on the shoulder. "I'm sure it will be fine."

Draco sighed. "Maybe," he conceded, and then brightened. "Maybe we'll get lucky, and Pansy will murder Weasley!"

Hermione glared at him.

"Or maim or injure, I'm not choosy," Draco amended, and she sighed.

"We should have sex," she decided, throwing herself back on the bed and heaving another dramatic sigh.

"Brightest witch of your age," Draco agreed, dropping their bags and joining her.

"So," Harry said, settled into the room he was sharing with Daphne. "How is . . . everything?"

"It's lovely," Daphne said, daintily clearing her throat. "Thank you for everything," she added. She tucked a lock of auburn hair behind her ear and Harry watched, stunned, wondering how a face could be so magnificently . . . symmetrical.

"I don't know what Pansy's told you," Daphne began, and Harry cut her off.

"I could say the same," he intoned glumly, moving to sit beside her. "I mean, I know neither of us have, um," he paused, thinking. "The purest of intentions - "

"I really want to fuck you and make sure Blaise knows about it," Daphne said apologetically, her long lashes fluttering as she looked up at him. "Just being honest."

"No, no, that's fine," Harry said quickly, nodding. "I really want to fuck you, too," he added, though he seemed a bit uncomfortable with the sentiment. "In front of Ginny would be ideal, of course, but I'll settle for her just knowing about it."

Daphne leaned her head against his shoulder, sighing.

"They really messed us up, didn't they?" she said sadly, and Harry nodded.
"She broke my heart," he said simply. "And it breaks again every time I have to hear about her."

Daphne nodded, and they sat several more minutes in silence.

"Want to have sex now?" she suggested hopefully, turning to look at him.

Harry swallowed. "Um," he said, coughing. "Well, I mean, it might ease the tension?"

Daphne came to her feet, slipping the dress she'd been so careful not to wrinkle before dinner off of her shoulders and letting it fall to the floor in a heap, her pink lace panties - decidedly not the ones Blaise had given her - the only remaining garments on her slender form.

"Consider the tension eased," she said smoothly, and Harry gulped almost comically before yanking her into his arms.

"Don't touch me," Pansy snapped.

Ron turned around, glaring over his shoulder at her. "I'm across the room from you," he half shouted, gesturing to where he was unpacking his dress robes for the wedding.

"Pre-emptive strike," Pansy said, shrugging, and Ron sighed.

"Do I look okay?" Daphne asked, using her fingers to tousle her long waves into submission.

"Yes," Harry said fervently, nodding as he tucked his shirt back into his trousers. "Do I?"

"Yes," Daphne said, her gaze flicking appreciatively over him.

"Okay," he sighed, stepping forward to put his hands on her shoulders. "Are you ready for this?"

She thought about lying. She considered telling him that all she wanted was the sweet revenge of seeing Blaise look hungrily at her, to long for her the way he once did, to see the hint of arousal in his eye that used to be reserved just for her. She thought about telling Harry that she wanted Blaise to hurt the way she had hurt, that she wanted him to feel the absence she had felt, to reduce him to a crying, non-showering mess who could barely manage to take care of himself because that's exactly what he'd done to her. She thought about saying yes, yes, of course she was ready, she was more beautiful than she'd ever been and she was better off without him, she was on the arm of a better man (true, probably) with a more impressive cock (false, but he certainly knew how to use it better) and a bigger stockpile of gold (in all likelihood a wash) and thus no longer needed him; but Harry's earnest green eyes made lying quite impossible.

"I might cry," she told him, and his mouth twitched into a half smile.

Was it pity? She squinted at him.

"I won't let you cry," he promised her. "At least not where he can see."

No, she realized, not pity. Just kindness.

"I think I might like you," said Daphne, a little bit in awe.

"Bad news, that," Harry warned, her hand firmly in his. "I'm a mess."

She smiled at him. "Come on," she said, pulling him to the door. "Let's go make Ginny Weasley
"Dragons, really?" Pansy giggled, squeezing her arms next to her ribcage so as to prop up her jauntily framed cleavage. "How brave -"

"Excuse me," Ron said, grabbing her arm and gritting his teeth as he tore her away from his brother Charlie. "Could you potentially not?"

"Let go of me," Pansy seethed, stomping her stiletto heel against the marble floor of the rehearsal dinner venue. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What do you think you're doing?" Ron demanded. "That's my fucking brother, Pansy, and you're supposed to be here with me -"

"He's hot," Pansy sniffed defensively. "I don't see why you're carrying on like this."

"Well, spoiler, I don't exactly need your help looking pathetic compared to Charlie," Ron said tightly. "So if you could just keep it in your pants for two days -"

She scoffed, moving to turn away. "Oh, shut up -"

"No," Ron said firmly, taking hold of her shoulders. "Listen. You're here with me, Pansy, so you have to be here with me."

Her eyes flashed angrily. "You don't own me, Weasley!"

"You agreed to this," he reminded her tersely, though he leaned in, lowering his voice. "Look, I get that you did this for Daphne, alright?" he said, his voice quiet. "I respect that you did this for your friend. But," he continued, flashing her a warning look, "I'm not okay with you disrespecting me. This is hard enough for me as it is," he reminded her, letting his eyes flick intentionally to where Hermione stood with Draco, laughing with her hand on his arm.

"Oh," Pansy said, following his gaze. She shifted uncomfortably. "I'd forgotten."

"Of course you did," Ron said stiffly, crossing his arms. "You're Pansy Parkinson, and after six years of school with you, I might have just assumed that the only thing you cared about was yourself."

She glared at him. "Hey!"

"Well, I was wrong, wasn't I?" Ron noted pointedly. "You care about your friend, too." He shrugged. "So maybe if you can just pretend to be my friend and care about me to the very base level of not trying to fuck my brother at my ex-girlfriend's wedding -"

"Got it," Pansy cut in softly, and Ron thought he saw a flicker of understanding in her dark eyes.

"Thanks," he replied coolly, though he felt considerably more grateful to her than he let on.

She nodded.

"Still not going to touch you, though," she warned, and he rolled his eyes.

"Still not trying to," he reminded her, raising both hands. She gave him a haughty look of approval.

"You know," she ventured, "Draco's my ex, too." The look she gave him was the first he'd seen
from her that wasn't masked with bravado. "We're kind of in the same boat."

Ron sighed. "This wedding is all kinds of fucked up," he decided, his eyes traveling to where Ginny and Blaise seemed to be having a competition with Harry and Daphne as to who could look more in love.

"Cheers," Pansy agreed, and they solemnly clinked glasses.

"Wine tasting," Pansy said the next day, surveying the many swaying people around her. "Because what we needed was more alcohol."

"When in France," Ron said grimly, toasting her.

Pansy looked over at where Harry and Daphne were giggling in a corner. "I don't think they've taken their hands off each other since we arrived," Pansy noted, a little proud of her best friend in spite of herself. "If this is a show, it's very convincing."

"I'm sensing it's not," Ron mused. "He had a rough time after Ginny, but this doesn't look fake to me."

"Not to me either," Pansy said, frowning. "Daphne looks sort of human again."

Across the room, Harry and Daphne sat down together at a table, smiling as they settled themselves beside each other.

"They're cute," Pansy announced, and Ron nodded. They each took casual sips of their wine, observing their two best friends as they relaxed in the sun, enjoying the pre-wedding festivities.

She wasn't so bad, Ron thought, sneaking a look at Pansy. Since he'd confronted her at the rehearsal dinner, she'd been much less . . . Pansy-esque. And she was pretty, too; he'd never really taken the time to notice before.

Her dark eyes flicked to his face and Ron looked away quickly, returning his gaze to where Daphne and Harry were sitting together.

"Oh," Ron said, and they watched as Daphne's hand traveled to Harry's lap, the dark-haired wizard's face going euphorically blank as the pretty witch's hand slipped out of sight. "Uh oh."

"Oh no," Pansy tsked, shaking her head. Harry let his head loll back as Daphne, whose face was radiant with mischief, used her free hand to reach for a dainty sip of her wine. "Oh boy."

"I can't look away," Ron said, knocking his full glass of wine back and making a face as it went down. "Bloody hell," he swore, catching the tell-tale signs that Daphne was picking up speed. "Make it stop."

"It's like, mesmerizing," Pansy commented, taking a slow, languid sip from her glass and watching Harry's chest rise and fall as he struggled not to pant openly at Daphne's touch. "How fucked up are we?"

Harry doubled over, choking, and Ron sighed.

"Really fucked up," he pronounced grimly, motioning to the server. "More wine, please," he said. "Like, a lot."

Pansy cleared her throat delicately, drawing Ron's attention.
"Or," she suggested, pursing her lips. "Maybe we could get a drink somewhere else?"

"Somewhere besides the vineyard that's being paid for by the Malfoy estate?" Ron asked skeptically, offering her an indignant snort. "Where exactly did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking maybe our hotel room," Pansy suggested, taking another ladylike sip.

Ron blinked at her.

"Yeah, okay," he said quickly, and she barely managed to set down her wine glass before he disapparated them out with a loud crack.

"I think I might like you," Harry said, when he could finally catch his breath.

Daphne smirked at him, and for the first time in months, she wasn't thinking about Blaise at all.

"I have to shower before the ceremony," she said primly, rising to her feet. "Maybe you'd consider liking me in there?"

"Oh, I think I will," Harry said smoothly. "I might even like you more than once."

"I can't believe they were just doing that out in the open," Ginny snarled, pacing their hotel room. "That's - I mean, that's just -"

"You didn't seem to care very much about that when you went down on me in the restaurant bathroom last night," Blaise noted, lazily flipping the pages of an Italian magazine.

"It's not the same!" Ginny exclaimed, glaring at him. "This has got to be Daphne's influence," she added. "Harry's not like this at all - I mean, he's -"

"Boring," Blaise reminded her. "That is why you left him, isn't it?"

"He's not boring," Ginny snapped. "And anyway, don't talk about him like that!"

"Why not?" Blaise asked snidely, sitting up on the bed. "You say things like that about him all the time," he admonished her. "Harry was so uptight, not like you, Blaise, you're so free," he said, mimicking her.

"Well I can talk about him if I want to, can't I?" she said. "And what about you? Daphne was so dramatic, she was so needy -"

"Leave her out of it," Blaise growled.

"Why?" Ginny demanded, tears reaching her eyes. "Do you still love her, Blaise? Do you?"

"Are you fucking jealous right now?" Blaise demanded, throwing the magazine he'd been reading on the bed and coming to his feet. "Are you fucking serious?"

"Don't fucking yell at me!"

"Did you hear that?" Ron asked, turning his head to squint breathlessly at Pansy. "Is someone yelling?"
"Honestly, don't even talk to me right now," Pansy said, eyes closed, still relishing the aftershock of what had been the most stunningly electric sex of her life. "I am really busy."

"Was that yelling?" Daphne asked, pulling the sheet up to cover her breasts as she sat up in bed.

"I think it was Ginny's voice," Harry said, frowning. "Sounds like she and Blaise are fighting."

"Oh," Daphne said, biting her lip as she turned to look at him. "Do - " she paused. "Do you want to go see if she's okay?"

Harry's green eyes scanned Daphne's face, and she hoped he couldn't sense her fear.

"No," he said simply, pulling her to him and rolling over her. "I want to make you yell."

"So let me get this straight," Hermione said slowly. "Our parents had too much wine and are sleeping it off, the Weasleys are busy comforting Ginny, your friends had to take Blaise to the hospital after Ginny hexed him, and then Harry, Ron, Daphne, and Pansy are - "


"Oh," Hermione said, dazed. "Interesting."

She looked beautiful; it was a shame Draco was the only one there to see it.

Though, now that he thought about it . . .

"You know," Draco said slowly, and Hermione looked up at him, eyes wide. "I really don't like anyone but you."

She tilted her head, considering him. "Same, I think," she said, sighing.

He offered her his arm. "Shall we get married?" he suggested, and she let her eyes sweep over the empty chapel.

"Let's," she decided, slipping her hand in the crook of his arm.

It really was the perfect wedding.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: So I honestly don't know why my brain did this but hopefully you thought it was entertaining. Also, I am clearly such a Dramione wasteland I can't help writing them in. In any case, this one's for my love bentnotbroken! Hope you had fun.
Bachelorette, Part IV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bachelorette, Part IV

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: M for language, sex (yes, actual sex)

Summary: Part IV of the drabble series based on the reality show "The Bachelorette," wherein eligible men in the wizarding world compete for Hermione Granger's affections.

[Black screen; Lee voiceover.]

"Here's what you missed on . . . The Bachelorette!"

[Camera shows Hermione saying goodbye to Ron; Theo and Draco exchange glances. Cuts to Theo interview.]

Theo: "It is interesting that Draco and I would both be in the final three."

Interviewer, off screen: "Do you see Draco as a threat?"

Theo: "I think anyone who has been paying attention should see Draco as a threat, but at the same time, I almost worry more about Potter being the standout."

[Cuts to Draco interview.]

Draco: "Yes, well, Theo and I do share many characteristics." [Waves this fact away like it is bothersome fly.] "But maybe that's just more indicative of what she's looking for."

Interviewer, off screen: "What do you mean by that?"

Draco: "Nothing, really." [Flashes the camera a distinctly Malfoy-esque smirk.] "Just that maybe she's tired of heroes."

[Clips of Harry and Hermione laughing together; cuts to Harry interview.]

Harry: "We have something together that nobody else has."

Interviewer, off screen: "You're not worried about anyone else?"

[Clips of Harry watching as Draco tucks a curl behind Hermione's ear.]

Harry, lying: "Nope."

[Lee steps into view, smiling at the audience.]

Lee: "And coming up tonight - Fantasy Suites!"
Lee: "Things get sultry between Hermione and Theo!"

Lee: "Harry and Hermione find love in an old friendship!"

Draco: "The truth is that I love you, Hermione. I'm falling in love with you, and it's terrifying. I'm terrified."

Hermione: "Draco, I - "

Hermione: "How am I supposed to be able to make this decision?" [She starts fanning herself, slightly hysterical.] "Is this real? Am I really supposed to choose?"

Hermione racing away from the manor, dressed in a stunning emerald green gown; she is barefoot and her polished updo is coming undone as she looks over her shoulder, running away.

Lee: "All that and more coming up next on . . . the Bachelorette!"

"Fantasy Suites?" Minerva repeated, unable to believe her ears. "And this is for something that is not only permitted, but vetted by the Ministry?"

"Yes," Pomona confirmed, wincing.

Minerva sat still for a moment, considering her options.

"Someone had better make sure we double check the wards on the students' dorm rooms," she suggested wearily, leaning back in her chair. "Best that nobody get any ideas."

"So," Lee said, eyeing Hermione to make sure she was paying attention. "Here's the deal - "

"I get it," she said, closing her eyes and sliding down in her chair. "Don't cut Harry or you'll cry for a thousand years - "

"No, not that," Lee said quickly, reaching down to swat at her feet with his cue cards. "This is the 'I love you' episode."

She looked up, frowning at him. "What?"

"This is the episode that the contestants usually decide to say 'I love you,'" Lee repeated, grimacing slightly. "I mean, it'll be very touching, I'm sure - "

"But also strategic," Hermione deduced. "I get it."

"Okay, here's the thing," Lee said quickly. "You absolutely cannot say it back, no matter who says it to you."
"I won't," Hermione replied tiredly, curling up in the chair to rest her chin on her folded arms. "It's only been a few weeks, anyway. I obviously don't love anyone."

"You sure?" Lee posed, grinning. "I mean, sure, you don't right now, but think of the possibilities - he knelt next to her chair, trying to paint the scene. "Candles, music, the Fantasy Suite - "

"What's the deal with Fantasy Suites, anyway?" she insisted, turning to frown at him. "Are people really supposed to assume I've slept with three different men?"

"Yes," Lee said firmly. "And don't you dare give them any reason to believe otherwise," he added, glaring at her as though she'd already had the inexcusable nerve to do so.

She rolled her eyes at Lee's particular brand of melodrama.

"Isn't that distinctly, I don't know - gross?" Hermione asked, frowning. "I'm supposed to have sex with three different people and then choose one of them to marry next week?"

"Funny how you only take the marriage bit of this show seriously when it's convenient for you," Lee noted, giving her an obnoxious smirk.

"Well, it's not like I invented this!" Hermione exclaimed defensively, giving Lee a little shove. "Just give the people what they want, would you?" he begged. "Just . . . leave some clothes lying on the floor, or something." He shrugged. "Leave some wine glasses out."

Hermione made a distinct gagging sound. "You want me to fake my own seduction?" she asked, making a face. "For the actual sake of fuck, Lee."

"I mean, you don't have to," he assured her. "You can always just call me a few minutes earlier and I'd be happy to do it for you." He looked at her, tilting his head as though he were brainstorming. "I could do something to make sure you had, you know, the appropriate post-coital look to you - "

"For the love of god, please stop," Hermione groaned, reaching out to shove his face away. "Literally never speak to me again."

"Okay, so, to recap," Lee said weakly, coming to his feet. "No 'I love yous' - "

"Yes, yes," she muttered impatiently. "You can leave now, Lee," she added, fixing him with her most severe glare. "Seriously."

"Okay," he agreed, tiptoeing toward the door. "Oh, and Hermione?"

"What?" she asked, pursing her lips primly.

"Team Harry," he said, grinning, before he hurriedly slipped out the door, just missing the impact of the fruit basket Hermione had flung in his direction.

[Camera pans the fancy manor house to show Theo stepping out, ready to meet Hermione for their date.]

Lee voiceover: "First up for the Fantasy Suites date is Theo."

[Cuts to Theo interview.]

Interviewer, off screen: "So, Theo. Could you explain for the audience what Fantasy Suites is?"
Theo: "Just out of curiosity, what am I not allowed to say on this show?"

Muttered response.

Theo: "So you probably wouldn't be cool with me saying it's my chance to Slytherin to Granger, then?"

Mutters.

Theo: "And as far as explicit language - "

More mutters.

Theo: "You should really consider asking someone else to answer this question." [Shrugs.] "I'm just saying."

Theo: "It's . . ." [Pauses, thinking.] "It's our first chance to be alone without cameras."

[Editor's cut:

Theo: "I should get some kind of award for that level of restraint. You're all fucking lucky I'm so goddamn refined."

Interviewer, off screen: "Are you looking forward to it?"

[Editor's cut:

Theo: "I'd like to be excluded from this line of questioning. It strikes me as somewhat . . . idiotic."

Theo: "Sure. For . . . appropriate reasons, of course." [Interviewer coughs loudly and Theo grins.]

[A montage of date clips flash across the screen; Hermione and Theo spend their day at dinner, watching fireworks, and conclude by holding hands and walking through a garden at sunset, the conclusion of their evening.]

Theo: "So." [He pauses, considering what he should say.] "I wanted to talk to you about something."

Hermione: "Sure." [She looks a little hesitant, like she might know what's coming.] "What's up?"

Theo: [Stops walking as they are almost to her hotel suite, taking both her hands in his.] "Listen. I know this has all been a little fast -"

Hermione, laughing: "Definitely."

Theo: [Grins at her, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.] "But I want you to know that I've definitely gotten swept up in it."

Hermione: [is a little breathless] "Oh." [Pauses] "And?"

Theo: "And." [He smiles at her.] "I just wanted you to know that I'm falling for you, Hermione." [He pulls her in close, kissing her cheek.] "I'm falling in love with you."

[Cuts to Theo interview.]
Theo: "How do I know I'm in love with Hermione?" [He shrugs.] "What's not to love?"

[Hermione and Theo; she looks like she wants to say something, but stops herself just in time.]

Hermione: "Thank you for telling me." [She pauses as though she's remembered something, glancing towards the door of the hotel suite as they arrive.] "Theo - "

Theo: [Bends to kiss her so fiercely she stumbles backwards, clinging to him.]

Hermione: "Do - do you" [tries to speak between kisses, reaching for the doorknob] "do you - want to - "

Theo: "Yes." [Kisses her again.] "Yes. I do."

[They stumble into the suite, the door falling shut just as Theo sweeps Hermione in his arms, pressing her against a wall.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "So . . . am I supposed to just wait here, or . . . what?"

Muttered response.

Lee: "Yeah, cool. Cool. See you guys in the morning, then."]
"Sorry," he said, grinning. "Been wondering about this for a few weeks now."

"About what?" she ventured, startled at the timidity in her voice. Despite the reassuring look of longing on his face, she had never been this exposed in front of anyone but Ron, and she felt ludicrously insecure standing before him in her silly, impractical lingerie, feeling awkward in the flimsy black pieces that she'd barely had the courage to purchase for herself.

Careful, she heard Draco say in her mind, feeling an unexpected leap at the calming timbre of his voice. Theo likes to have his fun.

"About you," Theo replied simply, his voice seeming throatier the longer he looked at her. He seemed to catch her hesitation, though, and his eyes flicked to hers. "Are you okay?" he asked, stepping forward to put his hands on her waist.

"Yeah," she said quickly, reaching up to wrap her arms around her neck. "Yeah, of course." He kissed her once, roughly, pressing her against the wall; then again, slower. Sweeter.

"Yeah," she said again, eyes closed. "I'm fine."

She felt him smile against her cheek and he moved his head to her neck, beginning to trace his way down, his lips brushing against the tingling skin of her chest as his fingers pressed into her hips.

"This is normal, right?" she whispered faintly. "Not a big deal."

"No," he replied, making his way down her abdomen to lower himself to his knees, his breath hot against her thighs.

"It's fine," she said again, her breath starting to catch as she grew more conscious of his mouth on her skin. "I mean, people do this, right? People who are dating?"

"Right," he assured her smoothly, tucking his hands under the thin fabric of her underwear, letting his mouth linger near her clit.

"I mean, we could be engaged next week," she said, attempting to allow a casual laugh; at the sobering thought, however, she suddenly opened her eyes. "I mean, that's what this is for, right?"

Her heart was pounding as she processed the truth of that statement. "Right?" she repeated weakly, reaching down to run her fingers against his scalp.

Theo paused his movements, looking up at her. "Engaged for the show, you mean?"

"Well, yes, that," she replied tentatively, and she could feel the beginnings of what was surely going to be a babbling stream of word vomit and nerves.

"I mean, if I have sex with you, that means I should probably choose you," she began frantically, "and if I were to choose you, I mean, that means I could really see myself marrying you - "

She choked a little, and the absurd thought crossed her mind that she quite wished she could ask Draco what he thought; he had an enviably cooler head, and she, by contrast, felt more than a little bit panicked. "I mean that's the point of this, isn't it?"

The mood was rather dampened and Theo chose to rise slowly to his feet, taking her hand to lead her to the bed and sitting her down gently, pressing his hands into her shoulders as he took a seat beside her on the bed.
"Hermione," he said, coughing as he attempted to manage the placement of his now inconvenient erection. "I thought you had always been pretty adamant that this show wasn't - " he paused, trying to be diplomatic. "Real."

"It's not," Hermione said quickly. "I mean, the being here for marriage and all that," she assured him, and Theo looked relieved. "But," she added tentatively, "the fallout is real, you know?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If I choose you," she began slowly, "I basically cut off any chance I have with anyone else," she explained, realizing that this thought, as obvious as it felt in that moment, was occurring to her for the first time. "Which would be fine, of course," she assured him, "assuming that this would . . . go somewhere."

Theo's face seemed to take on a strange, glassy appearance.

"I hadn't thought about that," he admitted, frowning. He looked intently at her, searching her expression for the proper way to respond. "Would sex tonight have to mean marriage next week?"

"Well, no," she said hastily, though that did seem to be the argument she was making, she realized. "I just - "

"Is marriage something you actually want?" Theo asked, tilting her chin up to look her in the eye. "I guess I'd just assumed it wasn't, you know," he said pointedly, "since you seem to really hate this show." He paused. "Like, a lot."

"I do," she insisted, grabbing a pillow and covering herself with it as she suddenly realized she was half-naked and somewhat chilly. "I do hate the show, but - "

She hesitated. "I mean, I do kind of like the idea of settling down," she confessed, biting her lip as she realized the veracity of that statement. "I think I might actually want all that" - she waved her hand around - "marriage and commitment stuff," she joked.

It was a joke, but it wasn't. She just hadn't realized it until this moment; and what an inconvenient moment it was.

"Well," Theo said carefully, leaning back on his elbows. "I do have feelings for you."

She eyed him closely. "Do you?"

"Yes," he replied, though she wasn't sure that he really looked convinced. "I mean, you're smart, you're funny, you're" - he paused, his eyes traveling over her again - "incredibly sexy - "

"But," she interrupted, feeling her cheeks flush. "There's a 'but' somewhere in there, isn't there?"

"But marriage," Theo determined grimly, reaching up to rake his fingers through his hair. "I don't know."

"I didn't think I did, either," she said slowly, and he reached for her, pulling her into the circle of his arms as they both lay on the bed. "And I really, really want to do this."

"But," he cut in, grinning.

"But," she agreed. "But," she decided, sighing with finality, "I think I kind of want a future."

He nodded slowly, and she had the distinct impression that he was processing her thoughts for her;
it was helpful, somehow, and she felt encouraged that he was taking her seriously.

"You can see one with Harry," Theo noted. "A future?"

She nodded.

"Yes," she sighed. "I can."

Theo was quiet for a moment, his lips pressed against her hair.

"And with Draco?"

She didn't know what possessed her to say it. "Yes," she replied, thinking of the undeniable sense of relief she felt whenever she met his grey eyes, and the pull she felt at the thought of him.

"There's a good chance they both want what you want," Theo commented, and she felt him nod a little to himself, resting his chin on the top of her head. "You should pick one of them," he decided. "They're probably better for you."

She sighed in a mix of disappointment and relief, turning to look up at him. "I wish I would be able to have sex with you without thinking about the consequences," she proposed, and he gave her a smug little Theo smirk.

"Not everyone can be so singularly gifted," he sniffed, pulling her in tighter.

[Show cuts to Harry in interview.]

Harry: "So, today is my date with Hermione before Fantasy Suites."

Interviewer, off screen: "And how are you feeling about it?"

Harry: "I'm - um - "

[Editor's cut:]

Harry: "Am I supposed to - "

Muttered response.

Harry: "Really? You want me to talk about sex?"

Mutters.

Harry: [indignantly] "What do you mean I'm the least sexy?"

Harry: "Obviously Hermione and I have the strongest connection of anyone left on the show." [He appears a little nervous, and is speaking slower than normal, like he's taking care to think about his answer.] "But - we also have the least physical relationship, comparatively."

[Camera cuts to shots of Hermione and Theo snogging with his hand on her arse, then to Hermione with her legs around Draco's waist.]

Interviewer, off screen: "Would you say that will be important to establish tonight?"

Harry: "Yeah, I think so." [He swallows, looking nervous.]
Interviewer, off screen: "Is there anything else?"

[Editor's cut:

Harry: "What is it you're wanting me to say?"

Muttered response.


Mutters.


Harry: "I mean, I love Hermione."

Interviewer, off screen: "Do you?"

Harry: "Do I love Hermione?" [He sounds a little robotic at this point, as though he is unable to work his feelings out in words.] "I've always loved Hermione." [He looks startled.] "Dear god, do I love Hermione?" [He doubles over, mumbling to himself.] "Oh no."

[Editor's cut:

Interviewer: "Are you okay?"

Harry: [is still muttering to himself]

Interviewer, looking around: "Is he okay?"

Lee, yelling from off screen: "He's fine, you prat - keep going!"

"Oh, poor Harry," Molly cooed, turning to her son. "Look, he's so nervous!"

"He's fine, Mum," Ron muttered, getting up and wandering into the kitchen. Had he looked like this much of a twat on the show? He sincerely hoped not. He was, if possible, twice as relieved now that he was no longer in the running for Hermione's heart. Particularly since the fan mail had started pouring in -

I'll make it better, Ron!

Ron, I'm still available!

Let me be your bachelorette!

All in all, it had been a worthwhile experience, he thought, grinning to himself.

"Ron!" Molly yelled, and he stumbled into the living room, startled.

"What?" he demanded.

"He told her he loves her!" Molly said, sighing, as she clutched one of her decorative pillows. "They're in love, Ron!"

"Bloody hell," Ron grunted, rolling his eyes as he trudged up the stairs and away from the madness.
It would have to be Harry.

Wouldn't it?

Hermione watched him as he wandered throughout the room, lighting candles, playing music - making things special, the way only Harry thought to do. He knew what she was looking for. He knew with absolute clarity what she was looking for; though perhaps he really should. He'd certainly known her long enough.

"Want to dance?" he suggested, holding his hand out to her.

She smiled.

"Sure," she agreed, stepping into the circle of his arms and resting her chin on his shoulder.

The friendship part would always be comfortable. That piece would always be there, and she'd walk to the ends of the earth for him. She always had. Love would be easy, then. Wouldn't it?

He spun her around the room slowly. "Remember when we did this?" he asked quietly. "That night when we were - "

"I remember," she murmured back, thinking how their minds had been so occupied, all those months of hunting Voldemort in solitude, alone together. "Of course."

Had it been a waste of a perfect opportunity?

"There's something so comforting about you," Harry told her, and she nodded her agreement, taking in the familiar smell of him. Her Harry.

He leaned away to look at her, and her lips met his without hesitation.

It was different, of course, kissing Harry. Not like Theo, who made her feel she couldn't breathe for the crushing need to explore him, to be laid bare in his grasp. Not like Draco, whose kiss stayed with her even after he was gone.

Comfortable. Reassuring. Isn't that what she'd told Theo she wanted? Someone to spend her tomorrows with. To have a future with. If there was one person she knew without a doubt that she could love for the rest of her life, it was Harry Potter.

She felt him smile against her cheek.

"What is it?" she asked, pulling away to smile at him. "What are you thinking about?"

"I was just thinking," he ventured, laughing a little, "do you remember our first flying lesson?"

"Oh, how could I forget!" Hermione exclaimed, launching her head into his shoulder with a frustrated groan. "Still the only thing you can lord over me - "

"That and my superiority in Potions," he countered, grinning, and at that she moved to pull away in mock indignation.

"You were cheating and you know it," she admonished him, and he pushed her a little, knocking her back against the bed.

"Was not," he insisted, and then they curled around each other, having the same argument they'd
been having since they were sixteen years old.

"You're so full of it, Harry James Potter," she snapped playfully, and he grinned at her.

She thought about kissing him again; she considered the possibility of slipping her hand against the zipper of his trousers, testing the waters.

But she was so comfortable, she decided, burrowing herself in his arms. And by then he had already brought up another story, and they were already laughing.

They talked until the sun came up, and by the time Lee knocked on the door in the morning, she was still in her dress from last night.

Kingsley walked out of his office, eyes on the paperwork in his hands as he opened his mouth to call for Mafalda.

"- oh Hermione and Harry are just so cute together -"

"- I know! They are my favorite -"

Upon hearing the conversation, Kingsley quickly doubled back, deciding with a solemn grimace he would be better off sealed in his office.

"So," Theo said, sipping coffee in the manor. "You're next."

"I am," Draco said warily, not wanting to disclose too much.

They sat in a slightly uncomfortable silence until Draco noticed that Theo's green eyes were laughing at him, and he realized he was being toyed with.

"What?" Draco snapped, and Theo finally broke into an open smirk.

"She's going to choose you," Theo said. "What she's looking for..." he shook his head. "I can't give it to her."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "That's gallant of you," he remarked, careful not to reveal the extent of his relief.

"So," Theo said, taking another sip of his coffee. "Are you going to tell her how you feel?"

"It's just a show, Theo," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

"You know, you two are so similar," Theo commented, giving Draco a haughty, superior sniff. "You both pretend you're not taking this seriously until all of a sudden, you are."

"Oh, shove off, Nott," Draco replied, scowling.

Theo sighed, setting down his mug and putting his hands on his best friend's shoulders. "Tell her how you feel," he advised, giving Draco a last pointed look before turning to exit the kitchen.

"Oh," he added, stepping back to face Draco one more time. "And sorry about all the times I've snogged her, mate."

Draco made a face. "But you didn't -"
"Nah," Theo said, his eyes dancing. "Though certainly not for lack of trying."

[Scene opens to where Hermione and Draco are on their date, eating dinner together. He seems a little stiffer than usual.]

Hermione: "Draco, can I be honest?" [She looks imploringly at him.]

Draco: [glances up] "Of course." [his tone is particularly silky, like it might be an affectation from nerves.]

Hermione: [puts her fork down, resting her chin on the heel of her hand.] "I feel like you seem a little bit distant." [She searches his face nervously for a reaction, which he does not give.] "Is everything okay?"

Draco: [hesitates.] "Yes."

Hermione: [looks saddened.] "Oh." [She picks up her fork, returning to her meal.] "Just my imagination, I suppose."

[Hermione is now picking listlessly at her food; Draco, by contrast, looks distressed.]

Draco: "Alright!" [His voice is several decibels too loud and Hermione is startled, letting her fork drop against her plate with a clatter.] "Fine. FINE."

Hermione, shocked: "Draco!"

Draco: "I love you, Hermione. I'm falling in love with you, and it's terrifying." [His face is paler than usual, and the words ring true.] "I'm terrified."

[Cuts to Hermione in interview.]

Hermione: "Over the last week, three different men have told me they loved me." [Shakes her head.] "But this . . . hearing it from Draco . . . ."

Interviewer, off screen: "Is this different?"

Hermione: [pauses, biting her lip.] "Yes." [She takes a deep breath.] "Something about this feels different."

[Cuts back to Hermione and Draco at dinner.]

Hermione: "Draco, I -"

Draco: [cuts her off.] "Don't." [He shrugs.] "it's okay. You don't have to say anything. I just wanted you to know."

[She is looking at him intently, like she is seeing something for the first time.]

Hermione: [reaches for his hand across the table.] "Draco." [Pauses to smile at him.] "Would you like to spend the night with me?"

Draco: [Leans over the table to kiss her; fireworks erupt in the background.]

[Editor's cut:]
Lee: "Did he say yes?"

Muttered response.

Lee: "I was just asking! Fuck, you Team Draco people are the worst."]

Once the doors had shut behind them, Draco released Hermione, taking a stroll around the suite.

"This is nice, Granger," he commented, eyeing the chilled bottle of champagne and the expansive bathroom. "Look at you."

"Feel free to enjoy," she told him, wandering in behind him. "That was a pretty good show back there," she added, giving his shoulder a mischievous nudge. "I almost believed you."

He fought a grimace. "You always have such low expectations for me," he told her, throwing himself back onto the bed and resting his head against his hands. "You should just know to be impressed."

"Still," she said daintily, slipping her feet out of her shoes and stretching the exhaustion from her arches. "You never cease to amaze."

He shrugged. "Born performer, I guess."

"Something like that," she agreed. She wandered into the bathroom as though checking for something, then returned to his line of sight.

"I'm thinking a shower," she announced, leaning over to rub her feet again. "I could use one."

"Go for it," Draco replied nonchalantly. "I'll open the champagne, if you're interested in having some."

"Sure," Hermione said, nodding a little. "We deserve some, don't you think?"

There was a faint pop as Draco worked the bottle open.

"We certainly do," he agreed, and she walked toward him for a glass.

Hermione woke the next morning with a start, squinting in the brightness. Her head was pounding but she felt unnaturally relaxed; the two came hand in hand, she supposed, looking down.

There was no real way to tell what she noticed first. She might have first discovered she was naked, though the realization that the arm around her belonged to an equally naked Draco Malfoy was surely a close second and third, respectively.

Slow down, she told herself, squeezing her eyes shut. What happened?

Things started flooding her memory piece by piece, like someone was playing with a dial in her mind and forcibly bringing things in and out of clarity.

I meant it, you idiot, I'm in love with you -

She heard herself giggle; had she even made it to the shower after the champagne?

Oh god, she realized, clapping her hand over her mouth. Yes, and not alone.
They must have gotten drunk, that had to have been the only explanation; she had been so set on a quiet night in his company, perhaps chatting a little, but mostly enjoying the solitude and the rare gift of being away from the cameras.

Who had made the first move? Not that it even mattered, really, she reminded herself. The kisses and touches had begun to feel second-nature after spending so many weeks doing it for purposes of show. What had initially been a purposeful demonstration had become instinct and -

*Maybe it had been her*, she realized with a start, remembering that she had been watching the way the drink touched his lips, captivated by the way his fingers looked as he held the thin stem of the glass.

*Yes*, she recalled, her stomach flipping a little. She had definitely been watching.

*He* had carried her to the shower, though; he'd certainly been involved. More than involved, she assured herself, remembering the flash of their reflection she'd caught in the mirror, his hands on her breasts the moment he'd undressed her, his lips on the back of her neck and traveling slowly down her spine.

She whimpered a little at the memory, but beside her, he didn't budge; he was beautiful when he slept, she realized, forcing herself to look away.

What next? Ah, yes, *in* the shower - he'd licked the falling droplets from her skin, revered her with his tongue, his lips, his hands - she came *so hard* the first time, his fingers inside her and his mouth on her clit and she could only press herself back against the tiles, one leg tossed over his shoulder as brought her right up to the edge and then sent her careening over it. She'd said his name, hadn't she?

*Draco* -

And more.

*I love you, I love you too* -

She inhaled sharply at the thought. Had she - ?

But then it was coming back to her, more, *more, deeper, harder - yes, yes, there* -

Her chest pressed first against the tiles, his hand on her clit, and then he'd turned her and she'd bit down on his bicep as he lowered her onto his cock, her legs wrapped around his hips as he thrust into her, one arm against the shower wall and the other sinfully around her waist, holding her securely -

*Don't lie to me.*

His voice was gruff in her ear.

*Don't lie to me.*

*It's not a lie* -

*Then say it again.*

*I love you* -

*Again* -
I - oh, Draco -

Say it -

I love you - oh, yes, there - Draco - yes -

I love you -

I love you - I love you -

Mine.

The shiver she'd felt, it was unending.

Even now, it was relentless, and every hair stood on end.

How many more times? At least one - her hair was still damp, and she remembered her hands against his chest, her fingernails digging into his back as he brought her there again, again -

"Granger."

She looked at him, eyes wide.

He swallowed carefully, squinting a little in the morning light.

"Are you upset?" he asked quietly, and she felt an overwhelming rush of something - affection, maybe, at the knowledge that Draco Malfoy had never looked so concerned.

"No," she murmured back, touching his face. "I just . . . "

The muscle in his jaw seemed to tense. "Yes?" he prompted.

"I want to do it again," she whispered, and the ravenous look in his eyes nearly stopped her heart.

[Camera pans the room where Hermione is wearing a long red gown, standing next to the two remaining roses.]

Lee: "Are you ready, Hermione?"

Hermione: [takes a deep breath] "Yes."

[She looks up; there is something different about the chemistry in the room.]

Hermione: "Harry."

[Harry comes forward, smiling, and she looks comforted to see him; she holds him tightly after pinning the rose on his lapel, and he seems encouraged.]

Hermione: "And this rose is for . . . "

[Music becomes dramatic and full of intrigue as the camera pans rapidly between Draco and Theo.]

Hermione: "Draco."

[Draco steps close to her and there is definitely something different about their interaction; each}
touch seems somehow twice as deliberate. He holds her for a moment and she almost imperceptibly leans into him as he pulls away, instantly becoming sheepish as she has to face Theo.

Hermione: "Theo, I'm so sorry."

[Cut to Theo interview]

Theo: "Oh, it's alright." [He is somewhat cheery.] "We didn't want the same things, but I'll be fine, and she's in good hands."

[Cuts back to Theo, who is giving Draco a hug; Draco appears to say 'thank you' in his ear. Lee steps into view.]

Lee: "And next week on the final episode of . . . the Bachelorette!"

[Scenes of Hermione with both Harry and Draco enjoying each other's company]

Hermione, voiceover: "I don't know." [She is sobbing.] "I don't know who to choose, I don't know what to do - "

[Cut to Harry interview]

Harry: "I know what I want, and it's her. What we have can't be replicated. The bond we have is too strong."

[Cut to Draco interview]

Draco: [is staring straight forward] "I can't do this right now." [He takes the microphone off his sweater, coming to his feet and exiting camera view.]

[Black screen; Hermione is heard whispering, as though she doesn't know she's being filmed.]

Hermione voiceover: "I love you, but is that enough?"

[Cut to the shot from the opening previews, in which she is running away from the manor.]

Lee voiceover: "Don't forget to stay tuned for all that and more on the finale of . . . the Bachelorette!"

[Editor's cut:]

Lee: "I can't believe this shit is still going on."

Muttered response.

Lee: "I KNOW MY MIC IS ON, FUCK OFF!"

Chapter End Notes

a/n: HAPPY BIRTHDAY DR. SALLY! I tried to end this but it is already way too long so there will have to be a part V for the finale. I'm sorry! But all my love to the keeper of my heart and the BFF horcrux, DrSallySparrow. A kiss, a very palpable kiss!
Bachelorette, Part V

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bachelorette, Part V: The Finale

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: M for language, references to sex

Summary: The final installation of the drabble series based on the reality show "The Bachelorette," wherein eligible men in the wizarding world compete for Hermione Granger's affections.

[Camera pans the now familiar Manor house as Lee steps into view.]

Lee: "Tonight on the finale of . . . The Bachelorette!"

[Montage of Harry and Draco getting ready for their respective final dates; Harry looks openly nervous and fidgety, while Draco's face looks placid and calm, but upon closer inspection, his fingers are shaking as he buttons his shirt.]

Lee voiceover: "Tension is at an all time high as Hermione prepares to make her final choice."

[Cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "I could be marrying one of these men." [She is relentlessly chewing her lip and she looks vaguely tired and unsettled, as though she hasn't slept well.] "The concept of forever just feels so . . . foreboding."

Interviewer, off screen: "Foreboding?"

Hermione: "Well, maybe that's not the right word." [She softens, thinking.] "I think forever with either of them might actually be kind of . . . " [she pauses.] "Wonderful."

[Clips of her softer moments with both contestants is paired immediately with dramatic music and scenes of her alone and pacing.]

Hermione voiceover: "I don't know . . . I just don't know . . . "

[Cuts to Draco interview.]

Draco: "I've told her I love her, and that's all I can do."

[Cuts to Harry interview.]

Harry: "It's really up to her now, isn't it?"

[Black screen; Hermione voiceover.]

Hermione: "I love you, but is that enough?"
"Lee, get out of the way."

He had barricaded the door with the entirety of his limbs and was refusing to budge. Hermione sighed heavily, trying to rub the exhaustion from her eyes that she knew even makeup might not successfully cover.

"Lee, I'm serious," she said, reaching out to push past him and then glaring as he swatted her away. "I need to talk to them, okay?" At his refusal, she grimaced. "At least one of them?" she attempted. "I need to - "

"You can't!" he barked, giving her the most petulant version she'd ever seen of his normally jubilant face. "That's against the rules, Hermione, you'll have to decide on your own - "

"This is ridiculous!" she snapped, stomping her foot on the ground and pivoting angrily away, pacing the room. "You can't expect me to get engaged in a couple of days without being able to even talk to the person I'm planning to marry!"

"Oh, really?" Lee asked, crossing his arms. "Because it seems like if you can decide which one you want to talk to, you probably know which one you want to marry."

Hermione paused mid-stride, glaring at him over her shoulder. "Fine," she conceded tightly. "You're right." She lifted her chin appealingly, giving him a prim look of satisfaction. "I know which one I'm going to choose."

"You do?" he asked eagerly, stepping forward. "Which one?"

At his abandonment of his post, she catapulted herself forward, attempting to muscle her way through the door; she'd timed it poorly, though, and he caught her around the waist, holding tight as she clawed at his arms.

"Lee," she hissed, struggling. For a relatively slender man, he possessed a surprisingly impenetrable grip. "Let - me - go - "

"No," he grunted back, "and you should know that I'm not fucking thrilled about this escape plan - "

"This is crazy!" Hermione shrieked, spinning around to smack the upper part of his arm with the flat of her hand. "You don't have to tell anyone, Lee," she added, switching techniques and attempting to make her gaze soft and imploring. "It can just be between us - "

"Are you bargaining with me now?" he countered, giving her a look of disgust. "You are losing it, Hermione."

"I'm - I'm not - " She sagged a little in his arms, realizing he was right. "I just can't - "

"Look," Lee said, gently nudging her to a chair and pressing her down into it. "Maybe we can just chat about this?" He looked at her hopefully. "Make a pros and cons list, or something?"

"Haven't you watched any sitcoms?" Hermione groaned, tipping her head back and sighing. "Those
only lead to trouble."

Lee wrinkled his nose in confusion. "Any what?"

"Nevermind," she grumbled, kicking off her shoes and slouching further against the chair. "The point is, those don't work for decisions this big - "

"Oh, you're just blowing this out of proportion," Lee muttered. "Marriage is like" - he paused, waving his hand around carelessly - "nothing, now! Everyone's doing it," he added, looking at her with an absurd expression of optimism. "It's just a piece of paper, you know?" He shrugged. "No big deal."

"Oh yeah?" Hermione asked, opening one eye to regard him with skepticism. "And why aren't you married then, Lee?"

"Oh, I haven't found the right person," he said instantly, "I mean, I can't just - "

At her 'I told you so' glare he cut himself off, looking sheepishly at his shoes. "Nevermind," he finished, trailing off.

"Nevermind is right," Hermione said irritably. "You're the one who said this was just a game!" Lee insisted, sitting down opposite her.

She grimaced. "I know I said that, but - "

"You were never planning to really go through with this, were you?" he interrupted, eyeing her carefully.

"Well, no," she admitted, "but - "

"Then why make a big deal of it now?"

"Because - because I slept with Draco!" Hermione blurted out, clapping her hand over her mouth. Lee let out a dramatic gasp of horror, clutching at his chest.

"You did what?" he exclaimed, his voice shrill with panic.

"I know!" Hermione cried, launching herself to her feet and starting to pace the room. "And I told him I loved him - "

"You didn't," Lee said, starting to fan himself. "Hermione, I specifically told you - "

"I didn't say it on camera!" she insisted, turning pleadingly to him. "I - I only said it when - " she hesitated, loath to meet his eyes. "When I was - "

"Merlin's tits, did you say it while you were fucking him?" Lee shouted, and Hermione let out a loud wail of frustration.

"Would you keep your voice down?" she begged, throwing herself back into the chair and cringing. "Obviously now you see the predicament I'm in - "

Lee nodded soberly, seemingly unable to speak. They sat in silence for several moments as Hermione waited, her heart railing against her chest.
"Well," Lee finally croaked, bringing his hands to his forehead wearily. "I'm sure Harry will forgive you - "

Hermione let out an entirely incoherent sound that was part shrill squeak, part agitated groan. "That is not really the issue here, Lee!" she growled, swatting lazily at him from her chair. "But - I mean," she paused, straining for an appropriate metaphor, "it's like comparing apples and oranges now - "

"You mean comparing visual, accessible dick to imaginary, unexplored dick?" Lee mumbled. "I can see the dilemma."

Hermione's eyes widened in dismay. "Lee!"

"Look," Lee said, leaning forward to rest his chin on his hands. "It's not that hard, okay?" He looked at her beseechingly. "I mean, is there a reason you slept with Draco and not Harry?"

"Well - " Hermione cut herself off.

She wanted to say alcohol, but that didn't seem sufficient. She wanted to say maybe the timing had been better, but that didn't sound right either.

"I don't know," she said, after several moments had passed.

Lee sighed. "Lucky contesticles," he muttered, sinking down into the chair.

[Camera cuts to Harry interview.]

Interviewer, off screen: "So, how are you feeling now that it's down to the final two?"

Harry: "Fine, I guess." [He does seem fine.] "I mean, I'm anxious to find out Hermione's decision, but I feel confident it'll be the right one." [At that, he can't help a slightly smug smile.]

Interviewer, off screen: "And how have things been between you and Draco?"

Harry: "They're quite good, actually."

[Camera shows scenes of Harry and Draco throughout the season; Draco genially tosses Harry his broom as they go outside for a game, Harry pours an extra drink and offers it to Draco, Draco offers a rare grin as Harry tells a story.]

[Cuts back to interview.]

Harry: "Anything I want for me and Hermione has nothing to do with Draco losing." [He shrugs.] "He's not who he used to be, and I have no issues with him."

[Editor's cut:

Harry: "What do you mean you want something more interesting than that?"

Muttered response.

Harry: [is shocked and appalled] "I am not going to call him that! My - " [he pauses, correcting himself] "Ron's mum watches this show!"

Mutters.

[End of excerpt.]
Harry: "Well I don't care what your mum wants!"

His hands were all over her, his fingers twisting into her wreck of curls and pulling her head back, his lips on her neck, his teeth against her skin.

*Draco - I love you -*

*Don't lie to me.*

*It's not a lie -*

*Then say it again.*

He'd had plenty of sex but none like this. There was sex, and then there was this. There was sex, there was *fucking*, and then there was Hermione Granger, who was in a league of her own. Every touch had an aftershock. Every ounce of pressure seemed like it could leave a mark.

Even her hand on his Dark Mark - her fingers brushed across it, and it was like he was somehow healed.

He jolted forward in bed, abandoning the thought of attempting more sleep. At this point, he was practically begging his brain to give him some release from that night. He was relentlessly vacillating between a pulsing numbness and a thudding panic, and he could get no relief.

The letter from his mother had done little to help, of course.

*Remember, Draco, you've done what you went there to do. Even if she doesn't choose you, you've repaired your relationship with the rest of the world; even Harry Potter has been clear that he no longer harbors ill will towards you. Take a breath, darling. It's not for nothing.*

Easy for her to say. *She* hadn't fallen in love with a muggleborn.

*Not that that even mattered to him anymore,* he reminded himself, shaking his head vigorously. She clearly didn't think of him as a Death Eater. The least he could do was see her for what she was, and he'd finally learned to do that.

He hoped she'd noticed.

He padded softly into the kitchen, not bothering to throw on shoes or a shirt. Now that it was just down to him and Potter, he'd gotten quite comfortable in the stuffy, largely tacky manor house. He was, after all, quite familiar with stuffy manor houses.

"Hey," Harry said, nodding at him. He was seated at the table, also shirtless, reading a newspaper.

"Hey," Draco returned, grabbing a cup of coffee and pulling a chair out across from the dark-haired wizard. "Anything interesting?" he asked, gesturing to the Daily Prophet in Harry's hands.

"Depends what you find interesting," Harry replied with a grin, lifting the front page to reveal a images of the two of them below the caption *WHO WILL HERMIONE CHOOSE?*

"Not bad," Draco said, nodding stiffly at the pictures. "Your hair looks shit, though," he commented, smirking into his coffee.

Harry rolled his eyes but said nothing; they sat in semi-comfortable silence for a few minutes, each relishing the solitude. The calm before the storm, as it were, Draco thought whimsically.
"So," Harry said, shifting in his chair. "Should we have the man-to-man talk?"

Draco looked up from his mug, flashing Harry his signature look of aristocratic skepticism. "Which one is that?"

"You know," Harry said amiably, shrugging. "Where I say 'if she picks you, be good to her or else,' and then you say - "

"Potter, I will do precisely what I please," Draco supplied, but Harry only scowled.

"Fine," he replied, rising to his feet and beginning to amble out of the room.

Draco sighed, staring at the other man's back. "Hold on," he called, and Harry slowly turned around.

"I know that if she chooses you, you'll be good to her," Draco said, somewhat sternly. "I don't need to tell you that."

Harry's mouth twitched into a smile.

"And," Draco continued loftily, "I care about her," he said, not wanting to reveal too much, but recognizing the moment was significant. "So you shouldn't worry about me," he concluded, looking for understanding in the other wizard's green eyes.

He found it as Harry nodded.

"I know," Harry agreed. "But thanks for saying that anyway."

Draco nodded.

All was well.

[Camera pans the manor house and rests on Lee, who is standing outside with Hermione.]

Lee, to Hermione: "This is your last date with Draco! How are you - "

Hermione: [glares at him]

Lee: [hastily clears throat] "Nevermind. Oh look, there he is."

[Draco steps out of the manor house and smiles at her; she brightens considerably.]

Draco: "Hi." [Kisses her.] "Missed you." [He says this with a certain rare sincerity and Hermione softens.]

Hermione: [in a whisper] "Me too."

[She glances at the camera; Draco notices this and takes her chin in his hand, kissing her cheek.]

Draco: "It's okay." [He turns to murmur in her ear.] "It's just me."

[Hermione seems to relax in his arms.]

Lee: [Clears his throat; Hermione and Draco jump, as though they have forgotten he is there.] "Okay, so, um . . . date time."
Lee: [gesturing to Hermione and Draco kissing] "For fuck's sake, why am I always just left standing here?"

Murmured response.

Lee: "Wh- seriously? Well I think you're a useless prat!"

Draco's head was nearly spinning by the time he sat down for his last interview segment. The date had gone well, of course - they always did - and since the camera had been relentless, they hadn't had the chance to talk about anything of substance. He supposed it was in her hands at this point.

He settled himself in the chair, adjusting his collar and waiting for the interviewer to finish with a quick makeup touch-up. It seemed a little mad, really, how many he'd done of these, and that this was to be his last. Questions about Hermione, about how he felt, about whether or not Harry was an abominable menace or a threat; he'd heard it all and he knew it was going to be edited, spliced and re-cut to make the show more interesting.

How exhausting. It had been one thing when the show was a contrived farce that he'd had no investment in. He'd come here to repair his reputation, and by all accounts, he'd done it. His job here was finished. Or would have been, of course, had he not actually fallen in love with Hermione Granger.

Though - his job was still finished, wasn't it? He wouldn't see her again until the final rose ceremony (wherein he would either be sent home or be proposing) and at that point, he wouldn't very well have the time to convince her. By the time he saw her next, her mind would be made up. It all seemed so utterly pointless, then.

"Ready, Draco?"

He looked up at the interviewer.

[Camera cuts to Draco interview.]

Interviewer, off screen: "So, Draco - "

Draco: "Sorry, but - " [Sighs.] "Can I just say something?"

Interviewer, off screen: "Of course."

[Editor's cut:

Lee: [whispering loudly off screen] "What's happening?"

Muttered response.

Lee: [roaring back] "YOU shut up, you garbage-faced twat canoe!"

Mutters.

Lee: [sighs resignedly] "You're right. I took that to a weird place. I apologize."

Draco: "The thing is, I love Hermione, and I don't want to say anything here that will reflect badly
on her, whatever choice she makes. I want her to be happy." [He swallows uncomfortably, as though this is hitting home.] "I just don't think there's anything else to say other than that, and I - " [Stares ahead blankly.] "I can't do this right now." [He takes the microphone off his sweater, coming to his feet and exiting camera view.]

[Editor's cut:

Interviewer: "Uh, so - "

Lee: [Storms into camera view] "Are you kidding me? He goes gallant right as things actually get interesting?"

Muttered response.

Lee: [Realizes he is on camera] "Oh, for the love of fuck."

Ron turned to the others in the room.

"Wow," he commented blankly.

"You can say that again," Dean said, and Seamus nodded his vehement agreement.

"That seemed . . . out of character for Malfoy," Ron noted, frowning a little. "Is it just me, or did that make it seem like he genuinely loves her?"

"Oh, don't be so surprised," Theo retorted, rolling his eyes. "He's loved her forever. He just didn't know it."

Ron's brow furrowed. "But you did?"

Blaise and Theo exchanged glances.

"Trust me," Blaise assured them, his tone silky and bored. "You do not want to know the extent of what we went through for seven years."

Theo let out a barking laugh. "Granger did this, Granger did that," he mimicked. "Did you see Granger today - "

" - do you think Granger noticed my hair?" Blaise supplied, and they both snickered joyfully at their best friend's expense.

"You mean he was telling the truth?" Ron demanded, waiting for them to stop their conspiratorial chortling. "That first night, when he told her he'd always had feelings for her - was that true?"

"Oh no, as far as he knew, that was a lie," Blaise corrected, shaking his head. "A pretty fucking blatant one, really," he added, though he looked slightly pleased.

"We're just smarter than he is," Theo added with a smirk, and Ron rolled his eyes.

"Whatever," Ron sighed, turning back to the screen. "Back to the viewing party, I guess."

Theo lifted a glass. "Cheers to that," he suggested heartily.

They all raised their glasses in salute.
[Camera shows Harry and Hermione, who are already well into their date.]

Hermione: [leans in, whispering something.]

Harry: [Looks confused, then nods.]

[Editor's cut:]
Lee: "What the fuck is going on?"

Muttered response.

Lee: [pointing feverishly] "Oh for fuck's sake, she's doing it again - "

Hermione: [grabs Harry's hand and takes off.]

[The footage is extremely bumpy as the camera follows them; they slip into an empty room and slam the door shut, but their audio is still heard.]

Harry: "What's going on?"

Hermione: "I need to talk to you. Alone."

Harry: "I see that, but - "

Hermione: "I have to know if you see this going somewhere, Harry." [She can be heard to take a deep breath.] "I have to know if you see this as being, I don't know - "

Harry: "I love you, Hermione. I'm sure of that."

Hermione: "And I love you, but is that enough?" [She lowers her voice to a whisper.] "Do you feel a little too . . . comfortable?"

Harry: "What do you mean?"

Hermione: "I mean, don't you wonder if we're meant to have something more passionate? Something more - "

Harry: "Like that you have with Draco?"

Hermione: [Says nothing.]

[There is a shuffling behind the door, like Harry has stepped towards her.]

Harry: [quietly] "Is he the one, Hermione?"

Hermione: "I don't know." [She sniffs.] "I love you, I do, and I know we could be happy together, but - "

Harry: "But?"

Hermione: "But I sometimes think I want more than contentedness, you know? I almost like that he pushes me. I almost enjoy arguing with him."

Harry: [chuckles a little] "Which is good, considering that's a good portion of what you'll do."

Hermione: "But I just don't know if it's worth diving into, you know? Not when I could have a
chance of something real with you - "

Harry: [interrupts] "Hermione, I think you're smart enough to realize that if you've wanted him around this long, you have a chance of something real with him, too." [Pauses.] "You just have to decide if it's the 'something real' that you want."

Hermione: "How can I know?"

Harry: "Well, did you - "

Hermione: [Cuts him off.] "Yes."

Harry: "Oh." [Pause] "Well, that's definitely something. And did you - "

Hermione: "Yes. A lot."

Harry: "Hmm." [Another pause] "Well, why do you think we - "

Hermione: "I just don't know if the chemistry between us is the same." [Adds hastily] "Don't get me wrong, it's definitely there, but - " [She trails off uncertainly.]

[A moment passes.]

Harry: "Is it possible we have our types of love confused?"

Hermione: [Sighs deeply] "Maybe." [Pause] "I've never been very smart at this sort of thing."

[Another moment.]

Harry: "Do you love him?"

Hermione: [Pause] "Yes. I do."

Harry: [Long pause.] "Then I think you should choose him."

[Editor's cut:]

Lee: "NOOOOOOOOO!"

"Really?" Hermione asked breathlessly, wiping a tear from her eye. "But what if - "

"No buts," Harry said fervently, shaking his head. "Maybe you're right, Hermione. Maybe what we have isn't the same kind of love."

"But -"

"And to be honest with you," he added, cupping her cheek affectionately. "Maybe I want that kind of passion, too."

She managed a weak smile. "It's pretty great," she admitted, still getting a flutter of excitement of the thought of Draco's skin against hers, of his spectacular wit and his unerring surliness, which he seemed to suspend only for her.

"I know." Harry seemed a little saddened, but not overtly downtrodden. "I had a love like that before," he told her, and Hermione knew he meant Ginny. "And I think maybe I was so hurt by how that ended that I - " he broke off, looking sheepish. "Maybe I was just looking for something .
The moment he said it, she knew he was right.

"We deserve better than easy," Hermione told him, looking up through tear-sprinkled lashes. "Right?"

Harry pulled her into his embrace, tucking her into his arms and resting his chin on top of her head. "I think so," he whispered, swaying her a little.

For a moment it was like they were dancing again, alone in their tent; he'd been right that whatever they had couldn't be replicated.

But then again, neither could Draco.

"Thank you," she murmured, leaning up to kiss his cheek. "I would have been happy, you know," she added. She pressed her fingers into his arm, wanting him to understand.

"Me too," Harry assured her, and she was comforted by the thought. "You'll always have me, Hermione." He paused, a smile forming on his face. "And he's really not so bad, either."

She grinned at him. "I kind of love him," she confessed. "Kind of . . . a lot more than I expected."

Harry pulled her in again, tighter this time.

"Just do me a favor?" he muttered in her ear.

She nodded.

"Spare me the rose ceremony, okay?" Harry said. "Just fucking marry the prick, would you?"

Hermione laughed. "Will do."

[Camera pans the front of the mansion; Lee and Hermione are standing outside, waiting for Draco.]

Lee: "Well, Hermione, obviously things have taken a turn for the criminally insane."

Hermione: [Flashes him a look of indignation.]

Lee: [Hurriedly] "By that I mean to say that this is not at all protocol." [He gestures to where she is standing, wearing the stunning green evening gown.] "Usually these rose ceremonies are not a total surprise to the participants - "

[Editor's cut: Off screen mutters.]

Lee: "Listen, I don't care if my narration has gone to shit, let's just get this done, shall we?"

Hermione: [Interrupts] "Is he here yet?" [She looks around nervously.] "Where is he?"

Lee: [Sighs] "I think he's - "

[At this point Hermione has spotted him where he is arriving from a leisurely broom ride; Draco coasts slowly to the ground and lands several feet away.]
Hermione: "Okay -" [She takes off at a clumsy sprint; the now tiresome scene in which she runs away from the manor finally plays on the screen.]

Lee: [Calls after her] "Herm- ah, whatever, I don't even care." [Throws his cue cards over his shoulder and walks away, then stops, sighs, and turns back around.] "Just kidding. I want to watch this." [He picks up the cards and runs after her; the camera follows.]

[Hermione runs to Draco and he opens his arms to her, his face alit with surprise.]

Draco: "Granger, what are you -" [he gets abruptly interrupted as she throws herself into his arms.] "Is everything -"

Hermione: "I need you to do something for me."

Draco: [Looks no less confused.] "Okay -"

Hermione: [breathlessly] "Marry me." [She is flushed and almost panting.] "Please. I mean, only if you want to -" [she trails off nervously, suddenly seeming to remember her vulnerable state and appearing to shrink a little in his grasp.]

[Draco is silent for a moment, as though he is having difficulty processing; then he picks her up by the waist, spinning her about and setting her back on her feet, only to kiss her so fervently she stumbles backwards.]

Draco: "Oh, I want to." [Kisses her again.] "Believe me, I plan to."

Lee: [Awkwardly steps into view] "So, um, there's one thing left to do -"

Hermione: [snatches the final rose out of his hand] "Draco, will you accept this rose?"

Draco: "Fuck. Yes." [He takes it from her and kisses her again.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "YES YES I KNOW, I HEARD IT TOO!"

[Draco gets down on one knee and proposes; Hermione cries. There are tears shed by all, particularly by Lee, who steps sniffling into view.]

Lee: "Well, there you have it folks." [Wipes at his eyes.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Just . . . I don't know. Play some of that horrible Dean and Seamus show or something. I'm so done with this. I'm done. I'm dying. I'm dead."

Muttered response.

Lee: [lays down in the grass, clutching his heart.] "I'M DEAD."]

He got her out of the gown so quickly she might have thought it was magic if she didn't hear the seam rip.

"Slow down!" she giggled, tumbling into the bed with him. Her bed, finally.
No cameras. No contestants. Just them.

Just **him**.

"We have a lot of time for this," she reminded him, and he withdrew his face from her neck to look serenely at her.

"All our lives, one might say," he managed gruffly, and she smiled.

They stared at each other for a long time, the cool grey taking in the warm golden-brown. There was so much to say, so much to talk about; so much to plan.

She frowned.

All of that could wait, of course. Priorities.

"Faster than *this,*" she told him, gesturing to where he now lay still on top of her.

He gave a fascinatingly urgent growl and she laughed again, tangling her fingers in his hair as he roughly kissed his way down her torso.

Minerva looked up at the sound in the doorway; Filius stood there sheepishly.

"Minerva," he began, "I - "

She pointed wordlessly to the pile of galleons on the right-hand corner of her desk.

"No need to make a show of it, Filius," she pronounced primly, returning to her work.

He didn't catch the little smile that traipsed across her lips.

"Minister!" He could hear Mafalda's footsteps echoing through the hall to his office. "Minister!"

"Yes?" he asked, his lips curling into a smile. "What is it?"

"The latest owls are in," she said breathlessly. "Everyone's saying it's a sign of the times, sir, a pureblood and a muggleborn - " she broke off, positively radiant with elation. "People are saying *wonderfully* positive things about the Ministry, and there've been *significantly* fewer complaints about unfair treatment of former or suspected Death Eaters - though who would, really," she added, her eyes lighting up with mischief. "I mean *honestly*, that Theo Nott - "

"That's enough, Mafalda," Kingsley cut in, trying to hide his amusement as she reddened significantly.

"Yes, yes, right you are, sir - "

She turned to back slowly out of his office.

"Though, one more thing," he called after her, and she turned.

"Yes?"

"Rome wasn't built in a day, you know," he rumbled thoughtfully.

She frowned. "Sir?"
Kingsley smiled. "Send Harry Potter in here, would you?"

SIX MONTHS LATER

[Camera pans the large, stately manor house to where Lee Jordan is holding a microphone, adjusting his suit.]

"Hello witches and wizards, and welcome to the new season of . . . the Bachelor!"

[Studio applause; Lee starts walking.]

"Last season, we all celebrated along with Hermione as she found love in the arms of Draco Malfoy."

[Flashes of their dates and proposal cut across the screen, followed by images of their wedding.]

"Hermione and Draco are living in newly wedded bliss, but not everyone was able to find love on last season's Bachelorette."

[Camera cuts to scene of Harry leaving the manor, and Harry where he stood as a groomsman at Hermione's wedding.]

"This season's Bachelor is perhaps the most famous we've ever had, and certainly the most eligible. Widely known as the Boy Who Lived and famous for his defeat of He Who Must Not Be Named, our favorite former Bachelorette contestant has returned to find his own happy ending!"

[Cuts to Harry interview.]

Harry: "I have to say, I'm very excited." [He does seem quite chipper and optimistic.] "Obviously things didn't go so well for me last season, but I think it was quite clear that Hermione and Draco were meant for each other, and now I'm looking forward to it being my turn."

[Camera cuts back to Lee.]

Lee: "Who will be the lucky lady who wins the Chosen One's heart? Will it be a beautiful Slytherin?"

[Camera shows clip of Daphne Greengrass blowing a kiss at the camera.]

Lee: "An exotic Gryffindor?"

[Parvati Patil flashes a reserved smirk at the camera.]

Lee: "Or will Harry, too, fall for his own former nemesis?"

[Pansy Parkinson's confident smirk appears on the screen.]

Lee: "All this and more coming up this season on . . . The Bachelor!"

[Editor's cut:]

Lee: "I'm telling myself I won't get invested this time. I can't take the pain again, I just can't."

Muttered response.
Lee: "Team Pansy?! [Stammers] Have you - do you even - are you - "

Mutters.

Lee: "I don't care if you won last season, you're still a twat canoe!"

Chapter End Notes

a/n: ah, what did I even create here? I don't know. Thank you so much to everyone for reading! This one is for Bachelorette junkie, susiequeen300 :)

So, I will NOT be writing the Harry Bachelor series (I have a lot more issues with the Bachelor than I do with the Bachelorette, it is just naturally a more unpleasant scenario) but you can let your imaginations run away with how you think that one would turn out. I will however be doing two things soon: a long delayed Theomione, and also a new drabble series called Marauders Doing Everyday Things. If you would like a preview of my Marauders interactions, which have been hailed as "ridiculous" and "death-inducing," they can be found in my longer WIP, Youth.

Also, I started a new Dramione: Nightmares and Nocturnes. A story per night to save her life. Dramione, dystopian post-war AU.
"Nice one, Weasley!"

Oliver Wood gave a loud whoop as she deftly knocked the quaffle into the hoop.

"Now, if the rest of you could kindly remove your head from your sphincters - "

Ginny emitted a prim little cough, her version of a subtle reminder for Wood to avoid being entirely unmanageable, and he collected himself soberly.

"Right, right," he muttered, waving them in. "Sorry. Huddle up, folks, please - "

The others gathered around her, many of them altogether too close. The hazards of being the first woman on the All-Star International Series, she supposed. The other chasers, two Irishmen that she regularly confused for each other, seemed uncomfortably starved for attention, and eyed her like she might be their next meal.

She flipped her long ponytail over her shoulder, smirking. You wish.

"Right - so," Wood started, facing his team. "As you all know, you're essentially rubbish - "

Ginny cleared her throat loudly, but by then, Wood had already picked up steam.

"- except, maybe - maybe - we have one and a half good chasers - "

She and one of the blonds (the better one) exchanged smug glances.

"- and of course, we do have the world's greatest seeker - nothing against you, Krum - "

Ginny looked up, squinting for him. Viktor Krum had yet to speak a word to her, or acknowledge her existence, for all she could tell; he was constantly lingering in the air above them, perched in his proverbial crow's nest. She might have expected it was a seeker's proclivity for heights, except that Harry had always been good about joining the team for little meetings like this, and so she suspected this behavior was unique to Krum. He was perhaps the quietest and least social person she'd ever encountered, and seemed content to engage as little as possible with anyone.

Which wouldn't be a problem, really, as they had no need to speak; except that he had managed to become bloody smoking since the last time she'd seen him, all arms and back and chiseled jaw and
other unsettling distractions. Ginny had come to think of all seekers as having Harry's narrow, linear build, or even Draco's lean, muscled height (that being the full extent of what Hermione permitted her to consider), but Krum was herculean, powerfully built; he had grown into his professional athletic career nicely, and reached a level of fame where he was expected to let his dark waves fall broodingly into his eyes and wear custom jerseys that were designed to the specifications of his chest.

Her attraction to him was undeniable, and incredibly distressing. She had come so far to get to this point; to be the only girl on the team, and to be treated fairly for her talent - having Wood as the coach didn't hurt, which made her suspect that Kingsley, the host Minister, might have called in a favor - that she wasn't about to waste it on anything silly. She had promised herself that involvement with anyone was off limits, and couldn't afford the distraction of a silly little crush.

Which she had to remind herself now, watching Krum cross his arms over his appealingly muscular chest. *Stop it, Ginevra*, she scolded herself. *Be mature about this.*

But then she removed her helmet, smoothing her ponytail over her shoulder and pursing her lips in false interest, hoping he was watching.

He wasn't. *Arsehole.*

" - anyway," Wood continued. "Hit the showers, we'll be at it again early - "

She was brought back to reality as the other men around her swooped to the ground to make their way to the locker room; she hung back, dragging her feet as they all made their way in. She was always last to shower, of course; apparently the Ministry hadn't felt one woman was worth building a second "world class athletic facility" for - to be fair, the massage area was quite amazing - and so it was easiest just to wait for the sweaty men to go first.

Krum landed from his broom a few steps ahead of her, but didn't look back. Not even when she made a point to remove her jersey with a loud sigh of feigned exhaustion, leaving her in her riding trousers and sports bra.

She looked over surreptitiously; nothing.

*Fuck.*

She quite needed some attention, if she were being honest. She and Harry had broken up before the start of the season (timing wasn't good; he wanted to settle down, and she wanted to continue her professional career) and she felt as though she hadn't been touched in months. It was starting to drive her a bit mad, she thought, biting her lip as she wandered into the locker room, her breath catching as Krum removed his jersey.

Godric, he was lickable. It took everything she possessed not to let out a whimper at the thought.

Sighing again, she tossed her jersey into her locker and kicked off her shoes, resting her broom against the wall. The men were normally quick to get in and out; they had tried, at first, to strut around in towels, peacocking for her benefit, but noticed right away that she was not receptive, and opted instead to hit the pubs after practice. Quidditch groupies were not difficult to locate (or shag) and were considerably less effort than Ginny; the rest of the team were all at least smart enough to pick up on that.

She waited, hands on her hips, still watching Krum as he slowly and methodically arranged his things, his tawny chest gleaming under the sweat of Wood's unyielding practice drills. He was so
carved and smooth that she sometimes wondered if he were even real, or just a statue come to life.

He hadn't even looked her way. He was infuriating.

After several minutes the rest of the team, including the two blond chasers, finally exited the locker room, nodding at her and Krum and chattering to each other. And then they were the only two remaining; Ginny tapped her foot impatiently, eager to get on with her day.

"Are you going to get in the shower?" she prompted, flashing him what Ron had always called her terrifying glare - 'even scarier than Mione's, I'm telling you' - and placing her hands on her hips in stern frustration.

*Sexual* frustration, probably, but she wasn't intellectual enough to care to make the distinction.

He looked up and let his eyes settle on hers, his heavy brow furrowed in confusion.

"Yeah, I'm kind of waiting here," she reminded him snidely, gesturing to her as-yet unshowered form. "If you could sort of, you know, *get on with it*, that would be great." At his blank look, she regretfully continued babbling. "I'm *sure* you aren't aware I'm waiting, of course, since you *obviously* don't seem to have any concept I exist - "

He grimaced at that.

"Well, you can give me that look all you want, but it's obviously true," Ginny remarked brusquely. "You can't seem to spare a single *moment* of your time to notice me, so, *fine* - do what you want, but I could really use a shower, so if you could just - "

"I haff noticed you," Krum interrupted, his voice prompting an instant leap in her lower belly.

She gaped at him, realizing he had never spoken to her before.

"Oh," she said finally, swallowing. "Well. Fine."

They stared at each other for a moment, and Krum's forehead creased as he continued to consider her.

"Well," Ginny attempted, trying to regain some semblance of dignity, "Like I said, if you could just - um, get *on* with it - "

He came to his feet, ambling his way towards her; she nearly shrunk against her locker before forcibly reminding herself that she was *Ginny fucking Weasley*, who was never nervous or unsettled, and convinced herself to square her shoulders, not backing down.

"I haff noticed you," Krum said again, stopping just inches away from her.

 Was he *flirting* with her?

Her heart was racing and she wondered if he could tell; even she was conscious of the way her chest seemed to rise and fall with undeterred longing, and the tremor of her breath as she took in the shape of his shoulders, the sharp curves of his stomach.

"What's your deal?" she asked suspiciously, translating her vulnerability into agitation. "You *never* look at me, you always ignore me - "

But the way his eyes settled on hers was distracting, and she lost track of her thoughts.
"Is it - is it because of Harry?" she ventured. "Because, I mean, we broke up, so -"

Now his darkened glance lingered on her lips, and she started fidgeting with her hands.

"Because, you know, if you're -" she paused, hesitating. "If you're interested, I - I could -"

Fucking hell, her game was entirely disrupted.

"Sorry," she whispered, realizing there was no digging herself out of this hole of humiliation. "I'll - I'll just go ahead and -"

She moved to step around him and he stepped quickly into her path, blocking her. She looked up, startled, realizing with a pang just how much taller he was, and how much she desperately wanted to untie the laces of his trousers - just to see -

And then suddenly his lips were on hers and his arms, the ones she'd been staring at for weeks, were around her, pulling her into his chest. He reached up, pulling the elastic from her ponytail to take hold of her thick red hair, tugging her head back to give him access to her neck.

"Oh," she managed, letting her hands grip onto the muscled expanse of his abs, digging her fingers into his skin. He seemed to chuckle a little - the first indication of amusement she'd ever heard from him - and even that tiny sound trilled through her, thrilled her, until she struggled to bring her arms around his neck, sighing into his mouth as he effortlessly picked her up.

"Shower?" she proposed, and he nodded very seriously, as though she had suggested a new play out on the pitch. He took instruction well, she noted, giggling as he tossed her higher, adjusting her legs over his hips, and made his way to the showers.

He set her down lightly, gently, and then in a stunning juxtaposition of moods he tore her sports bra over her head, lowering his mouth to her chest and seeming to savor the salt of her skin, letting his tongue trace around her nipple and then grazing his teeth over the underside of her breast. She gasped in response, tangling her fingers in his hair and then remembering that she, too, could contribute to the chaos, nudging his head up and fumbling for the top of his trousers. At her insistent tugging he gave her a subtle half-smile and took a step back, peeling them from his legs and kicking them to the side.

She gaped at him for a moment - bloody perfect, he was; she almost wanted to slap him for having the nerve to look like that - but he seemed as urgent as she was. He reached for her, grabbing her around the waist with one arm and tugging her trousers down with the other, and she, then, twisted in his arms, eager to remove them. By the time they were both undressed she was desperate and burning and she crashed back to him, shoving him into the shower and reaching blindly to start the water.

The pearls of water that began to form on his skin were, if anything, a unique form of torment; part of her wanted to slow down, to savor him, to store all of him for later (just in case) but the other piece of her could not wait and he, slicking his hair back and reaching forcefully for her, licking the droplets from his lips, seemed to agree; he had her pinned against the wall in seconds, his cock hard against the flat of her stomach.

She reached for him and he impatiently nudged her hand away, gripping her hips for a moment before moving his hand to her clit, sliding two fingers against it and smirking at her strangled moan.

It really had been much too long, she thought wearily, letting her head fall back against the tile of
the shower stall.

He didn't let her get comfortable; she gasped as he spun her around, pressing her back against his chest and palming her breasts before letting his fingers drift back down, slipping them inside her slit. He entered her easily and she realized with a pang how badly she wanted him; the burning at her core seemed to pulse around his fingers and she pressed herself against him, reaching around behind him to run her hands over the firm smoothness of his arse. It might be nicer than hers, she thought faintly, but then he had picked her up and shut off the water, lifting her like her weight accounted for nothing at all.

He brought her to the massage tables - really, state of the art facility, she thought again, panting - and he pressed her forward onto her hands and knees, kissing down her spine as he continued to rub against her clit. His lips traveled smoothly over her skin until he nudged her knees apart, slipping his tongue inside her from behind.

She let out a loud gasp, feeling his tongue repeatedly alternate between licking against her clit and entering her, and hastily pushed him away, flipping onto her back. She wanted to see him; she wanted to catch the glimmer of want in his eye as he lowered his head back to her slit, sucking lightly on her clit as he drove two fingers into her and left her crying out, her legs shaking around his head as she came.

She might have thought she needed a minute to recover but then he had climbed onto the table and joined her and she reached desperately for his cock, wantonly lifting her hips; he slipped inside her and she cried out again, pulling him against her and wrapping her legs around him.

His stamina is impressive, she thought vaguely, as he lifted her arms over her head and braced himself against them. Top notch endurance, she added as she came a second time, biting down on his lip.

World's greatest athlete, she decided, as he yanked her from the table and shoved her against a wall, settling her legs around his hips and biting into his shoulder this time as she came again, her clit humming in satisfaction from the friction he created.

By the time he jerked against her, sated and exhausted, they were on the floor, panting and sweating and in entirely worse shape than they'd been when they started.

"Well," she said, turning to face him after several minutes of silence. "Your English has really improved."

He, predictably, only gave her a punishingly arousing half smile, reaching for her hand and brushing his lips against it.

She sighed contentedly. "Shower?" she asked, and he leapt to his feet.

World's greatest athlete, she thought again, as he picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: I am laughing at how Dr. Sally writes drabbles for requests whereas I, on the other hand, just write whatever nonsense occurs to me. So here's some pointless Monday smut that I hope you enjoyed.
Theomione tomorrow, promise. And check out Epistles on AO3, wherein Dr. Sally and I spent several weeks writing letters to each other as Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy respectively. It is a treasure. A TREASURE.
Not With a Bang

Due to its darker content, this story has been moved to the story collection *Draught of Living Death* and can be found as Chapter 7: *Not With a Bang*. 
The blonde girl across from Hermione giggled.

"Say it again," she said, her eyes glinting with enthusiasm.

Hermione sighed.

"Water," she said, struggling to keep her tone even.

The three girls across from Hermione collapsed in a fit of tipsy laughter.

"Water!" the blonde girl exclaimed, imitating Hermione's accent. "It's so good. It's so posh. Right?"

She looked eagerly at Hermione. "You say posh, don't you?"

"At times," Hermione permitted, clearing her throat delicately.

"Another word!" one of the other girls cheered, leaning forward. "What about -"

"What about tequila?" Ginny interrupted, finally arriving at their table with her hands filled with shot glasses. "Far better than water, I'm sure."

"True," the blonde proclaimed regally, taking a glass and knocking it back. She winced as it went down, and the other girls followed suit, Ginny included.

"Come on, Hermione," Ginny pleaded, nudging the glass towards her. "Have a drink."

"Drink it, bitch!" the blonde declared, her words starting to slur after the third round.

"Yes," Ginny agreed. "Indeed. Drink it, bitch."

Ginny grinned wolfishly, but Hermione only managed a grimace.

"Last one," she grumbled, picking up the proffered shot.

"Sure!" Ginny agreed, while the other girls giggled conspiratorially.

Hermione lifted the glass to her lips, dreading the all-too-familiar taste of tequila and terrible decisions; she could be studying, after all. It was only a matter of days until the fall semester finals, and she was anxious to go home. A few weeks without being forcibly dragged to bars and clubs
and parties by Ginny and her intolerable sorority sisters would be a welcome change of pace.

Hermione caught a whiff of the alcohol and flinched, her stomach flipping.

"Come on!" Ginny urged again, her brown eyes wide. "Take the shot, Hermione!"

"Take the shot," the blonde chanted, her brunette friend joining in. "Take - the - shot, take - the - shot - "

Hermione rolled her eyes and tossed it back, shivering in disgust as the tequila slithered ungraciously down her throat. She held her hand out for a lime, eyes squeezed shut in revulsion, and felt rather than heard things fall silent around her as the wedge was placed lightly in her palm.

"Here you are," a deep male voice said, and she could hear a smile in his voice.

"Blech," she managed incoherently, shoving the lime wedge in her mouth. "Thanks," she added, the word blocked by the citrus obstruction in her mouth.

"No problem," he returned, and when Hermione finally opened her eyes, she could see the other girls were gaping at him.

"Oh," Hermione said lamely, surveying him. "Hi."

"Hi yourself," he remarked, offering his hand. "Theo."

She took it. "Hermione," she said, licking the lingering acidity from her lips. "We're kind of having a girl's night, though, so if you wouldn't mind - "

"You're a long way from home," Theo commented, interrupting.

Hermione hated to be interrupted.

"I live just on campus," she replied loftily, being intentionally obtuse.

"He meant the accent," the blonde girl interjected.

Hermione glared at her. I know what he meant.

"Accent?" Theo joked. "I hadn't noticed."

Sure you hadn't.

"Like I said," Hermione said smoothly, attempting to brush him off. "It's sort of a girl's night."

"Hen party," Ginny contributed, raising a brow and grinning challengingly. "No cocks allowed."

Theo turned to give her a knowing smirk. "These," he said, stepping aside to gesture to a table nearby, "are my friends. Cocks, if you prefer," he added.

"Oh," Ginny replied, her eyes widening. The other girls seemed to become stiff and silent as well, their gazes falling on the attractive men at the next table.

"One for each, if I'm doing the math right," Theo determined lazily, letting his finger travel over them as though he'd been counting. "And I am," he clarified, grinning. "Harvard and all that."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, taking him in. He was strangely appealing, though not gratuitously
handsome; his narrow build was outfitted nicely in a casual chambray shirt, cuffed to the elbows to feature the lean, muscled construct of his forearms, and he was wearing the hell out of some slim fit gray jeans. He had the distinct look of someone who was always laughing, but in a quiet, somewhat mocking way, as if only he understood the joke.

She irrationally bristled at that. She was Hermione Granger. Surely she would understand the joke. Why was she not also entrusted with it?

"No need to boast," Ginny said pointedly, admonishing him lightly. "We go there too, you know."

"Ah, excellent," Theo declared, his eyes flicking back to Hermione as he took a sip of his beer. "Same sorority?" he asked, gesturing to the letters on the blonde girl's keys.

"We are," the blonde explained, gesturing to herself, the two brunettes, and Ginny.

"Not you?" Theo questioned, raising an eyebrow at Hermione.

She smiled tightly, though it likely debuted as a grimace. "No," she said, reaching over to take a sip of Ginny's beer. She felt she needed to do something with her hands; this Theo person had a somewhat unrelenting stare, and it made her agitated. "Bit of a loner, I suppose."

Theo grinned. "Hey Blaise," he called leisurely, turning over his shoulder. At that, an exceedingly attractive dark-skinned boy stood, making his way toward them. This one - Blaise, or so it seemed - was gratuitously handsome. Hermione felt she should have been charged a fee just for looking.

"Blaise," Theo said again, throwing an arm over his friend's shoulder and gesturing to the girls. "What do you think: sorority, or non-sorority?"

"In terms of general preference?" Blaise asked silkily, a smile curling over his lips. "Sorority, I think."

The other girls cheered, and Theo thumped him on the back. "Why?"

"Devotion to a higher purpose," Blaise declared loftily, and Theo winked at Hermione.

"He means blow jobs," he mouthed, and Hermione stifled a laugh.

At her expression of amusement, Theo smoothly stepped behind him, shifting to stand next to where Hermione was perched atop a high stool. Ginny, who had been momentarily breathless on account of handsome Blaise's proximity to her, caught the motion.

"Careful," Ginny teased, her eyes flashing wickedly as she taunted Theo. "You know English girls just like sex, don't you?"

Hermione blushed and opened her mouth to argue, but Theo was quicker.

"I've got news for you," he cut in smoothly, letting his gaze settle mockingly on Ginny before flicking his eyes back to Hermione. "American boys do too."

Hermione felt her jaw drop slightly, just as Ginny let out a disbelieving laugh.

"Smooth," Ginny commented.

"I've been told," Theo replied, though he didn't take his eyes off Hermione. There was something insistent about his stance now; the pretense was suddenly gone.
You have my attention, he was telling her.

"She doesn't mean it," Hermione said, clearing her throat. "She's just - well." Hermione shrugged. "If you're looking for a hookup, you'll want to turn that way," she finished, gesturing to the other girls, who had wandered over to the table of Theo's friends.

"I'm here for you," Theo said, shrugging. "Whether you're committed to a higher purpose or not," he added, and she felt it again, the sway of silent laughter in his eyes that made her desperately want to latch on, to see the world the way he saw it.

I'm here for you. He was alarmingly direct.

She shifted uncomfortably on her stool. "I'm really not interested," she attempted, taking a quick, deep breath to steady her nerves.

"Aren't you?" Theo countered, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table, his collar gaping just slightly so that she could see the jut of his collarbone under his shirt.

She coughed.

"I'm really not," she said, more convincingly this time. "It's really not convenient timing," she added. "I should really go home and study."

"Three shots in?" Theo asked, surveying the table and calculating the glasses. "Seems unwise, even for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked indignantly. "I seem unwise?"

"You're still talking to me," Theo reminded her, grinning and taking a sip from his beer. "So yeah. I'd say so."

"I'm very wise," Hermione mumbled back, commandeering Ginny's beer once and for all and letting the tip of her tongue linger at the lip of the glass bottle. "Wisest of my age, one might say."

Was she flirting with him? Christ.

He seemed deliciously unswayed.

"You'll want to finish that," Theo advised her, his eyes falling on her lips.

"Why?" Hermione asked, scoffing. "Are you imposing rules?"

"No," Theo replied. "But we'll be leaving soon."

Her heart seemed to flip in her chest.

"We?" she asked, breathless.

"Yes," Theo said, inclining his head slightly. "You and me."

She huffed loudly, crossing one leg over the other and shifting, trying to ignore the heinously unrelenting appeal of this stranger - yes, she reminded herself, this complete and total stranger that you have no obligation to entertain - before her.

"What makes you think I'm going anywhere with you?" she asked, letting her naturally swotty tone bleed into the statement.
"Naturally clairvoyant," he declared cheerily, shrugging. "That, or your curiously dilated pupils," he deduced, squinting at her. "Or the fact that you can't stop looking at me."

He was smiling knowingly at her. Dick.

"I can," she informed him, shifting herself away. "And I will."

"Suit yourself," Theo remarked, though she instantly felt the need to look at him, and was thus infuriated with herself.

She waited for him to wander away - as any normal man might have done upon rejection - but he didn't. Figured.

"Going home for the holiday?" he prompted, and she sighed.

"Why are you still here?" she demanded, turning back to face him.

"I like you," he said. The response came quickly to him. Easily.

"You don't know me," she reminded him.

"No," he corrected. "You don't know me. But I know you."

"That," she remarked carefully, "is an exceedingly creepy thing to say."

He shrugged. "My specialty. Spec-i-ality, as you might say."

She gave him a look of skepticism.

"Seems unlikely," she prodded.

"Eh, you're right," he agreed. "More like there's not too many English girls in my comparative lit class, so yeah, I know you." He eyed her closely. "Though if there are, I've probably been a bit too distracted by you to notice."

She narrowed her eyes; she hadn't yet deduced if he was extremely smooth, or just startlingly honest.

"You're not in that class," she said, though she wasn't sure. It was at eight in the morning, after all, and she made a point not to let her eyes linger from anything other than the distance between the professor's powerpoint, her keyboard, and the lid of her travel mug.

"I am," he said, sighing. "I sit behind you. Regretfully," he added, "as your hair can be quite an obstruction in the early morning."

She smoothed a hand through it, suddenly self-conscious. It was straightened now, in an effort to keep up with Ginny and her friends, but he was right; it was normally an unruly halo of curls in the morning.

"Hey," she said, reddening. "That's -"

"No," he cut in quickly, looking sheepish for the first time in their exchange. "I mean - I like it. It's nice," he explained. "It works for you."
She took another sip of her beer. There was maybe a quarter of the bottle left, she realized, wondering now what she would do when she reached the bottom.

"That's a bit patronizing, don't you think?" she asked. "I haven't told you that your" - she paused, waving a hand over him - "slenderness works for you, or something."

"It does, though, doesn't it?" he chuckled.

It seemed it was nearly impossible to ruffle his feathers, she realized, sighing.

She frowned at him.

"Stop it," she announced.

He smiled beatifically at her. "Stop what?"

"All of it," she said. "This. Game, or whatever."

"Game." He laughed. "You think I have game?"

"Not what I said," she grumbled, but the corners of his eyes were crinkled with silent amusement.

"Listen," he told her, setting his beer down on the table. "I'm not trying to accost you. I'm a feminist," he added, winking at her.

"Ugh, stop - "

"Right, right." He laughed again. "No, seriously. If you're not interested?" He shrugged. "Just say so."

She looked up and met his green eyes, feeling her stomach flip at the earnestness in them.

"If you want me to go," he murmured, letting his eyes flick over her face, "I'll go."

She swallowed, lifting the bottle to her lips to give her a moment of pause.

Fuck.

Empty.

Fuck.

He noticed the state of the bottle when she did, and he seemed to be holding his breath. She, on the other hand, noticed the way his shirt clung entrancingly to the broad angles of his shoulders. He was so striking, and his effortlessness so deliciously appealing.

Fuck.

She set the bottle down on the table, and he exhaled.

"If you want me to go - "

"I want to go with you," she decided, her heart pounding. "Let's - let's go."

A terrible decision, probably. But ah, well.

She generally made so few of them.
Besides, maybe it's not that bad an idea, she thought hazily, tasting the bitter IPA on his tongue and marveling at how easily it gave way to sweetness, lazily pressing her fingers against the jut of his hips as he leaned against his car.

By the time he had her pressed against the door of her apartment, laughing breathlessly in her ear as she fumbled for her keys in her purse, his hand edging up her bare thigh, she was rethinking the whole terrible decision thing altogether.

"This might be the best night I've had all year," she murmured, tripping over the couch as they stumbled inside, his hands deftly unclasping her bra as she sighed against his mouth.

"Hold that thought," he whispered gruffly, spinning her around and kissing the back of her neck. "Roommates?" he prompted, his breath warm as it tickled her ear.

"No," she gasped, fighting a whimper at his hands under her skirt. She felt him smile as he kissed her shoulder and turned her again, lowering himself to his knees and licking his way up her inner thigh, biting down just hard enough that she knew she'd see it in the morning, and she smiled, knowing it would take her back to this moment, when she knew she'd smile again.

By the time she came the first time, biting her lip to keep from screaming his name, she was pretty positive she'd made a reasonably sound investment with her time. By the second time, bracing herself on the headboard as she lifted her hips, moaning this time - a totally reasonable moan, a fluid, controlled yes, Theo, yes - nothing to be ashamed of - she was thoroughly convinced.

Best decision ever.

"Well," Theo said later, catching his breath. "Remind me never to disparage English girls and sex ever again."

She smiled.

"Set an alarm, would you?" Hermione remarked casually, rolling over to face him.

At his telling smirk, she smoothly straddled his hips, leaning over to brush her lips against his ear. "By the way, I've got news for you," she added, and he instinctively gripped her waist at the low murmur of her voice. "American boys are pretty good too."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: UnicornShenanigans! I've owed you this one for longer than I care to admit. Besos, all the besos.
Due to its darker content, this story has been moved to the story collection *Draught of Living Death* and can be found as Chapter 2: *A Hundred Days*. 
"I've got it," James announced, letting his books fall on the table with a loud, resounding bang that echoed through the Great Hall. "We should start a band."

"In," Peter said instantly.

"Great," James chirped, clasping Remus's shoulder. "Moony?"

"A band," Remus echoed skeptically. "For the purpose of . . . ?"

"Prongs's amusement," Sirius said, flipping the page of an intriguing muggle magazine that featured bikini-clad women on motorbikes. "Obviously."

"Naturally, Padfoot is in," James determined for him. "If anyone is meant to be in a band, it's Padfoot."

"Right," Remus agreed. "Otherwise, what has he been collecting leather jackets for?"

"Can't," Sirius drawled lazily, pretending to read. "I'm busy."

"With what?" James snapped petulantly, crossing his arms. "Brooding?"

"Yes," Sirius said, looking pointedly at James as he primly licked his forefinger, making a show of flipping the page.

"It really does exhaust him," Remus noted, smiling in his quietly mocking way.

"Fine, Prongs and I will be in a band," Peter determined. "What shall we call it?"

James sighed. "We can't have a band without Padfoot," he grumbled.

"Or me," Remus said. "I never said I didn't want in."

"Oh, so you do?" James asked, his voice pitching higher as he felt the idea gaining steam.

"Well, no," Remus amended. "But I'd like to participate in the name discussion."

"Thinly Veiled Death Threat," Sirius suggested, propping his feet on the table just as Professor McGonagall made to whoosh past them in her purposeful, hurried way.
"Mr. Black, this is not your personal sitting room," she sniffed, pausing. "Feet on the floor where they belong."

"But Professor, he's exhausted," James said, barely bothering to fight a smug grin at his friend's expense.

McGonagall made a distinctly dubious scoffing sound. "Brooding should not exhaust you, Mr. Black, not when it comes so easily," she said briskly, brushing past them.

Remus chuckled. "Pity she didn't also take stock of your reading material."

"I think she likes me," Sirius said, looking impressed with himself. "And anyway, this has some very stimulating articles," he added, gesturing to a page that contained no text.

"Yes, she practically gave you ten points for breathing," James muttered, rolling his eyes. "And the use of tits are incredibly poignant."

"Did you say thinly veiled death threat earlier?" Remus asked. "As in, you're making one?"


"I like it," Peter declared, unsurprisingly.

James made a faint sound of protestation. "Well, now, wait a minute - "

"Therapeutic Arson," Sirius proposed, flipping another page.

"Ooh," Peter said. "Nice."

"I actually had some thoughts on the matter," James insisted loudly. "And seeing as this was my idea, I should think "

"Unapologetic Erection," Sirius interrupted.

Remus snapped his fingers. "There it is," he determined. "That's the one."

"What!" James exclaimed, rounding on Sirius. "I thought you didn't want to be in the band!"

"I don't," Sirius said. "I want no part of Unapologetic Erection."

"Damn, it's even better in context," Remus commented, nodding his approval.

"Fuck, it really is," James swore under his breath.

"So, perfect, then," Peter said, leaning forward. "Prongs will sing, Padfoot can be on lead guitar - "

"I'm not in the band," Sirius said again, flipping another page.

" - Moony on bass, and I'll do drums," Peter finished. "Sound good?"

"Can you sing?" Sirius asked James.

"He cannot," Remus announced decisively.

James huffed. "I am astounded that you all feel you can treat me thusly," he pronounced emphatically. "I am wounded."
They ignored him.

"Can you play drums, Wormtail?" Remus asked Peter.

"Not yet," Peter replied hopefully. "Bass, Moony?"

"Nope," Remus said, grinning merrily.

"For the holy sake of fuck," Sirius sighed. "Can anyone play any musical instruments?"

They looked at each other.

"New idea," James said, snapping his fingers. "Frisbee team."

"Can't," Sirius said. "Busy."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Yeah, so, these "band names" are actually things I have said in other works (in actual serious contexts) that UnicornShenanigans then repurposed hilariously in her review haikus. She is the best.
Below the Surface

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Below the Surface

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: HBP (Year 6) AU

Rating: T

Summary: Inspired by Little Chmura's art on Tumblr, "Goodbye Below the Surface." You must see this artwork - it is stunning. The prompt for her art was "A goodbye below The Black Lake surface before the battle of Hogwarts. No one ever knew about them, no one ever noticed. Or maybe it happened in a different universe." This is my take on that prompt, based on her art, in a beautiful cycle of fangirling.

I should warn you, parts of this turned out quite sad and dark, and I think that's partially due to the haunting quality of Little Chmura's work. BUT! There is definitely a happy ending.

A goodbye below the Black Lake surface, before the battle of Hogwarts. No one ever knew about them, no one ever noticed. Except me, of course. But then, people really don't care to lend their thoughts to me, do they?

I'm a bit of a romantic, really. I'm sure that will come as a surprise to you - I'm constantly underestimated that way, if I'm being honest - but I am, really, and I'm sure my retelling of their romance will be much more fanciful than it was in reality.

It was probably simple, now that I think about it, that goodbye. That's how they were.

There was probably very little fanfare; she probably fought tears, held her hands behind her back, trying not to reach for him. And he - well. He probably did something similar. He had this way of going cold, you know, when he needed to feel, and I'd be willing to bet he kicked himself for that a thousand times. At least a thousand times.

But with everything that's happened since then, I like to imagine they dove under, you know? Reaching for each other. Begging me to take them then and there rather than separate them - I know; I told you, I'm a romantic, and a narcissistic one, at that - but now that you ask, I don't think that's how it happened.

Hold on. Let me get my bearings.

It's a little difficult to remember, really, after all the things I've seen. It's surprising that I even remember this, honestly, but I took to them, I think. There was something very intriguing about them, about how quietly they fell in love. Like I said - I'm quite certain nobody else ever knew. I appreciate that, you know. Considering all the love stories. Well - you certainly know, don't you? You've heard them all. Written some of them, too. So you know. You understand. A quiet love story has a certain dignity to it, a sense of grace. A beautiful possession between two people, instead of a show laid out on a stage for people to watch and stomp all over. No, I'm quite sure nobody ever knew, and I'm glad of it, difficult as it must have been for them.
Ah, right, I digress. As I was saying - I initially came for Dumbledore. You know him, don't you? Heard of him? Sort of famous, even in these circles. Took a while with him. I thought it'd be fast but that potionmaster of his does some stunning work. You know, normally I would have been quite put out by the interruption - I have a lot of places to be at any given time, obviously, so I didn't appreciate the premature arrival - but I could almost feel that something was happening. Or going to happen.

Yes, I know you'll tell it differently, but let me have a shot, won't you? Just let me tell it, please.

Right. So I came for Dumbledore, it wasn't his time - yet, of course - and then I stuck around for a bit. I like the castle. Not a lot of reasons to visit. Ah, well, I guess I can't say that anymore, can I? Anyway, I like it. Cozy, but also possessing this murky grandeur, don't you think?

I happened to stumble in when she found him. I was gravitating towards him. Sometimes I wonder if he was calling me. Wishing for me, a little bit. Not fully, of course, but there was some sense of hopelessness there, a touch of exhaustion. Some resignation. Okay, a lot of resignation - poor thing. Young still. I see young ones all the time, but they still make me sad. He made me sad, but only for a moment, because then she came in. That's how she found him, bent over a bathroom sink, half calling me, half wishing I didn't exist.

I think she suspected something. She was angry at first. Well, not angry, that's not right - she was accusatory. The little thing was so combative, she was a ball of fight, and then she looked in his eyes and it just -

Time stopped, I swear it.

I know that sounds ridiculous, coming from me, but I choose to cement that in my truths, that time stopped when they looked at each other. She gave him a moment of peace.

He didn't give her anything at all, at first. Not a lot to give, I imagine. People don't usually have much left once I start hanging around; though, again, I was never there for him. It was Dumbledore, but the old bugger really took his time, so I kept tabs on the situation. Not for any particular reason. I think I was rooting for them, a bit. Because like I said, he didn't give her anything at first. Called her by her last name, though I suppose that was a relief from calling her other names. Bad names, though he didn't seem to mean them. I think she noticed when he stopped saying them altogether. She looked at him differently.

She didn't ask for anything from him. She's intriguing. He caught my interest but she's why I stayed. I kept wondering what she saw in him, you know, why she would always look at him across the room, when he wasn't giving her anything - and then I saw the way he looked at her, and I realized he had been giving her something all along.

Himself.

Only it wasn't much, so I didn't notice at first. But she did. She noticed, and she saw him, and I wonder how quickly she loved him. I think she loved him first. Though, I think that might be because she has the greater capacity to love. And anyway, it was a close call.

A very close call, really. Actually, it did cross my mind that maybe he had always loved her. It was always hard to tell with him, since he had that tendency to go cold when he meant to feel. But maybe. Maybe.

I told you it was quiet, and it really, really was. It was just looks at first, just stolen glances. I almost got bored, if I'm being honest. I sort of flitted in and out for a while, checking on
Dumbledore, but I had other places to be, too. A bad sign, that. That I was so busy, I mean. Never a
good sign. Happened with Grindelwald, the first time with Riddle, and then again right around
then. I chart them. Hazards of the job. But there was never anything I could do about it. I'm tasked,
you know, but not particularly gifted. No real power to intervene.

Anyway.

They met in secret, by the lake. She liked the outdoors. He liked to be with her.

The first time it might have been an accident. I don't think they arranged it on purpose. Either that,
or he simply knew she liked that spot. She was sort of predictable. Not as a person, of course, but
she had certain habits. Earl Grey in the afternoons, that sort of thing. Spot by the lake she liked to
go. She liked the outdoors.

They met there in the late afternoon, and it was a little breezy, and she shivered, and he reached out
and touched her wrist. It seemed like an experiment, from my vantage point. Like he was testing
the boundaries of what was or wasn't okay. I wasn't close because he didn't want me there - he
really didn't want me there, though he kept thinking about the possibility I'd show up, which
was irritating. She touched his wrist then, too, and he drew his hand back - that's how I figured it
out about the Mark - but she didn't let him leave, didn't let him go.

Which was fine. He didn't want to. He clearly didn't want to. He kissed her for the first time that
day, slowly, with so much uncertainty. He looked enraptured. Sort of like how people look when
they find religion, like pieces of things that seemed broken were finally making sense. Like people
who look their purpose in the eye and take their first breath of meaning. It struck me as
monumental. But, again, I'm a romantic.

She kissed him back and for her it was like how people look when they do something terrifying for
the first time, like jumping out of those muggle things - airplanes, I think - but then - no, wait, not
that look. No. It was the look after they've done it, when they've survived, when their feet are on
the ground and they press their breathless lips to the blessed earth and they yell that was amazing,
that was the most amazing I've ever felt - you know what I mean? Exhilarated, that's the word.

He was enraptured, she was exhilarated. I can't believe nobody knew. I can't believe nobody else
felt it.

They met there every day, even when it was cold. She's handy with a warming spell. He's not not
handy, but she liked taking care of him, I think, so he let her. I wasn't there every day, but after a
while I sort of relished the idea that they were. They talked, mostly, about everything sometimes,
though sometimes about nothing. Brilliant minds, both of them. Brilliant at evading their feelings,
too - especially him. I wonder if he regretted it.

Maybe not. Maybe he knew she had to go. She made him a lot less selfish over time, so maybe he
understood.

He didn't want her to get close but she did. He only half-heartedly fought it, in the end. In fact, I'm
not sure if he was really fighting it, or if he just didn't know how. When she told him she loved him
I thought he might just faint, just spontaneously disappear into the depths of his worries - because
truly, he could not stop thinking about me - but she held his face in her hands and she looked him
in the eye until he started breathing properly, and then he said it back.

But I heard what they were really saying. I love you, yes, I love you too, but it was really goodbye.
She said it first.
I was surprised at what happened with Dumbledore. His time was getting close but it was sort of a mess; the poor boy, too, that poor Chosen One, he really didn't seem to grasp the situation, which was a real pity. I'm soft, I know, but I never liked that he didn't know the whole story. Felt wrong. I thought she might figure it out, honestly, she was certainly smart enough - but I think they had other things to think about.

And she missed him, she so obviously missed him, and he missed her too, quietly. I can't believe nobody else saw the ache, the melancholy. It shocks me still. It was a long time apart for such a short period together and still they ached.

I wanted to check on them but I was really busy by then, which I did not appreciate. For several reasons, obviously; this really isn't a pleasurable experience for me, I hate the looks on everyone else's faces - or worse, the ones I take while they're alone, with nobody to make the sad faces and say the prayers or whatever it is they do - and Riddle got so bold about it, too. My only consolation was his obsession with me.

Obsessions are unhealthy. I knew he'd slip up.

They were apart. I don't know who had the worst of it. I do know that he begged for me, the day she was tortured in his house. Absolutely begged for me, because he thought I might take her, and he wanted to be the one instead. I was sort of furious with him, though now, in retrospect, I can see that he never quite understood me. He thought Riddle's control over me was quite a bit more unyielding than it was. Feared for his family. For everyone. I'm less angry about it now, though I still wish he'd intervened - but I can see why he didn't. Not happily, of course. But if I'm being fair, knowing what I know about them, I can see why.

She never blamed him. She knew. She always understood him. What he took to be his own cowardice she seemed to see as pragmatism, as caution, and she was astoundingly kind to him. She knew he suffered. He cried for her and I could see her mouth his name even in the depths of her torment, still careful not to say it out loud, so careful to make sure nobody knew, even then. It was dangerous for them. I think that day he really understood how dangerous it was, and something died in him.

I know, an interesting choice of words, coming from me, but it did. I thought I saw a little glimmer of hope extinguish. He gave up so easily without her.

He changed after that; he was always pretty far gone without her but he just broke after that. They were torturing kids at the school, you remember? Horrible. Horrifying. He wouldn't do it, and they punished him for it, and he just took it. They stopped after a while - he was lucky, having the name that he did; they couldn't kill him, couldn't hurt him in a way that would show, and so they eventually left him alone - but for a time, I think that was his penance. I think he wanted to hurt, but then it was worse - it was hopeless when he felt nothing.

She tried to move on. She couldn't.

When she came back to the castle he went straight for their spot by the lake, waited there for a few hours, staring at the sky. I don't know if he expected her to come. I was feeling really uneasy by that point. I could tell something was about to happen elsewhere in the castle, but I stayed to watch him for a bit.

She came, of course. I think that's every love story in a nutshell. That's love, isn't it? I wouldn't know personally, I've only watched from afar. But I'm given to understand that love means you always show up. Someone waits and someone else shows up. Right? Maybe not always, but it seems a common theme.
I wondered if he kicked himself for not rushing into her arms, for not digging his fingers into her skin and her soul and refusing to let go - for not just grabbing hold of her and running, honestly. Really, I half expected him to. He wanted to. He was tired of seeing her in pain, of thinking about her pain. But no.

Like I said earlier, I have two separate recollections of this, their little tryst before the battle. In one version they grabbed hands, jumping into the lake, holding each other under the surface, something really devastatingly beautiful - where the beauty is in the devastation, you know, something you just want to sob over, because it's just too heartbreaking, there's too much feeling. The kind of thing where words could never do it justice, and I'm epically wasting both our time.

I'm not sure if I imagined that, or maybe it happened in a different universe, or if it was just what he wished for and so, by extension, I couldn't unsee it. Or maybe it really did happen, but it was too agonizing to be real, and so I convinced myself it was something else entirely.

Though, truly, the whole thing was too beautiful to be real. The two of them. The world kept telling them it was wrong and they believed what they were told, but still they clung to it quietly by themselves, to their abhorrent truths, and didn't realize the whole time that it was stunning in its imperfections; that they were the perfect broken pieces who made each other whole.

Which is why I think what really happened was they said the words again - *I love you and I will always love you and I will love you until the day I die*, but really it was goodbye, again - and fought all their instincts, two people trying not to fall apart and failing horribly. I never hated Riddle more.

I know that sounds terrible, because I saw the destruction he brought, and they - these two - they were perhaps the least of it. But it wasn't so much *them* as what they represented. They should have just been two people. They should have just been a cocky little swine of a boy and a prim little swot of a girl who fell in love because they made each other better, made each other happy.

But no. No, because of Riddle, they were wrong, they were a gruesome mutilation of what was right, and I hated him for it, for bringing pain to this world that should never have existed. I loathed him in a way I never thought possible, and I've seen evil. Oh, I've seen evil, and felt the pain of what it touches, and still, it was *that moment* when I knew that there was something incurably festering in me. I knew that I was going to hound him mercilessly until he was mine, haunt him until he faced me.

I didn't have long to wait, unsurprisingly.

I really don't know what happened to the two of them while I was watching Riddle. I think by that time I was a little blinded in my fury and couldn't look away. They were - they both narrowly escaped me at one point, I was there for one of his awful friends. The fiendfyre - yes, that one. But again, I was distracted. I was there for Riddle.

I thought they'd run to each other when it was over, when Riddle was finally gone. I was holding my breath. They *didn't*, if you can believe it. I think they thought their goodbye was really goodbye.

Fools. Because like I said, someone always waits, and someone else always shows up.

They both came back to finish school, which says a lot about them, because they hardly needed to. The first day they both gravitated to that spot, and then, because they are fools, they both seemed surprised to see the other.

I stopped watching after that. I was pretty certain they were going to be fine. They'd survived the
worst of it, and I think by then they were either stronger than any of their obstacles, or they were
too exhausted by the whole ordeal to fight it any longer. Funny how different those things are, and
how both could still easily be true. Maybe it really is both. Individually they were exhausted, but
together they were strong.

Oh, look at me! Going soft. Weddings, I tell you. They make me so unbearable. Thanks for coming
to this, by the way. You owe me, of course, for the mess you made with that Three Brothers
nonsense. You made me look like an idiot, and I don't appreciate it at all, so I hope you do better
with this one. Did you get everything?

Oh, hush. Vows.

Ah, that was lovely. I do enjoy that he still calls her by her last name. In his wedding vows, no less.

But look at them. I knew they'd eventually be fine. I'm hardly clairvoyant, but I comfort myself
with some certainties. I have some truths. Love is one of them.

Hm? Oh, yes, sorry. No, I wasn't invited. Funny that. No, I'm here for that one, the portly one over
there. I'll wait until after the reception, but it's his time. Outlived them all, you know. All his
students, even Riddle. I wonder if he thinks about that. He's not the most selfless, you know, that
Slughorn fellow, but he means well. He'll go peacefully, I promise.

No, I don't want you to write his story. I only said he means well, not that he's fodder for the
imagination. It's them I want you to write. Can't you tell?

Why that story? I don't know, Beedle, I like it.

I like it. I'm sentimental. Leave me be.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: For you, Little Chmura, inspired entirely by your work. Now everyone go look at
her art! Littlechmura on tumblr, or see it on my tumblr, olivieblake.
Drunk Epilogue Rewrite

Pairing: Canon pairings (lol sort of, I'm trash)

Universe: Canon

Rating: M for language, loads of swears

Summary: UnicornShenanigans once suggested I could have written a better epilogue than Joanne even if I'd been drunk, so that led to this: me, quite drunk (QUITE drunk), rewriting the epilogue to Harry Potter. I did not change the events, only the wording (this is not an AU or anything). It was live on Tumblr last night, and I'm posting it now because DrSallySparrow said so.

I should warn you: it is mad.

NINETEEN YEARS LATER

(turn the page for drama)

Autumn seemed to arrive suddenly that year.

"Fucking, autumn? What the fuck," said Ginny.

The morning of the first of September was crisp and golden as an apple, which is a weird thing to say considering the Draco apple subtext, but let's not get carried away - and as the little family bobbed across the rumbling road toward the great sooty station instead of fucking BROOMING like Harry suggested in the first place - "better for their lungs, don't you CARE?" "Harry you twat just get in the car" - the fumes of the car exhausts and the breath of pedestrians sparkled like cobwebs in the cold air. Two large cages rattled on top of the laden trolleys the parents were pushing - "OH, SO YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH TO DEMAND BRAND NEW ROBES LIKE I NEVER HAD BUT NOT OLD ENOUGH TO PUSH YOUR OWN TROLLEY" "omg mum please stop shouting" - the owls inside them hooted indignantly, and the redheaded girl - "I'm so sorry," Ginny had cried, "you'll never be able to wear pink properly, or if you do people will mock you mERCILESSLY" "omg mum please stop crying" - trailed tearfully behind her brothers, clutching her father's arm.

"It won't be long, and you'll be going too, and then I'll have loads more sex," Harry told her. "That's the dream, kid."

"Two years," sniffed Lily. "I want to go now!"

"I bet you do, you little shit," Harry said affectionately, patting her head.

The fucking muggle ass commuters stared curiously at the owls as the family wove its way toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Albus's voice drifted back to Harry over the surrounding clamor; his sons had resumed the argument they had started in the car - if they had fucking used any other manner of transport, this would not have been an issue.

"I won't! I won't be in Slytherin!"
"James, you merciless little fuck, shut your gaping pie hole," said Ginny.

"I only said he *might* be, Mother, it's like you never fucking listen," said James, grinning at his younger brother. "I beg your fucking pardon, Mother, seeing as there's nothing wrong with a fucking hypothetical - "

But James caught his mother's eye and fell silent. The five Potters approached the barrier. With a look over his shoulder at his younger brother belying the cocky little shit he was, James took the trolley from his mother and broke into a run. He slammed against the barrier because little shits like that deserve to get smacked in the face once in a while.

Just kidding, he vanished, because *magic*, you fools!

"You'll write to me, won't you?" Albus asked his parents immediately, taking advantage of his brother's absence to be a whiny little shit.

"What the fuck? I thought we were done parenting," Ginny said at a shout, rounding on Harry. "When you talked me into this you said I only had eleven years!"

"Well, fuck if I know," Harry said, shrugging. "I'm an orphan."

"Oh, fuck you, don't play the orphan card right now," Ginny admonished him. "I hate the orphan card!"

"Hello?" said Albus. "Remember me? Your son?"

"Only faintly," Ginny replied, but she sighed dramatically, patting his shoulder. "Fine, we'll write."

"Every day?"

"For the actual sake of fuck," Harry groaned. " Fucking? Why?"

"I'm joking," Albus assured him. "Don't write me every day or I'll get the shit kicked out of me, don't even."

"We wrote to James three times a week last year," said Ginny. "He's a cocky little fucker but he's my favorite."

"Ginny!" Harry exclaimed.

"What?" she squawked. "Oh, is that not okay?"

"Not okay," he said sternly.

"Fuck," she sighed.

"Hello?" said Albus.

"You don't want to believe everything he tells you about Hogwarts," Harry put in. "He likes a laugh, your brother."

"That's why he's mum's favorite," Lily piped in.

"Yes!" Ginny exclaimed. "This little fuck gets it," she added, kissing her daughter soundly.

Side by side, they pushed the second trolley forward, gathering speed, looking like fools. As they
reached the barrier, Albus winced - "oh stop it, you giant baby," Ginny tsked - but no collision came.

"LOL we are wizards!" Harry yelped.

The family emerged onto platform nine and three-quarters, which was obscured by thick white steam that was pouring from the scarlet Hogwarts Express. Indistinct figures were swarming through the mist, into which James - *that little shit*, Ginny thought fondly - had already disappeared.

"Where are they?" asked Albus anxiously.

"Who is they?" Ginny asked. "We know fucking shit tons of they, Albus, we're famous as fuck, don't make us sound like losers."

But the vapor was dense, and it was difficult to make out anybody's faces.

"Hey," Harry said loudly. "Is that Percy discoursing loudly on broomstick regulations?"

"Fucking *duh,*" Ginny replied.

"Let's not say hello," Harry said hurriedly.

"Oh THANK GODRIC I MARRIED YOU," Ginny declared. "To think, I might have ended up with someone who didn't have such BRILLIANT IDEAS - "

"If you sass me one more time I will literally bend you over this bench," Harry informed her curtly.

"Do it, Potter, you haven't got the nerve - "

"MUM!"

"Ah, fuck, there's one more," Ginny sighed, remembering her daughter. "Balls."

She looked up just in time to see a group of four people emerge from the mist, standing alongside the last carriage. Their faces only came into focus when Harry, Ginny, Lily, and Albus had drawn right up to them.

"Hi," said Albus, sounding immensely relieved. "But like - a super platonic hi, because I'm gay as fuck lol."

"I know," Rose said snottily. She was already wearing her brand new Hogwarts robe. "Because I know everything."

"Good girl," Hermione said, offering her a firm handshake.

"Parked all right, then?" Ron asked Harry, forgetting for the fucking *one thousandth time* that Harry is an excellent driver and part muggle. "I did. Hermione didn't believe I could pass a muggle driving test because she has literally no faith in my abilities."

"That's true," Hermione confirmed, looking around. "I don't."

"She thought I'd have to Confund the examiner!" Ron exclaimed.

"No I didn't," Hermione said loudly, but she leaned in to whisper to Harry's ear. "He fucking 100% confounded the examiner," she murmured. "He's sweet, but he's a dumb little fuck," she added
fondly.

"As a matter of fact, I did Confund him," Ron whispered to Harry as Hermione winked, and together they lifted Albus's trunk and owl onto the train. "Because I'm a fucking crafty ass wizard, so fuck examiners."

"Totally," Harry said solemnly, wondering why the fuck his son could not load his own trunk and owl onto the goddamn train.

Back on the platform, they found Lily and Hugo, Rose's younger brother who sometimes didn't exist - entirely dependent on convenience, etc - having an animated discussion about which House they would be sorted into when they finally went to Hogwarts - "And not a moment too soon!" Ginny wailed, completely adrift as to how she'd agreed to three entire children.

"If you're not in Gryffindor, we'll disinherit you," said Ron, "but no pressure."

"Don't listen to him," Hermione said, patting her son's head. "I've got loads of money stowed away." She cast a skeptical glance at her husband. "I mean, who actually thinks this will last?"

"Not me," Hugo ventured.

"True fucking story," Hermione agreed, still looking around vacantly.

Albus and Rose looked solemn.

"Cheer up, you fucks," Ginny said spiritedly, but Ron was no longer paying attention. Catching Harry's eye, he nodded to a point some fifty yards away. The steam, that for some reason the magical train needed - "thanks a lot, you wizarding shits!" shouted the Earth - had thinned for a moment, and three people stood in sharp relief against the shifting mist.

"Look who it is," said Ron.

"I'm fucking looking, Ron," Harry snapped.

Draco fucking Malfoy was standing there with his wife and son, a classy ass dark coat buttoned up to his throat. His hair was FUCKING FANTASTIC which emphasized how STRANGELY ATTRACTIVE he was. The new boy resembled Draco as much as Albus resembled Harry, aka it was the face that launched a thousand fan fictions. Draco caught sight of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny staring at him, nodded curtly like the courtly ass gentleman he was, and turned away again, though he snuck a look over his shoulder to give Hermione a thorough once over.

"So that's little Scorpius," said Ron under his breath, having spent all day researching Draco Malfoy's son so as to recognize him and judge whether his wife was still staring longingly at the other man's ass, which she definitely was. "Make sure you beat him in every test, Rosie. Thank God you inherited your mother's brains."


"Ron, for heaven's sake," Hermione said, stumbling a little as she stared after Draco. "Don't try to turn them against each other before they've even started school!"

She leaned down. "But don't fuck Scorpius," she warned her daughter. "That will make things real weird when I leave your father for Draco."
"Girl, I got you," said Rose, offering her mother a solemn fist bump.

"You're right, sorry," said Ron, "but don't get too friendly with him -"

"Dad, I've fucking got this," Rose snapped. "Look at me. I'm good."

"Hey!"

James reappeared; he had divested himself of his trunk, owl, and trolley - "FUCKING LOOK AT THIS," Harry declared. "One of my sons is capable of independence!" - and was evidently bursting with news.

"Teddy's back there," he said breathlessly, pointing over his shoulder. "He's snogging Victoire!"

"I honestly could not be prouder of that kid," Harry said, nodding. "Victoire. Honestly, top marks. Well done."

James gaped in disbelief. "Our Teddy! Teddy Lupin -"

"We know who he is," Ginny said briskly. "Calm your fucking tits, James, honestly, you're supposed to be my favorite, and French ass Victoire is hot as shit."

"Fuck," James murmured. "You're right."

"Oh, it would be lovely if they got married!" whispered Lily ecstatically. "Teddy would really be part of the family then!"

Ginny threw her hands up. "I can't," she exclaimed, but at Harry's pained expression, she groaned and knelt to talk to her daughter.

"Lily," she said. "Lils. Listen to me. Teddy's got to fuck, like -" she looked up. "What, like four people?"

"Like five, I think," Harry said, nodding.

"Right," Ginny agreed, turning back to Lily. "Like five people before we discuss marriage. Okay?"

"Wait," Lily said. "Does Victoire have to fuck five people too?"

"Have you seen her? She needs to fuck more," Ginny said, sighing. "But lie about it, because #sexism."

"Got it," Lily said, nodding.

"Teddy already comes round for dinner about four times a week," said Harry, and then instantly felt like a massive shit when he remembered Teddy's a fucking orphan. "Why don't we just invite him to live with us and have it done with?"

"Yeah!" said James enthusiastically, because James, a character of fiction, is so good and pure and wonderful and part fucking Weasley, so sure. "I don't mind sharing with Al - Teddy could have my room!"

"NO!" everyone shouted, being totally clear on what a shitshow that would be.

"You and Al will share a room only when I want the house demolished," Harry said firmly, checking his old ass watch. "it's nearly eleven, you'd better fuck off."
"Don't forget to give Neville our love!" Ginny told James as she hugged him.

"Mum! I can't give a professor love!"

"I gave him a hell of a lot more than that," Ginny said wistfully. "I mean, with Harry gone, I gave him probably thirty thousand blow j-"

"OKAY," Harry roared casually, as James rolled his eyes, venting his feelings by aiming a kick at Albus.

"See you later, Al. Watch out for the thestrals," he said, winning a contest with himself to determine what the weakest, least discouraging threat he could concoct might be.

"I thought they were invisible? You said they were invisible!"

"Is it possible we shouldn't have had children?" Ginny asked her husband. "Because I sense they are incurable morons."

"I mean, anything's possible," Harry shrugged. He nudged Hermione. "Hey, are you with us?"

"Fuck you," Hermione whispered, still making eyes at Draco. He, too, was eyeing her hungrily across the platform.

James, though, merely laughed, permitting Ginny to kiss him, giving his father a fleeting hug, and then leaping onto the train.

Albus, the little fucker, still looked nervous, so Harry made a begrudging attempt to console him.

"Thestrals are nothing to worry about, considering I fucking murdered a genocidal maniac," Harry said soothingly. "They're gentle things, not like the shit that nearly killed me a thousand times, so don't get your panties in a twist. Anyway, you'll be going in the boats, and statistically those are much more dangerous. Seriously. Look it up."

"I have," said Rose. "Twice."

"Fuck you," said Ginny.

Ginny kissed Albus goodbye.

"See you at Christmas," she sighed, remembering he would have to come back and she would have to continue to raise him.

"Bye, Al," said Harry, as his son hugged him. "Don't forget to have tea with Hagrid, it's weird as fuck and everyone will judge the hell out of you, but he might carry your fake dead body somewhere someday, so, you know, don't burn bridges. And don't mess with Peeves, he's a real fucker, and don't duel anyone til you've learned how - I'm a dumb twat, been there, just trust me - and don't let James wind you up. Lucky your biggest nemesis is your fucking brother, by the way, right Hermione?"

He nudged her, but she was mouthing something to Draco across the platform.

_Tonight_, he said back, and she bit her lip, smiling.

"Uh," Harry said, but his asshole son interrupted.

"What if I'm in Slytherin?"
The whisper was for his father alone, as Albus knew he'd take shit for years if he said anything to Ginny, resident Cool Girl. Harry, understanding, crouched down so that Albus's face was slightly above his own. Alone of Harry's three children, Albus had inherited his mother's eyes, WHICH WAS A REAL FUCKING SHAME.

"Albus Severus," Harry said quietly, and then laughed again as he remembered what a fucking travesty that name was. "Fuck, I'm sorry - I'm really sorry about your name."

"It's fine," Albus said tersely. "Continue."

"Right," Harry wheezed. "Albus Severus, like a drunk threesome - anyway." He coughed. "You were named for two headmasters of Hogwarts - " he exploded in another peal of laughter. "Hold on," he said, choking on his ill-timed laughter. "It's just - such ludicrous - "

"I'm pretty clear on that," Albus assured him. "Get your shit together."

"Okay so - one of them was a Slytherin -"

Harry doubled over laughing again, and Albus sighed, tapping his foot in impatience.

"Look," Harry managed. "See that shit over there that Aunt Hermione keeps looking at?"

"Yes," Albus said tightly.

"He's a Slytherin," Harry said. "And fucking Gryffindors are shits sometimes, so, really, just fuck it all."

"Really?" Albus remarked skeptically. "That's your advice, father? 'Fuck it all'?"

"This," Harry snapped irritably, "this is why you're not our favorite."

"But -"

"Look," Harry said, letting his head fall back in utter exasperation. "If this shit matters to you, you can choose Gryffindor over Slytherin. It worked for me."

He'd never told any of his children that before, because they were normal human beings who didn't need constant reassurance, but he saw the wonder in Albus's face when he said it. But then the doors were slamming shut on the train, parents were swarming forward for final kisses - "no thanks," huffed Ginny - and last-minute reminders.

Albus jumped into the carriage and Ginny gleefully closed the door behind him.

"Done!" she exclaimed.

"Mum?" Lily asked, looking up at her,

"FUCK," shouted Ginny. "It's like these fuckers are multiplying!"

"Why are they all staring?" demanded Albus, as he and Rose craned around to look at the other students.

"Because," Ginny said sweetly, "they've never seen fuckery quite like a son who won't just go make friends on the god damn train and leave his saintly parents in peace."

"It's me," Ron said, in his best line ever. "I'm extremely famous."
Rose laughed, "Oh Dad," she cooed. "You epic twat."

"I know," Hermione agreed, smiling at her daughter. "Find someone who makes more sense, okay?"

"I will," Rose chirped.

"And not - "

"Not Scorpius," Rose repeated. "I've got it, Mum."

"I mean, be friends," Hermione suggested.

"Mum. I've got this," Rose said coolly, winking at Theodore Nott's son.

"God, I love that bitch," Hermione sighed.

The train began to move, and Harry walked alongside it, watching his son's thin face, already ablaze with excitement. Harry kept smiling and waving, even though it was like a little bereavement, watching his son glide away from him …

"Ah, that little shit," Harry said affectionately. "I bet he's going to fuck shit up real soon."

"Oh, no doubt," Ginny agreed, leaning against his shoulder. "Hey," she added. "Want to fuck in the backseat?"

"Lily," he reminded her, his gaze flicking down to their daughter.

"Ah, fuck me," Ginny sighed.

As Harry looked at her, he lowered his head absentmindedly and touched the lightning scar on his forehead.

The scar had not pained him for nineteen years.

"Ron," Hermione murmured. "I'm fucking Draco."

All was well.

a/n: I also apparently wrote this for clausumcormeum while still drunk -

"Hi," Hermione said, practically at a whisper as she inadvertently edged up to Draco, the two of them colliding on the platform as she made to follow Ron.

"Hi yourself," he said curtly, though he seemed a certain level of breathless himself. They were trapped together, forcibly lodged by the madding crowd, and she found herself distracted, forgetting everything about her life except the sound of his voice in her ear.

"I know you said tonight," she murmured, wondering what had come over her. "But if you could just - "

She cut off in a gasp, the remainder of the sentence - whatever it was, or would have been - vanishing against his lips as he pulled her behind a pillar, pressing her against it.

"I'm free now," he suggested casually, his hand nudging aside her collar, resting on her heart.
"You're killing me," she groaned, feeling the stinging truth of the statement.

He nudged her legs apart. "Just wait," he murmured, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

So yeah, I'm Dramione garbage, nothing's new.
Reunion, Part I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Reunion

Pairing: See description

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: M for language, high probability of future sexual scenes

Summary: Hogwarts Class of 1998 meets up for their five year reunion, but is all as well as it seems?

Originally requested by clausumcormeum. Pairings and plotlines inspired by songs submitted on Tumblr:

Pottgood (Harry x Luna) - "11:11" - Arkells / "Jinx" - DNCE
Blinny (Blaise x Ginny) - "Maps" - Maroon 5 / "Goodbye Forever" - Us The Duo
Dramione (Draco x Hermione) - "This is What You Came For" - Calvin Harris ft. Rihanna / "Pompeii" - Bastille
Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne) - "I Found" - Amber Run / "Sky Full of Stars" - Coldplay
Ronsy (Ron x Pansy) - "Is There Somewhere" - Halsey / "Glad You Came" - The Wanted

Luna lay her fingers lightly on Neville's arm, letting her eyes stray to the portraits that lined the walls of the recently renovated castle. She could tell he was tense - she had attempted to soothe his nerves about seeing Hannah Abbott again for the first time in five years with a lively discussion of Gaulish objets d'art, but to her bafflement, he seemed disinclined to comment - and she drummed her fingers gently on his forearm, attempting to be soothing.

"This will be fun," she promised him brightly, though he barely spared her a glance.

No matter, she thought to herself, humming in contentment. It was nice enough to have been invited, considering this wasn't her class. After all, despite her position as a disposable distraction, at least Neville's insecurity meant that she would be able to see -

"Harry," Neville called jubilantly, and Luna felt a slow smile melt across her face as she saw him approaching.

"Hi Neville," Harry said pleasantly, and then his eyes lit up as he spotted her. "Luna!"

"Hi Harry," she said softly, her smile faltering slightly as she noticed Ginny looking around nervously beside him. There was a strange energy between the two of them, Luna noted; despite the way Ginny's hand was clamped firmly around Harry's arm, they seemed to be pulling away from each other.

Luna had heard about this; tangled auras.

Likely nargles.
"Luna," Ginny permitted, though she was stiff and tense as she moved to offer a hug; Luna frowned momentarily as she watched Harry's posture relax a fraction of a degree in response to his girlfriend's absence.

*Unusual,* she thought, though she quickly brushed the feeling aside.

"Hello, Ginny," Luna said cheerfully, glancing up over the redhead witch's shoulder in time to catch the couple who had arrived in their wake.

Ron and Hermione followed closely behind Harry and Ginny, and if the other two were being held hostage by the effects of a nargle infestation, Ron and Hermione had surely been visited by exploding snabberwitches. Unlike the first couple, Ron and Hermione were very determinedly not touching; Hermione's arms were crossed tightly over her chest, her beautifully made up face pulled into a devastatingly flimsy mask of polite buoyancy, and Ron was scowling, his shoulders hunched over in poorly disguised fury.

Luna sighed sadly. Hermione in particular was prone to bouts of malaligned humours - *rather like a kodama who'd been cut down,* Luna thought whimsically, watching as the lovely Gryffindor reached over to give Neville a somewhat unenthusiastic hug - and Ron, whose agitation attracted swarms of blibbering humdingers, was not always the most complementary spirit for hers.

Everything was so out of place, Luna realized, trying to identify the strange, booming echo of discontentment that seemed to emanate from everyone; for as much as they insisted they were happy - "*so lovely to see you!* "*so glad you could come!*" - they seemed, quite obviously, to be lying.

Suddenly, it dawned on her; she was being quite rude. It seemed that once again, they were all just waiting for her to set them at ease; *like usual, of course,* she realized, laughing at herself for her own obtuseness.

"Oh," Luna remarked, tilting her head appealingly and offering her friends a warm, reassuring smile. "When did you all break up?"

There was a loud crash behind them and Luna and the others whipped around, catching sight of Blaise Zabini and Draco Malfoy, who were standing nearby; Draco had dropped his glass and was reddening slightly at the chaos he'd prompted, while Blaise, in contrast, had let his lips curl into a wide grin of merciless satisfaction.

"Apologies," Draco mumbled, inclining his head as he quickly dropped his gaze to the floor.

"Well," Luna heard Blaise murmur to Draco. "Let the games begin."

Ginny grabbed Hermione's arm and forcibly dragged her into the Great Hall, desperate to get away from the situation. She knew Harry was going to look around sheepishly, doing his *Harry Potter - who me? Boy Who Lived? Aw, shucks* - amiable, oblivious, *totally infuriating* shifting from foot to foot that would make her want to slap him, and having already been found out that she didn't even belong there, she was going to have to mend the situation immediately with a drink. She paid no attention to the decorations or the beautiful enchantment of the ceiling, which Luna began chattering behind her was intended on this evening to look like the Northern Lights; she was desperate to get away, and nothing - *nothing* - was going to stop her.

"Come on," she growled to Hermione, careful not to look at where she knew Blaise was watching her, still smirking wickedly from where he, Draco, and now Theodore Nott had clustered,
conveniently permitting them a front row seat for the *Luna Sees Too Bloody Much For Her Own Good* show.

"I'm coming," Hermione sighed as she stumbled along after her, tripping slightly over her gown as she was dragged in Ginny's wake. "Luna *would* say something like that out loud," she added, muttering under her breath.

"Is she right?" Ginny asked, grabbing a glass of elf-wine from a tray levitating around the room and taking a huge swallow before passing one to Hermione, who sighed again. "Did you and Ron break up?"

"Two weeks ago," Hermione admitted tightly, her eyes flicking around nervously as she took a sip of her wine. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she added, grimacing.

"Don't be," Ginny muttered, knocking back another solid gulp. "I didn't tell you, either."

"So she's right?" Hermione asked faintly. "You and Harry - "

"It's done this time. For real," Ginny said, grimacing. "The first two breakups were just practice," she added, trying to smile jokingly. She could see that she had failed tragically in that endeavor when Hermione made a terrible face of pity, prompting Ginny to reach for another glass, scowling. "You don't have to look at me like that, Hermione."

"I - I'm not," the other woman said hesitantly, but at Ginny's searching glare, she bit her lip, nodding. "Right. Sorry."

"I should have hidden it better," Ginny mumbled weakly, beginning to feel the thud of pain in her chest, the tightening that reminded her *they'd broken up, for real this time, it's over*, and Hermione touched the inside of her wrist.

"Hey," she said softly. "What happened? Last I heard - "

"We were doing better?" Ginny supplied grimly. "We've been lying about it for a while." She took another sip of wine. "It was over between us about two months ago, if we're being honest."

"Oh," Hermione said sadly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Ginny snapped, catching sight of Blaise's handsome face as he laughed, the familiar, musical sound carrying through the hall and reaching her ears, a blessed reprieve from the noise of her disjointed life.

If only she didn't thoroughly hate him.

If only she could stop thinking about him.

If only she'd never fucked him to begin with.

"Don't be sorry," Ginny said again, making the effort to soften her edges as she reached out to grip Hermione's hand; surely she would need a friend tonight. "Just be here with me."

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Draco tried desperately not to look at where Granger and the she-Weasley were standing in a corner of the Great Hall, sipping wine and glorifying in their obvious tension; but naturally, he failed quite spectacularly. Granger, who avoided most of the Ministry galas that he'd hoped to see her at, was wearing a long ivory gown with a sheer gold overlay, and it was as dainty and soft as it
was regal and stunning, and it was agonizingly difficult to look away.

"Draco," Theo said, snapping his fingers in front of his face. "Are you with us?"

"Yes," Draco said coolly, twitching his shoulders as though he might rid himself of his fascination with Hermione Granger, the witch who happened to need his signature once or twice a week - nothing more, nothing less - if he could only physically shake the thought of her.

"If you stare that hard, she might catch fire," Theo warned, and Draco gave him a sharp, indignant glare, frowning.

"I'm not - "

"Whatever," Theo interjected, waving his hand carelessly to indicate his disinterest. "Far be it from me to comment." Blaise, on his right, gave an irritingly knowing laugh.

"Excuse me - Theodore?"

The three of them pivoted abruptly at the soft, feminine interruption to find a pretty Ravenclaw whose name Draco didn't remember - and at a glance from the other two, he could see that neither did Theo and Blaise - who was excitedly pulling something out of her purse.

"Call me Theo," the dark haired wizard corrected her, a grin spreading across his face. "Theodore was my brute of a father."

"Right," she said faintly, then blinked, remembering what she was there for. "Could you sign this?" she asked, and Draco suppressed a groan as she produced a copy of Theo's book, A Sky Full of Stars.

"Not this again," Draco muttered under his breath, and Blaise let out another artful laugh.

"Of course," Theo assured her merrily, pulling a quill from the inner pocket of his dress robes - "of course he has one ready," Blaise murmured to Draco, who snickered - and taking the book from her. "Who is it for?"

"Well, there's one for me," she said, blushing, "and if you have time, I have another, for my sister - "

"Of course I have time," Theo informed her, and she looked as though she might fall headfirst into his arms; Draco made a face, and Blaise took hold of his arm, leading him to a tray of wine glasses.

"Here," Blaise said, handing him one. "To replace the one that broke under the weight of you learning that a certain Gryffindor princess is now available for the taking."

"Don't know what you're talking about," Draco mumbled, smoothing his hair back self-consciously. "I'm only here because you forced me. And Pansy," he added, looking around and wondering where she'd gotten to.

"Relax," Blaise said smoothly. "I'm not here to judge." Draco watched the other man's dark eyes settle hungrily on Weasley where she stood with Granger, his glance subtly flicking over the redhead witch's form under her long navy gown. "I'm certainly not here to judge," he repeated, and Draco took a silent sip of wine, resolute in his lack of comment.

Theo wandered over to them, still grinning as he reached out to take a glass of wine. "Sorry about that," he offered, shrugging. "Occupational hazard."
"Still can't believe you did so well," Blaise commented, smirking. "Bestseller twenty weeks running, isn't it?"

"It is," Theo confirmed, giving him a curt nod and barely hiding a look of supreme self-satisfaction.

Draco knew this, of course; Theo was his best friend, after all. This wasn't the first time he'd seen Theo get inundated with requests for autographs - or get stopped to listen to someone's immense emotional connection to his work - and it certainly wouldn't be the last, so it was easy enough to drift away from the conversation.

He tuned the other two out, his eyes traveling hopelessly to Granger - to the cut of the fabric against her waist, the light glinting off her gown; the pinkness of her tongue where it slid momentarily against her lip, the strike of lightning in her stance; the glimmer of gold in her eyes as they traveled across the room to settle on his -

At the inadvertent eye contact he ducked his head quickly, carefully eyeing the floor; but curiosity got the better of him, and he looked up again, his heart pounding in his chest.

He couldn't take his eyes off her, and he was sure it would be a problem all night; worse, he could tell he wasn't the only one. Nearly every set of eyes in the room had fallen on her, or on Weaslette beside her, ever since the moment that Loony Lovegood had made the bizarre announcement that she, Granger - beloved war heroine, entitled know-it-all, famous counterpart to Auror Weasley and one half of the Wizarding World's premiere golden couple - was finally single.

Draco couldn't take his eyes off her, the witch who came into his office once or twice a week needing his signature. Nothing more, nothing less, he reminded himself, repeating it like a mantra. He was looking at her, yes; so was everyone else, so he could hardly be blamed.

But she -

This was the thing.

She was looking at him.

"Well, fuck," Ron declared, shrugging as he and Harry parted ways with Neville and strode into the hall. "That went well."

"I guess we shouldn't be surprised," Harry said, grimacing. "Ginny and I fought on the way over."

"So did we," Ron sighed.

He and Hermione always used to fight. It was a constant in their youth, and for a time it was adorable; at first it was playful and it was banter and it was oh, look at them, young love! - until one day it was exhausting. And then it was mean. And then it was sharp and hostile and barbed with real, festering anger, until it progressed and became something somehow worse - because then it was dull, and it was tiresome, and it was making them thoroughly miserable.

The argument on the way over was a perfect example. It was about nothing, and there was no heat to it, no real effort. Just a constant shoving of one strong will against the other, until they both wished the other would just -

- fucking leave.

"Maybe Luna did us a favor," Ron admitted glumly, trying to shake the thought from his tired
Harry shrugged. "I guess," he said.

Ron surveyed the remainder of the population in the hall as he reached for a glass of wine, handing one to Harry and then taking one for himself. There had been a violent explosion of whispers at Luna’s announcement of their respective relationship states, and now he could see that people were staring, which for a moment made him want to throw drinks in all their faces and take off at a run.

It was only upon second glance, though, that he realized they were not looking at him with scorn or derision; in fact, of the many eyes that met his, they all seemed to be glinting with the same greedy interest.

"Harry," Ron whispered, nudging him in the ribs. "What are the chances that we are desirable to the general public?"

"Slim to none," Harry determined instantly, frowning. "Right? We are fools," he said bluntly, taking a long drink from his glass.

"Right, right," Ron agreed, nodding. "But - and hear me out - what if they don't know we are fools?"

Harry looked up at that, his green eyes narrowed slightly as he paused to survey the room.

"Is it just me," Harry ventured carefully, "or are there quite a lot of women staring?"

Upon Harry's observation, Ron let his gaze travel slowly around the room. He quickly caught the eye of Padma Patil, who emitted a tiny, exhilarated squeak and quickly averted her eyes, cheeks flushed as she turned to whisper to her companions; upon receiving the same response from Susan Bones, he nodded with a renewed surge of certainty.

"Well done, Harry," Ron concluded, clapping his best friend firmly on the back. "It looks like Luna definitely did do us a favor."

"What does that mean?" asked Harry, still seemingly unaffected by what Ron had so cleverly established.

"It means," Ron said, throwing an arm over Harry's shoulder, "that we, my friend, are about to have a very interesting evening."

"Hey," Pansy said, casually clipping Theo with her elbow to open their circle to her and Daphne. "Sorry we're late."

"As long as you're here," Draco said gruffly. "Otherwise, I don't see the point in me being here."

"Oh, really?" Theo drawled, pointedly lifting an eyebrow. "You don't see any point to - "

"You missed it," Blaise interrupted, his tongue flicking over his teeth as he smiled mischievously at Pansy. "Lovegood just made a delightful announcement."

"Which was?" Pansy prompted, already bored.

She wasn't sure why she had been so set on coming to this. Well, fuck, that was a lie, she reminded herself, fighting a twinge of impatience with her own inability to face facts.
Fact one: Pansy's stock had fallen considerably since the war.

Fact two: nobody had any interest in a girl whose family had lost its fortune to reparations, lost its good name to their own unwise alliances, and lost its bargaining power when the other two things flew out the window.

Fact three: her last hope for not ending up tragically alone was probably standing somewhere in this godforsaken hall.

"That the war's favorite Gryffindors have all been romantically splintered," Blaise said gleefully, interrupting her thoughts as she fidgeted under the weight of them. "Potter and Gin-" he coughed. "Potter and Weasley broke up, and so did Weasley and Granger."

Pansy felt Daphne stiffen beside her. "Potter's available?" Daphne asked, biting her lip.

"So are we, Greengrass," Theo drawled. "So thoughtless of you not to have noticed."

"When did they break up?" Pansy asked, frowning. Her mind was already beginning to tick with possibilities; Potter and Weasley were both the perfect option for renewing her fallen social status. Even dating for a short time would put her back in the public's good graces - especially if it were Potter.

"Don't know," Blaise admitted, and Draco shook his head to indicate his agreement.

"No idea," he said, and Pansy narrowed her eyes, watching his gaze travel over her shoulder to where she'd already ascertained Granger was standing.

Pansy had already noted that the frizziest Gryffindor had once again managed to pull something respectable together a la Yule Ball of their fourth year, which was always a bit jarring. Pansy had to assume that the mousy brunette's appeal lay embedded in her shock value; surely Pansy, with her smooth, raven hair pulled back into an elegant french twist, was objectively the more striking between the two of them, wasn't she?

Unfortunately, Granger always wielded the element of surprise, and it was so annoyingly Draco's style to be blindly captivated by it. Even the she-Weasley looked better, Pansy noted, feeling a twinge of envy at the girl's attractive navy dress, which was cut perfectly for her figure; and then, of course, there was Daphne, exquisite in her dainty blue gown that seemed to whisper intimately around her curves, which Pansy could admit - begrudgingly, of course, but she could still admit it - made her easily the most beautiful girl in the room.

So yeah, Pansy thought, bristling. It wasn't like Granger was anything special, however good she looked.

Or, Pansy noted with a grimace, however much she was letting her gaze flick repeatedly back to Draco.

"Damn it," Pansy seethed, letting out a hiss of infuriated impatience between clenched teeth as Daphne roughly yanked her aside. "What?"

"Pans," Daphne begged, smoothing her skirt and pleading desperately with her wide hazel eyes. "You have to help me."

"You look fine," Pansy said instantly, a reflex born of lifelong friendship. "You look beautiful."

"No - not that," Daphne said, making a face as she brushed the statement aside. "No, Pans - I - " she
paused. "It's just that - "

"Spit it out, Daph," Pansy sniffed.

Daphne sighed, fidgeting with the delicate beading on her bodice. "Potter," she whispered. "Harry Potter is available, Pansy, this could be - " she stopped, hesitating again. "This could be huge for me - "

They were in the same boat; Pansy couldn't be more sympathetic. Daphne had Astoria to think of - her own marriage would invariably help make her sister more valuable - and despite the brief moment Pansy had had of thinking to snag Potter for herself, she instantly softened, recognizing Daphne's need was greater.

"I don't see what I could do for you that you aren't already accomplishing on your own," Pansy pointed out, gesturing to the inviting curves that were heightened by Daphne's gown.

Daphne blushed. "Thanks," she mumbled, "but I'm still going to need to get him . . . alone."

A loud, clanging surge of revulsion went off in Pansy's head as she sorted out the implication and looked up in alarm, seeking out Potter amidst the crowd. He stood alone with one other figure, precisely as she'd feared; a tall, lanky, redheaded -

"No," Pansy said instantly, recognizing Weasley's loping stance and shaking her head. "Absolutely not - "

"War hero," Daphne reminded her, her tone bordering on pleading. "War hero, beloved by the public, unattached for the first time in five years - he could really turn things around, Pans - "

"It's Weasley," Pansy hissed, staring after him. "He's just so - "

She'd initially paused because she couldn't pick a word - she was waffling between prattish and gangly and lame - but then felt her priorities shift abruptly as she caught a shared glance between Weasley and Granger; it was a look of such open detest that Pansy, from a distance, delighted in the candor of it.

"Well," she said, cutting herself off mid-protest. "Who knows. Maybe his taste has finally improved."

"What do you think they're talking about?" Theo asked, frowning over at where Daphne had pulled Pansy aside.

Blaise took another sip of his wine, his eyes casually flicking over to where Ginny stood talking to Granger, having a similar secret female conversation. "No idea," he murmured, catching the minute stiffening of Ginny's shoulders as she caught his eyes on her.

He knew her mannerisms. He knew he was making her uncomfortable.

And he reveled in it.

"Seems weird, doesn't it?" Theo asked, his brows knitted together in his lofty, refined confusion. "That you'd bring up Potter and Weasley and then she'd - "

"Theodore?"

Susan Bones had approached them in her quiet way and Blaise laughed a little to himself as Draco
made a small cough of frustration.

"Not used to someone else being the center of attention, are you?" Blaise muttered in his ear, grinning as he elbowed Draco's ribs.

"I'm fine," Draco replied tightly, watching as Theo carefully dragged his attention away from Daphne to smile and sign Susan's copy of his book. "It's fine."

"You can admit that it's tiresome," Blaise pointed out, taking another sip. "Theo does all the time."

"Of course he can admit that," Draco groaned. "A loner all his life and now it's like everybody wants to suck his -"

"Not everyone," Theo reminded him curtly, a slight scowl coming over his face as he returned to their side, watching as Daphne and Pansy seemed to whisper ever more intently, both girls deeply unsubtle in their blatant ogling of Potter and Weasley.

"You'd think all this fame would do something for your confidence," Draco reminded him, giving him a patented Malfoy smirk that Blaise knew to be equal parts affection and derision. "Maybe you'll finally abandon this very careful dance you've had going for, I don't know, both your entire lives -"

"I play a long game," Theo said loudly, making a show of tipping his glass against Draco's and then taking a sip. "Some things are complicated, Draco. Some things take time."

"They certainly do," Blaise agreed, seeking out Ginny in the crowd. She was stunning, of course, as always; the dress itself was understated, but that only meant that she, with her gilded copper hair and her flawless, creamy skin, could not be outdone by something as foolish as fabric.

He missed her, of course; had been waiting impatiently for her to come back to her senses, to come back to him; to realize that the times she'd come to him had not been weakness, they'd been fate, and it was going back to Potter each time that had been the error. He'd been patient, hadn't he? And selfless? Given her space? Difficult, of course; exceedingly difficult, as Blaise was a man who knew what he wanted. And fuck him if it wasn't Ginevra Weasley.

And fuck her if she thought he would forget.

She turned her back on him resolutely, but he saw the flush in her cheeks and knew she was remembering what it felt like to have him pressed against her, his lips on her neck, his teeth sinking into her shoulder. And if she wasn't thinking about that - which she definitely was - then she wouldn't be able to stop thinking about the rest of the night in his arms, her fears bared for him with her lips against his pillow, her thoughts floating in the air between them, her desires kept safe in his bed.

_Harry's the one_, she'd said stubbornly, _I'm sure he is, he has to be, or else why would I -? Why would he have -? But sometimes, sometimes, I swear -_

Blaise had said nothing, done nothing but kiss her, and she'd kissed him back and he'd been waiting for this day, when what he knew - what he'd known since that first night - would finally catch up with her: that she was never meant for Harry Potter.

No. Blaise was a man who knew things; and fuck him if he didn't know Ginevra Weasley belonged to him.

"Excuse me," he rumbled primly, handing his glass to Draco, who looked bewildered at being used
"So you'll do it?" Daphne whispered excitedly, gripping Pansy's wrist. "You'll help?"

"Yes, yes, fine," Pansy said, rolling her eyes. "Fine. I will take Weasley," she conceded, her face contorting into a vaguely repulsed grimace.

"Maybe practice not making that face when you say his name?" Daphne offered, fighting a laugh. "Just a thought."

"Full of demands tonight, aren't you?" Pansy said, offering her a wicked smirk. "You're lucky you're my only friend, Daph, or I'd be forced to murder you if this goes badly."

"You wouldn't," Daphne reminded her, letting her hand slip to take hold of her best friend's slender fingers. "You adore me."

"That, or you've drugged me," Pansy agreed, and Daphne felt a thrill of excitement run up her spine, reminded of the prospects of the evening.

"It'll be just like it was at school," Daphne whispered gleefully. "Back when we were still - "

"- worth something?" Pansy supplied grimly.

"Oh, don't be sulky," Daphne chided her, fondly tapping her nose. "This'll be fun. We used to be great at this."

"Used to being the operative term," Pansy returned.

But Daphne would not let Pansy's cynicism get to her; not tonight. It had been ages since she'd gotten to dress up again - there weren't exactly grand parties anymore; or at least, if there were, she wasn't invited to them - and she was marvelling in her own beauty, in all her youthful charisma, and what she knew had once been her unfailing charm.

You should be married by now, her mother regularly lamented, always making a show of her fall from grace. There should be men banging down our door. That blasted war.

War's over, Mother, Daphne would say, trying to be helpful. It's a better world.

She had a job, after all; she wasn't destitute. She was doing fine. She was providing for her family; her father had passed away at the end of the war and her mother had never worked a day in her life, so that left Daphne, and she'd risen to the challenge.

It's a better world, Mother.

Not for you, her mother would wail. Prospects dried up, nobody for you, nobody for Astoria - who will take care of Astoria?

Astoria, her mother's darling. Daphne's darling too, really, for all her lively wit and humor; but primarily the pride and joy and undeniable mirror image of their mother.

I will, Daphne sighed, catching her sister's form as she ducked out of sight, pretending not to be eavesdropping.

And she did. She got by on her own, much as her mother hated it. She had started working as an interior designer when Narcissa Malfoy had required what she called "a tastefully trained eye" for
the renovation of Malfoy Manor, affording Daphne the opportunity to make a living from it; thankfully - and tactfully - gracing her with a means by which to support her family. Not that it had done much for her prospects, as her mother repeatedly reminded her; as much as pureblood families needed a designer with her impeccable taste, they also judged her harshly for it. As they reluctantly dropped their galleons in her hands, she knew they were also crossing her name off their lists for their sons - and Astoria’s, too.

So in the end, beautiful Daphne Greengrass, for all her lovely features and her admirable birth and her bloody impeccable taste, had run herself right out of prospects.

She stiffened momentarily at the thought, but suppressed it; if this was her last chance, then she was going down swinging. Harry Potter, she reminded herself. Auror Potter, the Boy Who Lived; the Chosen One.

She warmed at the thought. Let them sneer at Daphne Potter, she thought, picturing their faces. Let them try.

"Come on," Daphne said, artfully brightening her face with a coquettish smile and pulling Pansy along behind her. "Let's do this before anyone else has the same idea."

Theo held back a laugh at the look on Draco's face as Blaise took off, straightening his tie and proceeding straight for the table with Granger and Weasley. "Where did he - "

"Has business to attend to, it seems," Theo noted, though the smile on his face quickly vanished as he watched Pansy and Daphne proceed in the opposite direction, taking a direct route to where Potter and Weasley were standing in the corner.

"Ah," Draco mused, catching the sullen look on Theo's face. "Suddenly not so funny, is it?"

Theo swallowed, his throat suddenly quite dry. "No," he murmured, watching Daphne adjust her bodice - "How are they?" she mouthed to Pansy, gesturing to her cleavage; Perfect, Theo imagined assuring her, vehemently wanting to die - and confidently moving to tap Potter on the shoulder.

"You could try saying something," Draco suggested. "You know. In case the many years of hoping she'd learn mind reading is becoming tiresome."

"You're becoming tiresome," Theo snapped, seeing Potter's eyes widen as he took in the concept that Daphne Greengrass, goddess among women, had actually - willingly, consciously, and, as unhappily as Theo found it to acknowledge, enthusiastically - chosen to speak to him.

Theo, perversely, was happy to see that Potter was at least aware of the magnitude of the situation, though his desire to see Potter burst into flames was at least equally as intense.

"I love when you get frustrated," Draco remarked, smirking. "You become infinitely less clever, and it really evens the playing field."

"Shut up," Theo snapped testily, as Daphne let out a dainty, melodic laugh at whatever inanity Potter had supplied her with.

Maybe I should laugh too, Theo thought moodyly, his entire countenance darkening at the hilarious concept that he might now lose Daphne, whom he had lost time after time to a variety of pureblood heirs, over and over throughout their schooling. Hysterical, really, that the night he thought he'd finally get his chance, she'd be running straight for Potter, who wouldn't have been fit to tie her shoes while they were in school and certainly wasn't fit to now. Fuck, the hilarity of it!
"Does she know about the book?" Draco asked.

Ah, and to add to the comedy - *the fucking book*. The one that every other woman in the castle - McGonagall included, though she'd been much quieter about it, choosing to send him a highly discreet owl of congratulations and a *light suggestion* that he send her a signed copy - couldn't stop shoving in his face, begging for his attention. *That* fucking book? The one he'd spent the last two years writing, the one he'd achieved sudden acclaim for, after so much obscurity? That was hailed all over the Wizarding World as the finest literary work in a generation? That was lauded for its brilliance, praised for its poignancy, worshipped for its craftsmanship?

"I don't think she read it," Theo muttered.

*Fucking hysterical, wasn't it?*

Absolutely, without a doubt, the most uproariously funny, the most riotously, heartwrenchingly entertaining joke he'd ever had the displeasure of experiencing.

It was so funny he could sob.

"Well," Draco broached tentatively, vacationing from his usual smug arseholery to comfortingly grip Theo's shoulder, "I'm sure that if she - "

Theo tuned him out, feeling his chest burn at the way Daphne's delicate fingers rested gently on Potter's forearm.

"You know what?" Theo said suddenly, squaring his shoulders and clenching his vacant fist, "I think I have to go do something."

He shoved his glass against Draco's chest and took off; certain, for once, that he was *not* going to be the punchline of this joke.

Hermione nudged Ginny, feeling her face shift in confusion at the oncoming Blaise Zabini, who was approaching them in the most purposeful way she had ever witnessed a man walk.

"Hey," Hermione murmured, gesturing over Ginny's shoulder, "is there a reason that - "

"Good evening, Ginevra," Zabini said coolly, coming to rest between them.

Hermione was not fantastic with gauging social interactions, but even she could tell there was something to this one; the low, languid cadence of Ginny's name on Zabini's lips was startlingly intimate, and Hermione suffered a distinctly uneasy feeling at the sound.

"Blaise," Ginny said stiffly, the muscles tense around her jaw.

"How are you?" Zabini asked, and despite the innocuous content of the conversation, Hermione couldn't help feeling incredibly nonsensical and awkward - as if she were sitting between them during late night pillow talk instead of at a very public event, in a *very* crowded hall.

"Don't," Ginny warned, her eyes flashing, and Hermione hesitantly took a step back.

"Um," she ventured, "I'll just - "

"Don't what?" Zabini asked, his voice husky and warm as he stepped closer to Ginny. Hermione instinctively took several steps back, resolving to find another glass of wine, or several glasses of wine, or someone else entirely.
In her haste to escape, she knocked directly into Theodore Nott, who seemed intent on reaching someone else across the room. "Sorry," she said quickly, but he had already taken hold of her shoulders and nudged her gently aside, striding past her without stopping.

"Okay then," she said quietly, biting her lip.

She had never felt like a more ridiculous afterthought. She didn't know why she had wanted to come; she'd insisted on it, really, and she'd prepared for it for weeks, and she told everyone it was because it was important that they honor their alma mater, that they celebrate how far they had come - but then, was that really a reason to buy a new dress, to spend all day on her hair? To pretend to still be with Ron, just to not have to come alone?

She sighed, straightening as she prepared to press on, and then paused, catching a flash of a pale, silvery head and feeling inexplicably relieved at the sight.

Hermione looked over and was forced to suppress a giggle at the way that Malfoy was clumsily maintaining a grip on three wine glasses, his own in addition to those of his two companions, who she realized must have recently abandoned him. He looked around, gaping helplessly, and she ducked her head, covering her mouth to ensure he hadn't seen her smile; but when she looked up, bound by curiosity, he was smirking at her.

No, not smirking.

Smiling.

"Laughing at me, Granger?" he called, and she, caught in the act, reluctantly moved towards him.

"You look a bit burdened," she commented, reaching out to take one of the glasses. Their fingers brushed momentarily as she took it, and her chest gave a strange, incomprehensible flutter, compelled forward by some invisible, cruelly merciless force.

It happened to her on occasion with him. Sometimes she handed him a quill and he, lost in conversation, would let the tip of it brush against his lips, forgetting it was hers. Sometimes he would hand her back the form with his signature and his grey eyes would settle on her face, sometimes hovering on her lips; and each time, she would think please. Please stop.

She had her career to think about; she didn't need his pretty face distracting her. Stop.

She had things to do; she didn't have the time for mindless flirtation. Stop.

She had a history with him, an unpleasant one; she didn't wish to be made a fool, and especially not by him. Stop.

And then, the biggest reason of all: she wasn't free. She had Ron. Stop.

Please, please stop.

"Burdened indeed," he agreed, nodding. "Deliver me?" he suggested, and she watched his smile fade as he swallowed carefully, his breath suspended as he waited.

Please, please stop.

But she didn't have Ron anymore, did she?

"Let's walk," she offered softly.
Harry had never been particularly good with women, as both Ginny and Hermione, the only women in his life, chose to remind him on a regular basis. Especially Ginny, who had become particularly adamant about pointing out his flaws in the last year.

*You never notice anything,* she repeatedly railed against him, her cheeks flushed as she roared her displeasure. *You barely notice me!*

*I notice you,* he would say, puzzled. *How could I not -*

*I have needs, Harry!* she would continue, and he would think *I know that, of course I know you have needs; what did I do this time?*

But she had stopped wanting to tell him, stopped being patient with his idiocy, and after the last two breakups, there was nothing left to fix.

Or so she told him. And he usually listened to the things she told him.

"Harry?" Daphne asked, his name so devastatingly sweet on her tongue. "You were saying?"

"Oh," he said, realizing he had been talking. He flailed momentarily, having forgotten the topic of conversation; Daphne Greengrass's beauty was intimidating. Distracting. *"I, er - "*

"Evening," Theodore Nott said smoothly, easing his lanky frame between them. "How is everyone?" he asked, his eyes glinting with something Harry judged to be mischief.

"Fine," Harry said, watching Daphne's cheeks flush appealingly.

"Excuse me, Theo," she said sweetly, giving him a look that Harry guessed was her particular variation of Hermione's withering glare. *"Harry and I are talking."*

"You still are," Nott assured her, tilting his head somewhat mockingly. "I've just joined in." He glanced over at Harry. *"Post-war benefits, eh? Inter-house unity and all that?"*

"Sure," Harry permitted, nodding vacantly.

"Theo." Daphne's pretty smile faded, replaced with a fiery disapproval. *Not that that was any less attractive,* Harry noted, still shaking his head as to why Daphne Greengrass had felt compelled to talk to him, or why Pansy Parkinson was beside him, appearing to take an unusual interest in Ron's biceps. *"Theo, I'm not exactly - "*

"So, Potter," Theo said loudly, cutting her off. "What are your thoughts on the post-war economy?"

"Theo!" Daphne snapped, slamming her glass on a nearby table. *"What the f- "*

"Hi Harry," he heard a voice say behind him, and he sighed in relief at the sound of her voice.

"Hi Luna," he said, turning to face her.

*I wouldn't answer that question if I were you,* she said sagely, nodding her reassurance. *"He doesn't really care to hear the answer at the moment."

*Because of Daphne?* Harry guessed, stepping away from where Nott and Daphne were now arguing to join Luna where she stood against the back wall. She was wearing her long blonde hair in a shimmering sheath down her back, and her dress, a soft, airy white gown that reminded him of a fairy princess from a muggle storybook, had a series of glittering birds sewn in around the shoulders.
Birds are nice, he thought.

"That, or nargles," she quipped, smiling. "Either way, you'll have to talk commerce another time, I'm afraid."

"How unfortunate." Harry smiled, relaxing in her presence. "How are you, Luna?"

"I'm quite excellent, actually," Luna told him, and she looked like she meant it. "I'm having a lovely time. Thank you for asking me," she added.

He felt his brow stitch together quickly, always finding Luna to be strangely disarming. "Of course," he said. "I wanted to know."

"I know you did," she replied. "And that's what's so lovely about it."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. He didn't know what to say, but he knew that would be okay with Luna.

They stood in silence for a moment as they watched the others around the hall; if it were Ginny beside him, Harry would probably have had to ask something - to make sure she was entertained, or at least not overtly bored in his presence. Ginny would be chatting with the people around them, always so social; it came so naturally to her.

Nothing really came naturally to him anymore. Work, he supposed, where things still made sense; but he was so used to having to save things, or save people, or save himself, that the concept of just getting by on a daily basis was frightfully mundane, and at the same time, overly complicated. Knowing how to go about his life, or how to behave when people wanted to talk to him on the street, or how to keep his girlfriend happy . . .

Ex-girlfriend, he reminded himself grimly. I have needs, Harry -

"Harry," Luna interrupted quietly, reaching up to brush his unruly hair away from his face. "You have an awful lot of Wrackspurts floating around."

The tips of her fingers briefly brushed against his jaw as she brought her hand down, frowning. "Are you quite alright?" she asked, and he felt, inexplicably, a jolt at the silvery brightness of her eyes, paired with a strange, thrilling sense of calm, like he was floating in them.

"I think," he started, his voice breaking momentarily. He paused, clearing his throat. "I think," he said again, "I am, actually."

Her smile was radiant. "Good," she murmured, and for once, he felt his smile come easily.

"So," he ventured after a moment. "What are Wrackspurts again?"

"Nothing you have to worry about with me," she whispered.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A ONE SHOT! I estimate 3-4 parts. Sorry that I am so overwhelmingly VERBOSE.
All of the songs are available in a playlist on Spotify (search olivieblake). This one is dedicated to clausumcormeum and moonnott for song suggestions (the rest of you will have dedications in future installments). Thank you! And thanks again to everyone for reading, reviewing, tumbling, submitting things, etc - the best. The absolute best.
Chaotic Good

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chaotic Good

Pairing: Hansy (Harry x Pansy)

Universe: muggle AU, Britain, 16th century (think Plantagenet/Tudor period)

Rating: M for sexual references

Summary: Pansy Parkinson is a pawn in Tom's game of thrones, unloved by her husband and left to suffer quietly as he wreaks havoc over his kingdom. What will she do when she crosses paths with her husband's enemy?

Lady Pansy Parkinson fought every instinct born of pride, every fiber of her being that told her to hold her chin high - a Parkinson, after all, of noble birth, of peerless virtue - to lower her eyes to the ground, her hands clasped as she walked, knowing all eyes were on her.

Her shoes tapped against the stone of the castle and she fought a brief shiver of nerves, hearing her father's voice - finally, some use for you; finally, someone has need of you - and his unsubtle reminder not to destroy her family's chance to rocket into prestige. Her secret fears - what if I don't love him; what if I don't even like him? - were of little to no concern. They'd yanked her into her corset without a care to how they broke her, and oh, did she look fine.

Her skirts rustled appealingly as she breezed through the door, the light hitting her eyes as she reached the Great Hall; she knew without looking up that he was there, the king himself, with her father beside him. She knew if not for her, her father would not find himself in such proximity; and yet she knew better - in her noble birth, her peerless virtue - than to expect gratitude. She kept her eyes on the ground; saw the king's boots first, the gilded base of his throne; his face would have to wait. She would need permission first.

"Your Majesty," she breathed, sinking into a low curtsy before him.

Silence. A rustle. He was shifting in his seat; no doubt looking over her, gauging the value of his purchase.

"Up," he said, his voice low, and she rose, a puppet on his strings, her eyes demurely cast at his feet until she saw him stand; and then her breath caught as he approached her.

She knew, impeccably trained as she had been, that she was bound to acknowledge her father; to bow nearly as low to him as she had to the king; but her attention was elsewhere. The man before her - the man who was to take ownership of her - was far too distracting.

They whispered about him all over the country; so, of course, she'd heard her fair share of tales. She'd heard that he had claimed the throne in cold blood, a conqueror-king; that he had placed himself atop a throne that only noblemen had previously dared to reach for; that he muted any voice that opposed him; that he, of little name and even lower fortune, had stolen his title, made off with it by the blood-stained tip of his sword. What they had failed to mention, though, had been the stunning arrangement of his face; the rich paleness of his skin; the ebony sheen of his hair; the
keen cleverness of his gaze - the velvety richness of the blue which appraised her sharply, traveling up and down the fabric of her gown, made for this occasion.

She shuddered, feeling naked before him despite the finery they draped her in.

"Slender," he noted, his gaze flicking to her father. "Taller than I expected," he added, and Pansy saw the twist of mockery in his gaze, an acknowledgement of her father's known insecurity. The king reached out, lifting her chin, his blue eyes searching hers.

"Lovely," he concluded, and as much as she wished to hate him, as much as she felt her stomach lurch in fear, she longed for his approval.

"Your Majesty," she said again, her voice barely a whisper. If the first time had been a greeting, this one was a promise. *My king.*

"So formal," he murmured. "That won't do, if you're to be my wife." He stepped closer and she thought for a moment he meant to kiss her, and she wondered if he would dare; here, before his lords, before her own father - *did he dare?*

He didn't. She cursed the distance between his lips and hers.

"Tom," he offered coolly, and she cursed herself this time, for finding it a blessing. "Tom will do."

She had ladies now, and jewels, and the favor of everyone at court; she was queen, after all. Tom's royal seal now bore her signature flower, intertwined with a snake that made her shiver; as did he. It was a shiver born of half revulsion. Half desire.

Her ladies were numerous and as well bred as she, save one; Lady Hermione Granger - the *lady* being, of course, a questionable addition - who was of ambiguously lower origins, who arrived one day in Pansy's entourage without fanfare. Or warning.

"Who is she?" Pansy asked, turning in her seat to murmur into the ear of her favorite, Lady Daphne.

"No one of importance," Daphne assured her. "Said to be brilliant, though," she permitted, and her pretty face instantly fell at the knowledge she'd accidentally revealed.

"Said by whom?" Pansy pressed, catching the slip in the other woman's expression.

No answer. In these times, that was as much an admission as any, and Pansy felt the air in her lungs turn cold. "Whose choice was she?" she pressed.

Daphne's hazel eyes dropped demurely to the floor. The king's, of course.

Pansy felt a tingling numbness at that, at the way her heart lurched, and she distracted herself by letting her eyes travel around the room, fighting a yawn; she was expected to remain awake for as long as Tom did, and he was deep in conversation with a man Pansy recognized as a Lord called Mulciber. The man was not an advisor, per se, as her husband did not care for the concept of requiring advice; nor a companion, as Tom rejected that concept too. But certainly something along those lines.

There was a boisterous intrusion at the entrance to the room and Pansy momentarily forgot herself, nearly leaping at the sound. Two men had burst riotously through the doors of the Great Hall, laughing and carrying on merrily, garnering glares from Tom and Lord Mulciber, where the two
heads had been bent in conspiracy.

She ought to have looked away, and after a moment she managed it, but she felt her gaze snag slightly; it seemed her powers of sight were briefly caught on one of them, whose jewel-toned eyes danced with mischief.

"Who is he?" Pansy asked, gesturing.

"Ronald Weasley," Daphne replied, "the redhead, on the right. A would-be earl, though we've nearly all forgotten, considering how many Weasley sons there are." She made a face. "Too many."

"Not him," Pansy corrected quickly, then blushed.


Pansy watched across the room as Henry-called-Harry threw himself at a table, digging into his food. He was lively and spirited, his expression bright and kind; his manners utterly atrocious.

"He looks like a knave," Pansy sniffed.

"He is," Daphne confirmed, her lips curling up in a smile. "Keep your distance."

Pansy nodded. She'd heard of him, this Henry-called-Harry, and Daphne's slip in referring to him as a prince had been dangerous indeed. Tom would not like it. Though, in fairness, Tom did not like much.

She let her eyes slip to her husband, let her mind wander to the memory of him bursting into her chambers, barking for her ladies to leave them; of the way he pressed her back against the bed, not bothering to undress, and left quickly. There, he muttered. Have it.

Tom was a man who did not care for threats, and Harry's presence was nothing but. Tom was a harsh monarch, the despotism of his reign unpopular, and there were many who preferred an England with young Harry at its helm. To make it worse, the younger man's claim to the throne was legitimate for those who valued - as Tom had not - the established line of hierarchy for inheritance to the throne.

Pansy suppressed the thought quickly, fighting a shiver; she knew better. She knew the thought alone could get her killed.

She watched her husband's eyes, intense as always, as they wandered to the table of her ladies; to the petite figure with chestnut brown curls, the bent head that Pansy could not prevent a venomous stir of loathing for. Pansy watched from afar as Hermione Granger looked up, the only woman on earth with the gall - or lack of breeding, as was more likely - to meet Tom's eyes. His gaze was searching and hungry.

Hermione smiled at him, a smile full of secrets; and Pansy, across the room, felt her heart sink.

"You shame me," Pansy called desperately, appealing to his sense of propriety, to the empathy she knew he lacked. "You dishonor me, my Lord - "

"Lady wife," Tom cut in, spitting the word out as though the taste of it were too bitter to stomach,
"you dishonor yourself."

She had been a fool; she'd overplayed her hand. But a woman cast aside was a fool indeed, she thought, sulking.

Her husband's eyes flicked to the side; to Hermione, who curtsied deeply and, after a moment of hesitation, stepped forward to lay her fingers delicately on his arm. Pansy knew it was she, Hermione, that her husband turned to; it was her mind that he coveted, and by the looks of it, her body, too.

At the reassurance of Hermione's touch, Tom turned back to Pansy, glaring.

"You think I wanted you? For your beauty, or for your wit?" He laughed; a callous, terrible laugh, so incongruous with the moment that she shrank back from it, from the mania of it. "Your family guards the border lands and we have trouble with the Scots. Our marriage is only a matter of geography - so if you find yourself displeased, I suggest you not cling so naively to your romanticisms," he sneered, mocking her with every line of his cruelly handsome face, "or to your foolish perceptions of love."

That word, too, he spat like it was poison. She wondered, then, what happiness Hermione could possibly find with her husband; until Pansy remembered the glitter in her eyes, the woman's captivating cunning. Perhaps Hermione, like Tom, looked disdainfully on something as flimsy as love.

Which was, as it turned out, something Pansy now doubted she would ever find.

At her silence, Tom nodded his rare approval and swept out of the room, a king with his chosen queen, the two of them the very portrait of power and authority. He left Pansy behind to sink to the floor, drowning in her sorrows, and neither he nor Hermione looked back.

Pansy closed her eyes, feeling the wind as it drifted between her fingertips, where it slapped color into her pale face and stung her bloodshot eyes, reminding her how wretched she was. It spoke in her ear, alternating between whispers and bellows. Wouldn't it be nice to feel nothing?

To be nothing?

Some rubble came loose and fell to the ground below; she was so high up she could not hear it fall. Good.

At this point, would she even make a sound? Did she even exist? Tom would be glad of her absence, she knew. Perhaps ultimately it could be considered a wifely duty, to spare him her presence.

Just a step, she told herself; one step, a fall, and then -

She felt the wind knocked out of her as steady arms wrapped around her ribcage, yanking her to the side.

"Wh- unhand me!" she yelped, fighting her captor. "What have you -"

A voice, throaty and deep, laughed in her ear. "I don't make a habit of sitting idly by as young maidens take to their deaths," he informed her.

She'd heard his laugh carry through the Hall enough times to recognize it, much as she regretted
the discovery of having committed it to memory. It was Henry-called-Harry, the knave himself, and she was tightly in his grip.

"Codified somewhere in your handbook of roguery, is it?" she snarled, twisting out of his grasp.

"Nothing quite so limiting, but general theories apply," he said drily, releasing her.

She turned to face him, speechless with rage, sputtering in his face. "You - how - how dare - "

"How dare I?" he countered. "How dare you?" He stepped closer, forgetting himself, his nose inches from her face.

"How dare you let him win?" he asked quietly; so quietly that even if they were in the company of others, only she would hear. "How dare you admit defeat?"

"You can't speak to me like that," she told him, though the statement lacked her intended venom. "I'm the queen," she added haughtily, lifting her chin.

To her displeasure, he softened.

"Thanks to me, you still are," he reminded her. "Lucky I knew you'd be so gracious," he added, a glimmer of mischief returning to his laughing green eyes.

"You mock me," she said flatly. "I don't care for it."

"My roguery," he supplied, shrugging, as though that were explanation enough. "You understand."

"I don't," she snapped. "I don't condone it, either."

"Apologies, then," he murmured. "I shall have to settle for being the second most upsetting man in your life."

She drew her shoulders back furiously, summoning her aristocracy. "You overstep," she accused, feeling a hollow ache in her soul at the transparency of her abandonment.

"As is my practice," he admitted. "But I would be remiss if I did not inform you that your husband is a fool," he continued grimly. "A tyrant, and a fool; and if I let you walk away from here less than certain that you know it, then I will be the one to suffer for it."

There was no laughter in his eyes now; only a glitter of something.

"What is it you wish to take from me?" Pansy asked, careful not to betray the dryness of her throat, or the tight flutter in her chest. "Am I a tool to the throne, then? A mechanism for revenge? A path to your rightful place?"

"Why must you be anything but you?" he returned, and he raised a hand, smoothing an errant curl away from her face.

A lie, she thought, panicked. His words, his glance, it all had to be a lie - what had men done but lie to her?

"Don't touch me," she cautioned, swallowing.

He moved to let his fingers hover over her face; he let them trace the air over her cheek, let them
"I wouldn't," he assured her. "I won't."

She couldn't be rid of him. When she moved to dismount her horse, Harry was there, his hands firmly gripping her waist as she slid down, pressed against his chest, his fingers tracing the curve of her spine in the moment before he released her.

"Don't," she whispered.

When she looked up over her dinner, at her place beside Tom - Pansy on his right hand, as tradition dictated, but Hermione on his left - Harry was watching her, his eyes on her lips. Don't.

When she traveled through the castle, he watched her hips sway. Don't.

When she sought out solace in the gardens, he joined her, though he didn't say a word. He didn't need to. Don't.

"You favor Lord Potter," Daphne noted. A warning.

"I don't," Pansy whispered. "I swear it."

When she slept. When she dreamt. When she breathed. His face, his voice; his hands, his arms. Don't.

"You're avoiding me," Harry told her.

She had her head bent in prayer - please, please, please don't - but he'd found her in the alcove, her sanctuary. It was quiet; she needed the solitude.

"I'm not," she said, choking on the lie. Don't.

"You insult my powers of observation," he joked.

"What is it you observe?" she challenged.

She tried not to watch his tongue drag across his lower lip. She failed.

"Poise," he told her, reaching for her fingers. She put her hand palm up and he did the same, leaving a sliver of air that kept them from touching. "Fire. Grace. Spirit. Heartbreak," he added, watching her, but she said nothing. "Pain."

"Beauty," he murmured, and she wondered if he could see her fingers shaking.

She felt faint and inadvertently swayed forward, her hand coming to rest against his; at the contact, he gripped her fingers and pulled her against his chest, his hands on her waist as he kissed her.

She slapped him.

No, she thought about slapping him. She kissed him instead, gave in; ground her hips against his and let him reach behind her head, tugging her hair loose and burying his fingers in it, letting his mouth travel to her neck, to the tops of her breasts.

"Don't stop," she gasped, and he yanked her to her feet, pressing her back to the cold, stone wall, his hands fidgeting with her skirt. He kissed her until she felt feverish, touched her until she thought
she might burn.

"I won't fail you," he promised her. "I will never fail you."

"Fail me or don't, just don't stop," she said, and he grinned, his fingers tracing the inside of her thigh as he nudged her legs apart, his other hand pressed to her back, holding her tight against him.

Clever rogue that he was, he made easy work of finding his way to her chambers every night; fool that she was, she let him.

"Tom's days are numbered," Harry muttered against the creamy skin of her shoulder. "Ron's got his men ready, I've been - "

"You'd make me a traitor as well as a whore?" she interrupted, reaching impatiently for him. "One crime at a time, please."

"Like I'd put you at risk," he said, tracing his fingers over her neck. "Never."

"You already are," she reminded him, shivering at his touch. She'd die, surely. For something. For disloyalty, for treason. For want of him.

He gently pressed her back, laying her against the bed, running his hand between her breasts and down her torso. "Should I stop?" he asked, his fingers twitching at the words. "Should I leave, and save your life again?"

"I was dead when you found me," she reminded him, gasping as he began to replace the trail of his hands with his lips, kissing the flat of her belly, making his way to her thighs. "At this point, I'm on borrowed time."

He said nothing, though she watched his shoulders stiffen; he sighed, his breath ghosting across her skin, and then he looked up, dragging himself up against her to brush his lips across hers.

"I won't fail you," he whispered, the promise melting sweetly in her mouth. She slipped her tongue against his; he slid inside her, and she sighed.

"Be sure that you don't," she warned him, but then she closed her eyes, enraptured.

"He's dead," Tom raged, stabbing his dagger into the wooden table in frustration. "I'll wring his neck myself - I'll tear him to pieces with my own hands, nobility be damned - consider him finished - "

"Breathe," Hermione said sharply, and Pansy glanced at her. The petite brunette's frame was rigid, her eyes cold. "Control your temper."

There was a twitch between Tom's shoulder blades, a slight quirk in his mouth, and then his demeanor miraculously cooled.

"She's a witch, Pansy thought in awe, swallowing. No wonder he wants her.

"Find him," Tom instructed his guards; Mulciber, Nott, Avery. "Find him. Now."

They pivoted instantly, and Hermione came to his side.

"He has allies," she murmured to Tom, her hand smoothing across his shoulder as she leaned
toward him, whispering in his ear. "You would be wise to uncover them."

Tom stiffened. "Allies?"

"He must."

Pansy watched Hermione's lips move, her tone purposeful and firm. "He must have allies. He must have someone whom he trusts." As you do, Hermione did not add, though Tom knew her intent well enough.

His blue eyes darkened, turning glacially cold.

When they fell on Pansy, she felt a shudder in her soul.

*For disloyalty, for treason. For want of him.*

"My Lord?" she whispered, and her fear turned her blood to ice.

---

She knew when he'd be there. She'd come to expect him, after so many nights in his arms.

"He's there," she croaked, wanting to sob. "He's there. Someone grab him."

Malciber and Avery dragged him away.

---

She ran through the castle, barefoot, holding her breath so as to not make a sound.

"I'm here," she whispered. "Where are you?"

She nearly gasped at the relief of hearing his voice. "Here."

Pansy made her way to his cell, her hands shaking as she clumsily struggled to unlock the door. The latch mercifully clicked and she exhaled sharply, her heart frozen in her chest and her feet numb against the cold stone floor.

"Go," she whispered, and at a sound behind her, she let out a fearful gasp. "Go, now, they're coming -"

Harry grabbed her face in his hands, kissing her; he bit her lip in his haste and she tasted her own blood. She would spill it all for him.

"Go," she said again, and he moved to run, but stopped.

"Come with me," he said breathlessly, and the chaos grew louder behind them. "Come with me, Pansy, please -"

"I can't," she panted, her chest straining. "I - I can't -"

"Are you with me?" he asked, nearly having to shout over the growing clamor. "I won't go without you." He held his hand out, his green eyes flashing. "Are you with me?"

*I was dead when you found me. I'm living on borrowed time.*

"I'm with you," she said, placing her hand in his and feeling a surge of certainty in her veins. "I won't fail you."
He never dropped her hand.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: This is obviously not my OTP - this is not even a pairing I actually care for - and yet I find myself compelled to expand this, should your interest be piqued. In any case, here you have it: by anonymous tumblr request, a Hansy.

Reunion Pt. II coming shortly, but I had to feed the muse. Also impending: new Nocturnes.
a/n: I was working on Reunion Pt II and then the muse struck with an unspeakable violence. Reunion is coming very shortly, but first, here's this, by request.

Happenstance

Pairing: Tomione (Hermione Granger x Tom Riddle)

Universe: Muggle AU

Rating: M, language and sex

Summary: Who exactly is Tom, and more importantly, why does he keep showing up?

She was thirteen years old, crying under her favorite tree. Ron had teased her again, the insufferable twit, and yet she was the one crying, wondering when she'd stop being so sensitive. Probably never.

She tugged at the hem of her skirt, willing herself to care less. You're so brilliant, her mother cooed. Who cares what the other kids think?

I care, she thought sulkily. I do.

Her downfall, probably. Caring. It'd be so much easier not to, and yet -

"Hello, Hermione."

She looked up, startled. There was a man there - a man, and a tall one; she squinted at him.

"Who are you?" she asked, wiping vigorously at the corners of her eyes.

"I'm Tom," he said, stepping closer and taking a seat beside her. He lowered himself carefully, elegantly, and made a charming face of displeasure, as though he found himself quite above sitting on the grass, but felt it somehow necessary to do so.

She gaped at his face; even at her age, she could recognize it as perfection. His eyes were a rich, dark blue, his hair smooth in thick, dark waves, his cheekbones, his jaw, his mouth - he's handsome, she thought, frowning. Yes, that's the word. Handsome.

People weren't handsome anymore; boys her age. They weren't handsome. Tom was handsome.

She knew it right away.

"What's wrong?" he asked, and she made a face.

"Nothing," she said quietly.
He lifted an eyebrow, his mouth twisting into a dubious smirk. "You know," he began, somewhat gently, "you shouldn't worry about other people." He straightened slightly, taking a deep breath. "I can tell you with certainty that other people are terrible," he remarked, "and jealous of you. Of your mind," he added. "And your talent."

She frowned at him. "What do you know about my talent?"

"I'm an excellent judge of character," he said curtly. "And candidly, you reek of it."

She didn't relish the idea of reeking of anything, really, but she rarely got compliments, so she decided to accept them where they came.

"I'd rather fit in," she informed him, flinching a little at the sadness in her voice.

He stood then, brushing his trousers off. "You won't," he informed her. "You never will. Nor should you," he said sternly. "Don't debase yourself with the effort of becoming generic."

She sighed. "But wouldn't it be nice?" she said wistfully. "To feel like I belong?"

"You can try, if you like," he sniffed. "But I think you'll find it unsatisfactory."

"Do you?" she asked.

"Find it unsatisfactory?" he prompted. "Yes."

"No," she corrected. "Do you belong?"

He paused for a moment, thinking.

"In a way," he permitted. He squinted at her. "Don't let them get to you," he said firmly. "I won't have it."

She felt herself smile. "Okay," she agreed, and he turned.

She made a little noise of dissatisfaction - "Are you leaving?"

He turned. "Yes," he replied. "For now."

"Oh." She bit her lip, disappointed. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I told you," he reminded her. "I'm Tom."

And then he walked away, and she stared after him.

She was sixteen years old, sighing with boredom. Ron was paying her no attention, as always. She wondered if she was growing tired of him; she knew she wasn't, really. But she fervently hoped she would.

"I see you settled on trying to fit in," a voice said in her ear, and she jumped. "Pity."

"Oh," she said, clutching her chest in shock. "My god, Tom - "

He grinned at her, taking a seat across from her. He was as handsome as she remembered.

"I thought I dreamed you," she told him, surprising herself with her own honesty. "I was so sure it was a dream."
"You're awake," he assured her, as though such a statement were assurance enough.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, frowning. "What is it that you even do?" she added curiously.

"I'm here for the same reason you are," he said, holding up a book. "Purchasing."

*The Age of Reason.* Sartre.

"Ah," she said softly. "How . . . enlightened."

"I consider myself the enlightened type," he agreed. "Replacing a copy, as it were."

"Ah," she said again, then remembered his opening comments. "What was that you said? About me 'settling on' fitting in?"

"Yes," he sighed. "Disappointing, if I'm being honest."

She bristled. "And why should your disappointment affect me?"

"It shouldn't," he said. "Nobody's should."

He reached out, tapping his long, elegant fingers against the table. "You are beholden to nobody."

"Well - " she paused, swallowing. He was difficult to talk to; and so easy, at the same time. "I don't understand," she admitted.

"You're young still," he conceded, shrugging. "When you're older, you'll see what I mean." He rose to his feet, and she felt an unexpected pang of longing.

"You're leaving again?" she asked, actively trying to fight the strain in her voice.

"Yes," he said, and looked thoughtful. "I could come back."

She was elated. "Yes," she breathed, her chest tightening at the thought.

She was eighteen years old, frowning with displeasure; outside the party, out on the street. Ron was flirting with another girl, the bastard. She was sick of him. She wanted him.

She couldn't quite figure it out.

"A bit late to be out here, don't you think?"

She was startled, as usual, and then relieved.

"Tom," she said, reaching for him. She was a little drunk, if she were being honest. It was the result of all that 'trying to fit in' that he was so opposed to. She put her hand on his chest, looking up into the blue depths of his eyes. "Tom."

She watched something in his gaze flicker. "You've been drinking," he noted.

"You disapprove, I'm sure," she scoffed. "Bossing me about, as always."

"You don't seem to mind," he reminded her. "Always so disappointed when I leave," he added, curling his fingers to brush the back of his hand fondly against her cheek.

She closed her eyes, leaning into his touch. "I do mind," she murmured. "It's cruel, what you're
doing to me," she added boldly, leaning forward. "Don't you want me, Tom?"

He laughed, and she drew back, humiliated. "Don't laugh!" she shouted, smacking his chest with her hand, and then curling a fist, thinking about punching him in the stomach. It would be so rewarding, she thought, making him hurt.

He reached out, loosening her fist and threading his fingers through hers. "Hush," he told her. "You've been drinking."

"You've been patronizing," she shot back, distantly aware that the parallelism was a bit off. She wasn't at her sharpest. "Who even are you, Tom?"

"No one at all," he assured her, lifting her chin to look at her. "Certainly nothing to be so aggressive about."

She stared at him. "Kiss me," she demanded, jabbing a finger into his chest. "I think you want to," she added, "you keep showing up, and if you - "

He bent his head, his finger still under her chin; he pressed his lips to hers and she gasped into his mouth, pressing herself against him. He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her, the taste of something manly and mature - scotch, she thought fancifully, or bourbon, though she wasn't familiar with either - on his tongue, which he used to nudge her lips open and slide against hers. His kiss was fiery and thunderous and she clung to him, wondering how she could possibly go back to kissing foolish, boyish Ron after she'd had him.

He pulled away and she cursed his existence.

"I should - "

"Don't you dare go," she growled, letting her eyes flutter open to admonish him properly. "Don't you leave me, Tom - "

He laughed, and she hated him.

"Another time, Hermione," he said, his lips curling into a smile.

She was twenty years old and sitting in the library, attempting to spend some time on her thesis, which she'd already grown quite bored with. Tom was right; philosophy was hardly productive in the scheme of things, and yet she'd insisted on it. It's important, she'd said, angry again that he was telling her what to do, furious he wasn't kissing her. It's fundamentally the foundation of human existence -

Hush, he said, and she fumed quietly, resolving to ignore him, promptly leaving to fuck Ron. To great disappointment, of course, as always, but it was nice to be touched. To feel wanted.

But now, of course, bored to tears, she wished she'd listened to him.

"How's it coming?"

"Fuck," she swore under her breath, dropping her pen. "Tom, you've got to stop sneaking up on me."

"Hardly sneaking," he said loftily. "You act as though I am not also compelled to visit the stacks when the opportunity permits."
"Why?" she demanded.

"Academia, as you well know," he reminded her. "Duty, on occasion, calls."

He held up a handful of books. She pretended not to care what they were.

"What do you even teach?" she asked. "You're always so mysterious." At the painful, girlish curiosity in her voice, she grimaced. "It's irksome," she added, hoping to salvage her pride.

"Physics," he replied. "My work is in physics."

"Oh." She was a little confused at that. "You seem more, I don't know," she shrugged, "the literature type. Or art history. Something snobbish," she added, flashing him an impertinent smirk.

"I make an effort to provide ample snobbery, I think," he said coolly, unaffected. "I wouldn't want to disappoint you, after all."

Ugh, she thought, go away.

Stay, she begged, a moment later, watching the flex in his arm as he reached for something over her head. Never leave me.

"Why do you always find me?" she asked, swallowing. He was close to her; too close.

"Happenstance, I suppose," he replied, unfazed. "Should I leave?"

Her heart thudded in her chest. "No," she confessed quietly, and he smiled.

"How are things with the boyfriend?" he asked, and she promptly hated him again.

"Fine," she said, then instantly straightened, amending the statement. "Great," she said brightly. "The sex is fantastic," she added, watching for his reaction.

His face flamed momentarily, and she reveled in it.

"Good," he said, recovering quickly, "I'm glad to hear it. Good sex is a blessing," he continued. "I'd hate to think you were somehow . . . unfulfilled."

God, she burned for him.

"It is great," she said again, licking her dry lips. "Particularly," she added, feeling bold, "since you don't seem to find yourself compelled to - "

She blushed. Her boldness had a quota, it seemed.

He looked down at her. "You want me to?"

"Um," she said. Fuck, god, I want you. "I - it's more an observation," she offered lamely. "You're always here, you seem to hate him" - she couldn't say Ron's name, not now, not to Tom - "and yet you never - " she faltered again. "You don't - "

"Hermione." He stepped in closer and she turned her head away, knowing that if she looked him in the eye all he would see was her mad desire for him, her gruesomely unrelenting greed for him. "If you want me, just say so."

He's asking me to lose, she thought angrily. I'll say it, he'll laugh, and then he'll leave -
But oh god, yes, "I want you," she managed roughly, turning to look him in the eye. They were blue, so fucking blue. Fuck. Fuck -

"Fuck me," she demanded, gritting her teeth in her need.

She fought a gasp as he slammed her against the bookcase, effortlessly tossing her up, propping her legs over his hips. He kissed her and it felt just like the first time, just as fiery and desperate, and his lips burned over her throat and down to her chest as his fingers traveled under her skirt, gripping her arse and slipping under the lace of her underwear.

He slipped a finger into her with ease and she sighed breathlessly into his shoulder, arching her back to encourage him.

"Fuck you," he mused, panting a little in her ear, "that's what you want?"

She could feel the hardness of his cock pressing against her and she bit down on his shoulder, mumbling yes into his skin as she moved to fumble with his zipper, yanking it down and taking him in her hand. Yes, yes, yes.

She slid her palm against his length and he hissed his satisfaction, filling her with a thrilling taste of power, finally giving her a taste of triumph over him, even in the blinding haze of her need. He slipped inside her and every thrust was like a victory - she finally had him, finally -

"Tom," she gasped, and he yanked her head back by her ponytail, hungrily watching her face as she came.

She was twenty-three and restless, sitting at her favorite spot in the park, wondering what to do next. Done with research. Not exactly desperate to move on to another academic pursuit. Fucking sick as fuck of Ron.

"Hello Hermione," Tom said, sliding gracefully beside her on the bench.

"You're back," she said dully. Fuck me into oblivion once a year. Wonderful to see you. "What's new?" she spat.

"You're upset," he noted. "A shame, that."

She glared at him. "We're outdoors this time," she noted. "You could have at least picked something less public."

"Ah," he said, uncomfortably. "I'm not here for that."

That concept, if anything, made her more furious. "Then what do you want?" she snapped harshly, staring at him. "We're just going to chat?"

"Sort of," he replied, shrugging. "Yes and no."

She clung to the 'and no,' despite her better judgment.

"Fine," she said evasively, waving her hand. "Chat."

He grimaced momentarily, but seemed intent on continuing.

"You've asked me many times who I am," he reminded her, after a moment. "I'm Tom Riddle."
She paused, feeling something different in the exchange. A shift in power.

"Okay," she said slowly, turning towards him, letting her curiosity get the better of her. "And?"

"I'm Tom Riddle," he repeated, "and I can travel in time."

She blinked.

"What?" she asked vacantly. "You -"

She thought about it, about his face, about the way he hadn't changed, even while she'd aged ten years. He was as handsome as he had always been, identical in every version of her memory.

"Explain that," she said flatly, waiting.

"I'm a professor of physics," he reminded her. "I discovered I could travel in time when I was twenty-six years old, and have spent two years refining my ability."

"You're -" she looked at him. "You're twenty-eight?"

"I am," he said. "I have been, the last ten years." He coughed, correcting himself. "Your last ten years, I should say."

"Oh," she said, then tilted her head thoughtfully. "I should argue with you, I think -"

"You don't have to," he assured her. "You, after all, are the reason I was able to refine it."

She felt her mouth open slightly. "How -"

"Look over there," he said, nudging her; she noticed a dark head of hair, bent over a book, sitting peacefully on a bench across the way. "Do you see him?"

"That's you," she realized, her heart beginning to pound. He did look a bit younger, a bit more carelessly dressed; easily just as handsome. "Isn't it?"

"It is," he said, nodding. "He's about to meet someone very important."

She felt dizzy.

"Wait," she said, her head spinning, "but - wait - I have -"

"You'll have to break up with that boyfriend of yours," he muttered, grimacing. "It's about time, anyway. I assure you," he added, tucking some loose strands of hair behind her ear, "you won't look back once you meet him." He laughed. "Me, I mean."

"But," she insisted, "I don't know anything about time travel, or about anything at all, really -"

"I am currently a graduate student in physics," he explained. "I will grow to grasp the complexity of the mechanisms involved. You, though, have the final piece of the puzzle." He leaned over, whispering in her ear; she nodded, realizing he was right. She did have the final piece of the puzzle.

"That's it, then," she said, feeling her mind whir with possibility. "That's it?"

"Essentially," he agreed. "I'll see you again in a couple of years. Though, I should make a point to encourage you to try not to be upset if I disappear from time to time," he added, smiling slyly. "It's just that there's someone that I'll have to visit, or she gets quite put out." He laughed again at that.
"She has quite a temper."

She stared at him.

"I hate you," she decided firmly, feeling herself frown.

"You'll come to love me," he assured her, tangling his fingers in her hair and turning her face towards his. He kissed her, brushing his lips against hers, and sighed.

"How I envy him," he murmured into her mouth.

She shoved him away and stood, not looking back.

It was a lovely day, wasn't it? she thought, feeling the sun on her face. She did always love when a puzzle began to take shape. Fitting pieces together; she really did have a talent for it.

"Excuse me," she said brightly, tapping the shoulder of the handsome young man on the opposite bench. He turned, startled, and looked at her vacantly.

"Hi Tom," she said, smiling. "I'm Hermione."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: A muggle Tomione as requested by UnicornShenanigans, who has been having a rough go of it and DESERVES ALL THE STORIES. And honestly, several drinks.

Again, Reunion Pt. II coming very, very soon.
Reunion, Part II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Reunion, Pt. II

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Ronsy (Ron x Pansy), Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne), Blinny (Blaise x Ginny), Pottgood (Harry x Luna)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: M for language, sexual scenes

Summary: Continuation of chapter 21, Reunion, Pt. I. The class of 1998 meets up for their 5 year reunion, and all is decidedly not as well as it seems.

"No," Ron said quickly. "Absolutely not."

Pansy's falsely pleasant expression flickered momentarily. "Why Ron, I simply can't imagine what you mean - "

"Oh shove it, Parkinson," he retorted, ripping his arm from her grasp. "You and I both know why you're doing this and I bloody well don't enjoy being played."

At that, she dropped the facade altogether, her expression melting into an irritating smirk. "Well, good news, Weasley," she sniffed. "You're still a twat, but you're at least not a dumb one anymore."

"Bloody hell," he muttered to himself, glaring at her. "How long were you expecting to get away with this?"

"Oh please. Get away with it," she scoffed, rolling her eyes. "If you weren't so paranoid - "

"Do you know how many times Harry's almost gotten me killed?" Ron countered, feeling distinctly less than pleased with the unflattering imitation. "If I weren't paranoid, I'd be ten different kinds of dead!"

"Ugh." She had fully abandoned pretense now, snatching his wine out of his hand and downing the remainder of glass. "Honestly, Weasley, I don't know what I was thinking - "

"Hey!" he grunted, making a grab for his drink; Pansy, who had failed to notice his indignation, moodily replaced the now empty glass in his hand, her gaze traveling elsewhere. "I certainly can't help you," he informed her, scowling. "Thanks for this," he added sarcastically, setting the glass down with a thud.

"You're welcome," she murmured, unfazed. "I'll take another, by the way."

"Godric, you are infuriating," he mumbled. "Do you really think you can just wander around demanding things?"

"I do not demand things, Weasley," she corrected loftily, pausing to glare at him. "Normally, people are much more compelled to give them to me." She eyed him critically. "Imagine my surprise that you're not much of a gentleman."
"Imagine my lack of surprise that you're not much of a lady," he retorted. Another levitating tray came around and he grabbed a single glass, pointedly stepping between it and her.

"You are an insufferable prat," she seethed, reaching behind him and stomping her foot as he knocked her arm aside, impeding her grasp. "Hey!"

"Say please, Parkinson," he instructed, grinning as she huffed in frustration.

"Please," she hissed, her teeth gritted; he obligingly stepped aside, flashing her an impish grin as he permitted her to reach for a drink.

"Oh, but you didn't let me finish," she informed him sweetly, in the kind of voice that made him want to instantly take cover. "Please run off and die, Ronald," she purred, snatching a glass off the tray.

"You are a menace," he informed her. "Truly."

She snorted delicately. "Please," she said again, rolling her eyes. "I wear it well."

"At least you've grown into your nose," she snapped.

He felt an instant pang of remorse as she instinctively angled her face downwards; her eyes, normally narrow with snobbish dismay, now widened at him in artless horror, and he could tell immediately that he had delivered far too low a blow.

"Sorry," he offered sheepishly, alternately hearing his mother - Ronald Weasley, how dare you insult the poor girl? - and Hermione - for heaven's sake, Ronald, have you absolutely no tact? - as their voices resonated shrilly inside his head. "I, er, I just meant that - "

"Shut up," Pansy snarled, her moment of self-consciousness abandoned as she set her jaw and glared angrily at him. "I should have known better than to try to talk to you," she added, lifting her chin. "Like Potter's pathetic sidekick was really going to get me anywhere - "

"Hey," he interjected, frowning. "I know I upset you, but you don't need to be a dick about it."

"I'm not upset!" she insisted, clearly deeply upset. "I'm merely stating facts, Weasley," she added haughtily, "and you - "

"Stop," he interrupted, setting his glass down and ignoring her squeak of protest as he lightly took hold of her shoulders. "Let's just start over, okay? I - " he paused, hesitating. "I was rude. I'm sorry."

She pursed her lips and eyed him dubiously, but seemed resolute in her desire to say nothing.

"So," he started, taking a deep breath. "How are things, er - " he waffled between using her first and last name, deciding at the last minute to be generous. "Pansy?"

She made a face for a moment, but seemed to have grasped the sincerity of his intent; he fought an audible sigh of relief as she mercifully offered him a conciliatory grimace.

"I'm great," she said sulkily. "I'm absolutely grand. I've been completely cast out by society, for one thing," she added, in an alarming half shout, "my family's vault is practically drained; I have to pay my father's debts and I'm drowning in his mismanaged accounts - and then on top of that, of course, I have absolutely no prospects - "
"Whoa, whoa," Ron cut in quickly, sensing a rising hysteria. "Shit, Parkinson, that's bleak - "

"I fucking know that," she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest. "So forgive me," she continued, letting out a completely unhinged bark of laughter, "if I was momentarily foolish enough to deign to talk to you, Weasley, as I'm not exactly in an ideal state of mind to think sensibly!"

"You certainly aren't," he agreed, letting out a low whistle and completely disregarding the insult. "That sounds bloody horrible. I really had no idea," he added, attempting to be sympathetic.

He looked earnestly at her, hoping she would recognize the effort; she softened a bit, seemingly appreciative of his intent. He relaxed a little.

"Yeah, well," she shrugged. "Why would you know that? It's not like I really endeared myself to your crowd of heroes."

He made a face. "Don't call us that," he mumbled, letting his gaze drift to the floor as he shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

"The rest of the world calls you that," she reminded him, then stopped, tossing in a derisive laugh. "Well, really, the world gives Potter most of the credit, which isn't exactly fair," she amended, and Ron looked up, startled.

"I - what?" he asked, wondering if he was being insulted.

"Well, Potter's the one who gets all the glory," she sniffed. "He always was, even though the rest of us knew perfectly well he'd have died a thousand times if not for you - " she paused. "And Granger," she conceded, making a face. "But still," she sighed. "He gets too much credit, I think."

He stared at her; she looked away, taking a long sip of wine and refusing to meet his eyes.

"Parkinson," he managed. "I - " he hesitated, wondering what to say. "Thank you," he offered weakly, and she gave him a look of such intense irritation that he almost laughed.

"Don't thank me," she told him, tsking impatiently. "Help me find someone else," she decided. "Since I presume you're not - "

He made himself shudder dramatically. "I'm definitely not," he said bluntly, though he wondered if he was as adamant about that as he had been at the beginning of the exchange.

She nodded. "Good," she declared, then straightened. "Then eyes open, Weasley, I've got a society-approved boyfriend to snare" - she paused, glaring at him as he groaned - "and you're going to help me find him."

"So," Harry ventured, listening to the sound his shoes made as he walked the courtyard with Luna, "are you and Neville" - he shrugged, hoping that was sufficiently telling - "you know? Together?"

"Oh, no," she said dreamily, giving him a little smile. "He was nervous about seeing Hannah again, so he brought me along for moral support. People have a tendency to do that," she noted, frowning slightly, "though once the opportunity for support arises, I find they're not really paying much attention to me."

"That's a shame," Harry said tentatively, wondering if he should comfort her. Ginny would expect to be comforted, he suspected, but Luna . . . he hadn't quite worked her out.
"Is it?" she asked, looking thoughtful, and he paused.

"Ye-es," he said slowly, trying to decide. "I mean, I'm sure you'll find someone," he told her kindly.

Her normally vacant eyes became startlingly sharp as she stared at him. "Harry Potter," she said, and he gulped comically in alarm, "do you think that I'm not involved with anyone because nobody wants me?"

"Uh." He turned sheepishly, looking intently at the ground. "Well, I mean, nothing quite so harsh, really, but I'd just thought - "

"Harry," she said, sparing him a little sigh of affectionate exasperation - the way Molly might sigh fondly at Arthur, for example - before placing her hands on her hips. "Do you even know where I've been for the past five years?"

"Um," he offered apologetically, realizing he hadn't the faintest idea. "I don't, but - "

"You've been busy, of course," she said gently, "so you might not have thought to ask, but I've been traveling around the world," she informed him. "Research, mostly, and writing for my father; but in the process of traveling," she continued, "I've had my fair share of intercourse."

"Intercourse," Harry repeated, finding himself displeased with the knowledge.

"Oh, sorry, I was being opaque," she said, pausing. "I'm referring to congress." She glanced at him, searching for recognition. "Sexual congress," she offered, in case the subject were still in question.

"I know what you meant," he said quickly.

"Alright then," she said, smiling. "It's just that you normally need me to explain myself."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I guess that's true," he agreed, stretching a hand up to pass it through his hair. "I didn't just mean sex, though," he clarified. "I mean, unless that's all you wanted. Er, not all," he amended hastily, a little horrified with himself, "I just - "

"It's quite alright, Harry," she interrupted cheerfully, and he sighed in relief. "I know you've been in a very meaningful relationship. I'm sure you want that for me, because we're friends." She looked at him. "Does that sound right?"

"It does," he confirmed, feeling a little silly, but also unexpectedly relaxed. "I mean, yeah. That's all I meant."

"I haven't really been interested in much more than that at the moment," she told him, looking a little bit lost in her thoughts. "I suppose I've just been waiting for someone to come around who will . . ." she trailed off, tilting her head as she stared off into nothing.

"Who will what?" Harry prompted, surprising himself with his own immense curiosity.

"Well," she said, frowning a little. "Someone who will measure up, I suppose."

"To what?" Harry asked. "To who?"

Her pale grey eyes slid to his, a delicate smile spreading over her face. "To whom, Hermione would say, I think," she said, and he laughed.

"To whom, then," he agreed.
"Well," she said again, and her smile faded slightly. "To you, I suppose."

"I'm surprised to see you here," Hermione said tentatively, attempting conversation as they walked.

"I could say the same," Draco agreed. "Or I would, anyway," he amended, "if you hadn't been so instrumental in planning everything."

"How did you know that?" she asked, glancing sideways at him. She usually made a point not to claim too much credit; she was far more comfortable in the background.

"McGonagall," he supplied, shrugging. "She mentioned it."

"You talked to Professor McGonagall?" she asked. About me? she didn't add, knowing her eagerness would inevitably color her tone.

"She had approached me for some assistance," he admitted, coughing uncomfortably. He furiously looked away as she eyed him, entertained by his unexpected coquettishness.

"Financial assistance, you mean?" she asked, then laughed, gripping his arm. "Stop hiding!"

He turned to her with a smile, leaning into her grip; she noticed what she was doing and retracted her hands, blushing.

"Yes, Granger," he said, his smile fading just slightly as she brought her hands back to her sides. "Financial assistance, as you've so crudely made a point to emphasize."

"You're being so coy about it," she noted, enjoying his obvious discomfort. "Why?"

"Well, Granger, if you must know," he sniffed. "Not every pureblood family was able to come out of the war with their fortunes intact," he explained stiffly, and she felt her teasing smile fade. "Luckily we weren't destroyed by reparations, but plenty of other families were. The Parkinsons, the Goyles, the Greengrass family - "

"Right," she said softly, biting her lip. "I'm sorry, I was being . . . thoughtless."

"I doubt you've ever had a moment without thought," he countered dubiously, though not unkindly. "But regardless, I don't blame you. It's certainly not your job to concern yourself with the losing side."

He scuffed his foot against the stone castle floor at that, and she felt the immensity of his situation suddenly weigh heavily on her.

"I guess I just assumed you were doing well," she ventured nervously, twisting her hands in her agitation. "I mean, you obviously have good standing in the Ministry - "

"Thanks in large part to McGonagall interceding on my behalf," he supplied. "And I make a rather concerted effort to donate where possible," he added, "hence the conversation about this event."

"Oh," Hermione said. "Well - "

"Granger." He paused, pulling her aside; he let his hands float over her shoulders and around her upper arms, like he wasn't sure he trusted them to land. "You really don't need to worry about me. Despite your tendency to fuss over anyone who doesn't particularly need your help," he added, and she rolled her eyes at that.
"You'll never stop teasing me about that, will you?" she sighed, though she couldn't help a smile. "I'm sure you were terribly inconvenienced by the house elf march S.P.E.W. organized, but - "

"Oh, I wasn't," he said quickly, and promptly turned scarlet.

"You weren't?" she prompted. "Why not?"

He hesitated. "I, er," he coughed, swallowing, before murmuring something entirely incoherent.

"You what?" she asked, squinting at him. "Didn't quite catch that, Malfoy."

He sighed, holding his hands up in resignation. "Fine, Granger," he barked, and she jumped. "I don't fucking have any house elves, okay?" he continued, practically at a shout. "I got rid of them after the war!"

"Why," she opened curiously, "on earth are you yelling?"

"I don't need you to mock me," he insisted, still unreasonably loud. "I hardly need to hear you laugh in my face about how you of all people convinced me to free them - despite the absolute monstrosity of a temper tantrum I anticipated from my mother, which she definitely lived up to - "

Hermione gaped at him. "Draco - "

"- and I certainly do not need to watch you give me that smug look you have, the one you always give Potter when you're snottily outsmarting him - "

"Draco!" she exclaimed, grabbing his wrists as he waved his hands about in agitation. "Draco, it's okay," she continued, her cheeks flushed with pleasure. "Draco, I promise, I'm not going to mock you."

He sighed loudly, still hesitant to meet her eyes. "You reduced me to an absolute buffoon, you know."

"What, just now?" she asked, biting her lip to fight a broad smile. "I think that was all you, really."

"No," he said, and then his breath caught as he eyed a strand of hair that had come loose around her face as she'd reached for him. "I - before that," he explained, sighing. "I've been a buffoon for quite some time, I'm afraid."

She held her breath - and held his gaze - as he slowly reached to tuck the hair in place behind her ear, his hand slightly shaking. "I couldn't really stand the thought of having them, you know," he told her quietly. "Knowing you were working so hard, I mean. It was hard to stomach having them around, knowing how much work you put into it."

She realized now why he'd been shouting. She realized also that what he had just said was perhaps the most meaningful thing she could remember anyone having said to her; she tried to think of the last thoughtful thing Ron had done, or the last time she'd really felt valued, and she found herself coming up short when compared to the concept that Draco Malfoy had set his house elves free, and all because he couldn't stand to see her effort wasted.

"Well," she broached carefully, feeling a threatening creak in her voice, "I think I would have preferred it if you'd freed them for their sake. But," she continued, "short of that - "

"They were not overly thrilled about being freed," he informed her, raising an eyebrow. "I actually had to give them money. Last I heard they'd pooled their funds and are living somewhere in some
kind of shire," he added, shrugging.

*Oh, for heaven's sake,* she thought, feeling her innards turn to mush. *He checked in with them.*

"Ah," she managed, clearing her throat. "Well then," she determined, squaring her shoulders, "I suppose your intentions were *infallible,*" she offered, tossing in a gratuitously Malfoy-esque smirk, "and I owe you an apology."

*I should kiss him,* she thought, watching his mouth quirk up in a smile.

"Well, Granger," he replied, his voice husky and warm. "I would certainly agree that you do."

*I am definitely going to kiss him,* she thought resignedly, before deciding she was quite looking forward to it.

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Ginny wasn't looking at him; Blaise decided that was an excellent sign.

"I don't want to talk to you," she said bluntly, crossing her arms over her narrow chest. "I have absolutely nothing to say to you."


At that she glared at him, and he had to fight a smile. Irritated Ginny was only a breath away from Fiery Ginny, and Fiery Ginny would eventually find her way to his arms.

"Goodbye, Blaise," she said loudly, turning to stomp away from him. She tripped slightly on her gown but carried on, never wavering in her retreat.

Ah, she was infuriating. He loved it.

"Ginny," he called after her, catching her easily as she struggled in her formalwear, "did it occur to you that, perhaps, *I* might have something to say to *you*?"

"It did not," she snapped. "Nor will it."

"Pity, then, that you'll have to hear me out," he purred in her ear. "Only fair, really, considering how many times I've granted you favors."

She stopped abruptly, coming to a halt in the corridor. "Was fucking me the favor you think you did me?" she asked, her brown eyes narrowing.

He scoffed. "Charming," he told her, lifting an eyebrow, "but no. I was thinking more along the lines of being at your disposal," he reminded her. "Waiting for your late night owls, being at your beck and call every time you fought with Potter - "

"And *then* fucking me," she supplied, scowling. "One might think you should consider yourself aptly rewarded."

He found she was testing his not inconsiderable patience. "Ginny," he said, turning her to face him. "I was there for you in your darkest nights. I was there for you, every time you needed me. Was I not?" he prompted.

"You were," she permitted curtly, without a hint of remorse. "Though not without - "

"And where were you, Ginevra?" he pressed. "Where were you when I needed you? When I was
waiting to hear from you?"

She hesitated, and he relished her silence, took pleasure in his triumph. "Where were you when I was at my worst?" he pressed.

"With my boyfriend," she reminded him coldly. "Where I should have been," she added. "Since you know as well as I do that I should never have come to you." She looked saddened at that, and he hated it.

"We didn't do anything wrong," he reminded her firmly. "You came to me when you broke up. You were fully broken up, there was no cheating - "

"Yes there - " she cut herself off, cursing under her breath. He watched her, waiting for her to speak.

"No, there wasn't cheating," she sighed eventually. "But - it was still wrong."

"How?" he urged. "Why?"

"Because sometimes - " she stopped, half-choking on a tiny sob of frustration, "sometimes I would look forward to a fight because of you." Her voice was quiet; just above a whisper. "Sometimes I wished he'd break it off again, because then it meant - " she cut off again, and he curled a hand under her chin, lifting it to look her in the eye.

"Say it," he murmured, and she blinked, tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

"Because it meant I could go back to you," she whispered.

"Oh, Ginevra." He pulled her into an alcove, wrapping her in his arms, tangling his fingers in her long red hair. "Why didn't you come to me?"

She sniffed into his robes. "How could I?" she asked, and the fury had made its way to her voice again. "I hadn't heard from you at all, I didn't want to just be your - your conquest, or something, your fucking prize - "

"I was trying to be considerate," he said sharply. "You had a boyfriend. It wasn't my place to force myself on you."

"But you did that just fine before!" she said, shoving him away. "You practically hounded me when you started working with the team, didn't you?"

"It was my job," he reminded her, teeth gritted slightly at her pushing him away. "I'm a publicist, Ginny, the team was a client, and you are fucking impossible to track down - "

"Oh, that's a laugh," she spat. "Like you weren't watching me? Staring at me?"

"And you weren't staring back," he countered. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"I wasn't," she insisted angrily. "I couldn't, I was with - "

"I fucking know who you were with!" he shouted. "I am hugely fucking aware that you were with Potter, considering that I had to see you with him in every newspaper, every magazine, as every topic of goddamn conversation - "

"Stop yelling," she told him, though a look of desperation crossed her face, "please stop - "
"It didn't matter to you that every road you took came back to me," he told her, not bothering to feel ashamed of the pain in his voice. "It never fucking mattered to you what you did to me, when things were hard for me and I - " he broke off, struggling. "I had no one - "

"You lost your mother," she interrupted, cupping her hand around the jut of his cheek as her eyes filled with sorrow. "I know. I know how much she meant to you," she said softly. "I couldn't stop thinking about you when I heard."

"You knew," he agreed, feeling a stinging pain at the words. "But you weren't there."

"I wasn't," she murmured, but lifted her chin. "I couldn't," she said again, and he sighed, taking a step back from her.

He thought about leaving. About walking away from her, washing his hands of her. It would be the best thing, really; what was he expecting from her? She'd never really known what she wanted. She wasn't naturally very selfless, which he knew quite well - he'd always admired her for her flaming sense of self, her stunning confidence, her relentless pursuit of her own desires. He couldn't ask more from her than she could give; it wasn't right.

He moved to exit the alcove, hanging his head. "I'm sorry I yelled," he sighed. "And - "

"I should have been there for you," she cut in suddenly, and he paused mid-stride. "I wanted things to work with Harry, I didn't want to hurt him, but - "

He pivoted, looking back at her. "But?" he prompted, swallowing with difficulty, barely daring to breathe.

"But I thought of you," she confessed. "I thought of you every waking moment, I swear, I dreamt you every night - I missed you and I hated you, hated you for not writing to me, or coming to see me, for not taking me away from everything - "

"I'm here now," he interrupted, teeming with want as he stepped towards her, pressing her back against the wall. "I'm here now."

"Don't let me go," she said breathlessly, and he let out a growl as he bent to press his lips to hers.

"Theo," Daphne seethed, "what are you thinking? What are you doing?"

"Trying to indulge in a little thoughtful conversation," he said obnoxiously, and she, fidgeting in her anger, considered whether she was capable of throwing a punch that would land.

Undignified, she concluded after a moment, figuring it wouldn't do much for her image.

"Theo," she said again, attempting to simulate patience, "have you perhaps suffered a head injury? Is it possible," she added, "that you may have lost your fucking mind?"

"You know, in the immensity of my experience, I find it best not to rule out any possibilities," he replied, and she felt her hand clench in a fist.

"You know I need this," she warned. "You know how important this is to me."

"Potter?" he asked, scoffing. "You've only just discovered he's even an option," he said skeptically. "How am I to know he's suddenly important to you?"

"Not him!" she snapped. "You know - "
She stopped, realizing they had attracted attention; she grabbed Theo's arm, pulling him into the corridor. "You know I need to find someone," she hissed. "I'm worried about Astoria; my mother never lets her out of the house, and she ought to have some prospects by now - 

"Salazar's balls, what a romance," Theo drawled. "What stunning poetry, the pairing that is you and Potter; what spectacular enchantment - 

"You can mock me all you want, Theo," Daphne said furiously, nudging her skirt back to step towards him and jabbing her finger into his chest. "I don't mind it, you know, I can take it - 

"I know you can," he assured her, and she raised her finger to point it in his face.

"You might think I'm some stupid pureblood snob who needs a husband," she started, then paused. Pureblood? Check. Snob? Check. In need of a husband? 

"Oh fuck," she muttered, bringing her hand to her mouth. "That's - fuck. That's precisely what I am, isn't it?"

She looked up, catching his eyes as they grew large with concern. "Theo, I'm just an idiot pureblood who needs to marry rich, aren't I?" she gasped. "Oh no, oh no - 

"No, no," he interrupted hastily, gripping her arms. "No, Daphne, not at all - 

"Oh no," she wailed. "I thought I had the right intentions - do I not?" she gasped, thinking of how she'd been prepared to throw herself at Harry Potter's feet, all so that - what? So that she could trick him into marrying her? Just to make her life a little easier? So that people she didn't even care about wouldn't look down on her?

"Whoa, hold on," Theo said urgently, bending slightly to look her in the eye. "Breathe, Daph, come on - you're okay, you're fine - 

What had she been thinking? And now, of course -

"Oh, and now I can't even do that!" she yelled, turning back to him as she remembered who she was really angry with. "I was about to do something stupid and selfish and I didn't even accomplish it because you had to interfere! And - 

The rest of the sentence, whatever it was going to be, escaped into his mouth. She blinked for a moment before she realized he was kissing her, his hands cupping her face and then moving into her hair; it took another moment before she realized she was actually enjoying his kiss. Melting in it, really; and as his tongue slipped against hers she felt herself sigh into his mouth, drooping helplessly against him until -

"Wait," she gasped, shoving him away. "Theo, what - 

"Sorry," he said instantly, his face turning red. "I was only - 

"I'm not here for you to play games with," she snapped, bringing a hand to her swollen lips. "Theo, someone could have seen that - I would have been humiliated - 

"Why?" he insisted, his eyes flashing. "I'm humiliating?"

"I'm not one of your stupid" - she stammered, trying to think of an appropriately hurtful term - "book groupies, Theo! I'm not going to suck your 'bad boy' dick just because every other woman in the world is bizarrely captivated by your firsthand account of the dark side of the war," she spat
nonsensically, "or whatever that thing is about -"

"My 'bad boy' dick?" he echoed, his face helplessly pained. "Dark side of the -" he stopped, shaking his head. "You really didn't fucking read it, did you?" He barked out a sharply unpleasant laugh. "Not even the back cover, did you?"

"What, your book?" she asked, scoffing. "Of course not, Theo, I'm not exactly in a hurry to read your vanity project about -"

"Vanity project?"

She felt her breath catch as his green eyes went wide with disbelief. "Well," she muttered, stammering a little, "I meant -"

"You," he interrupted furiously, "can fuck right off, Daphne Greengrass."

He turned away, took five steps, and then paused, swiveling to look back at her. He pulled at his mouth for a moment, his expression tense as he considered her.

"I wrote that book for you," he intoned flatly, and it shot like an arrow through her chest. "You might as well know that now, seeing as everyone else does." He laughed a little; a jarring, maniacal laugh. "Fuck me, right?"

She stepped forward, knowing she'd done something awful. "Theo," she begged.

He shook his head. "No," he told her firmly. "No."

With a final pained grimace, he pivoted back around, striding angrily into the hall and leaving Daphne behind, her heart still pounding from his kiss.

Draco noted with pleasure that Granger was looking repeatedly at his mouth; he considered it a victory, and one that was made considerably more crucial by the fact that he'd nearly humiliated himself over the whole elf debacle. Fuck, he was an utter fool. Thank fucking Merlin she seemed not to mind.

He glanced at her again, fighting a smile as their gazes locked.

"I'm so fucking glad you finally broke up with Weasley, he imagined telling her. Do you know how long I've waited? How long I've wanted -"

"Oh," she murmured, a jittery look of nerves passing over her face as she bit her lip. "Sorry, I didn't really realize where I'd been walking," she said hesitantly, glancing at him. "Is this -"

She trailed off, and he realized with a jolt what her concern had been. They were heading up to the Astronomy Tower.

"Oh," he echoed faintly. "I haven't been here since -"

"I thought as much," she admitted, looking sheepishly at her feet. "We can go somewhere else, if you'd rather," she assured him. "It's a big castle," she added, the warmth of a playful smile blossoming in her cheeks.

*Nah. Let her see.* "It's okay," he told her. "The view from up there is pretty spectacular, and anyway, it's" - he paused, inhaling sharply - "it's been long enough, I think."
She nodded. If anyone was going to understand, it was probably going to be her. They took the steps in silence, but she occasionally let her eyes drop to his hand, as though she considered she might take it in hers; he wished she would. He knew she would not.

The night air was cool on his face, and Draco found himself surprised by how little he actually remembered of the fateful night in the tower. Perhaps he'd pushed it out; perhaps she'd done it for him.

"It really is beautiful up here," she said, and he nodded, standing beside her as they looked over the castle grounds.

"It is," he agreed. "This whole castle is beautiful," he added, holding his hand up and letting the wind brush his fingertips. "It's home."

They stood together for a moment in silence; a comfortable silence. A rarity in his life. He found himself grateful to her for it.

"It's so strange being back here," she confessed. "I've been back before, of course, but now, with everything sort of" - she hesitated - "put back together, you know - "

"It almost feels like nothing's changed at all," he supplied, and she nodded.

"Yes," she sighed. "Almost like none of it happened." Her lips dipped into a thoughtful frown. "I can't decide if that's a good or bad thing."

"Well, it definitely did happen," he reminded her. "Some of us have to live with that every day," he added grimly, and her eyes traveled slowly to his.

"What was it like?" she whispered. "How did you - "

"Where do I begin," he joked. "The rubble, or my sins?"

The look she gave him was soft; almost tender.

"I was caught up in the dust settling around me," he offered, thinking she deserved the truth. "Lost in my vices. My prejudices. And by the time I knew I was wrong - "

She nodded. She understood.

"Would you do it differently?" she asked. "If you could do it over?"

They were facing each other now; she was the view.

"It depends," he confessed. "It's hard to go back, you know, without knowing what I know now. But maybe if - "

He trailed off. Maybe if you'd been there, I could have done it differently.

"Sometimes I feel like I can just go back," she whispered. "Like if I closed my eyes, it would almost feel like I've been here before."

He closed his eyes, feeling the need to oblige her in her moment of whimsy; he thought for a moment he had gone back, back to being young and thoughtless -

He inhaled sharply as the smell of her, the faint scent of vanilla and gardenias, suddenly breezed around him and she touched her lips to his, her hands braced gently on his chest as she leaned
towards him, reminding him why he was glad to have suffered as he did. He kissed her back but kept his hands at his side, letting her be the one to direct him; she reached up to caress his jaw and he leaned into her touch, shivering as she traced her tongue across his lower lip. It was a ghost of a kiss, really, but it was entirely her; as warm and inviting as it was strange and enigmatic.

She pulled away and he felt her vacancy like a punch to the gut; he sighed, keeping his eyes closed, willing himself to maintain some semblance of cool.

"Granger," he said hoarsely, letting his eyes flutter open. "I - "

He frowned. "Granger?" he asked, looking around.

Nothing. She was gone.

"DAMN IT, GRANGER!" he swore, peevishly crossing his arms over his chest.

"What about Dean?" Pansy asked, jutting her chin out to reference him.

"Gay," Weasley said bluntly. "Or have you not heard his more common moniker? Dean, as in Dean 'and Seamus'?"

"Ah, rats," she said, pouting. "I thought this would be easier."

"You're bloody telling me," he muttered. "Believe me, I'm not overly thrilled about being single either."

Pansy made a distinctly unpleasant gagging sound. "Don't tell me you're pining over Granger," she said, making a face. "If you are, I'm leaving."

He gave her a weary look of impatience. "I'm not pining," he said, "but I'm not thrilled about my options. I would have been relieved to be done with the whole thing," he added, waving his arm wildly. Pansy giggled.

"It is pretty sad," she admitted. "Pickings are slim."

"Slim is an understatement," he scoffed. "Who's even left?" he asked, his blue eyes scanning the remaining women in the room.

"Excuse me," she sniffed, bristling at the motion, "but we have to pick someone for me before I spend any of my valuable time on you."

"You generous angel," he drawled, lifting his glass for a drink. "You charming pixie."

"I am both those things," she agreed. "Good on you for noticing."

"I'm surprised you didn't try your hand at Harry," Weasley remarked. "Or did you rightfully suspect that 'he's there, grab him' is not the love story of the century?"

Pansy felt her cheeks redden and scowled, less than appreciative of the reminder. "I could have won him over," she sniffed, "but Daphne - "

She felt herself blush again and ducked her head, taking a sip of wine. Weasley, however, was still looking intently at her.

"Daphne what?" he prodded, in his crude, direct sort of way.
She sighed. "Don't tell anyone, okay?" she asked, not sure why she was revealing anything to him, but resolving to continue at his nod. "She's sort of in the same position I am. You know, needing someone," she explained, and he nodded a second time. "But it's worse for her, since she supports her family, and she has her sister, and - "

She cut off, realizing he was smiling at her. "What?" she snapped. "You have a stupid look on your face," she informed him, raising her glass to her lips. "I don't care for it."

"Sorry," he said, chuckling. "It's just - I didn't realize."

"Realize what?" she asked sharply, not insignificantly put out by his laughter.

"That you're so," he paused, thinking. "Soft, I guess."

She gaped at him. "Soft?" she echoed, her eyes wide. "Oh, fuck you, Weasley."


"Cute?" she repeated, realizing her hand was clutching her chest as though he'd insulted her mother's pedigree. "I - I can't - "

He was laughing harder now, and she was stunned; feeling herself out of options, she reached out on instinct, abruptly slapping him across the face.

"Bloody hell!" he exclaimed, doubling over. "What the - "

"Oh stop," she said breathlessly, though she couldn't quite identify where the impulse had come from. "You're fine."

"I know I'm fine," he snapped, glaring at her. "That doesn't mean you need to violate my face."

"Violate your - " she cut off, realizing she was giggling now, and even he looked entertained, his cheeks red from both her hand and his fit of laughter.

"That should teach you to call me cute," she informed him steadily, but she was pleased to see he had taken it quite well, rubbing his face and shaking his head.

"Consider myself taught," he rumbled, his eyes flicking to hers as he fought a smile. "Fuck, Parkinson. Your future husband is a lucky man," he drawled sarcastically, taking a very loud sip of wine.

"I'm aware," she replied drily, then dragged her gaze away from his face - which was really not so bad, once you got past the whole Weasley thing; he was at least better looking than his brothers - to analyze the room. "What about him?" she asked, motioning to Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Weasley raised an eyebrow. "Really?" he asked.

She made a face. "No," she agreed. "Terry?"

He made a face this time. "I guess," he sniffed. "If you're in the market for a total prat, I suppose."

"I opened with you," she reminded him. "My defenses are down."

"Stop, I'm blushing," he remarked into his glass, rolling his eyes.

"Oh," she said, catching sight of Michael Corner; she backhanded Weasley in the stomach,
prompting him to cough up his swallow of wine. "Him?"

"Fuck, Parkinson," he choked, "you're not safe to be around -"

"What do you think?" she asked. "Corner could work, right?"

"Um," he said, clearing his throat and emitting a single, throat-vacating cough, "sure."

She looked warily at him. "No?"

"I mean, sure," he said again, shrugging. "He's got a good family, he's done pretty well for himself after the war, he's at least interested in women -"

She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "Okay," she said, fidgeting with her fingernails. "Good then." She glanced back at Weasley. "Do I look okay?"

She heard it; the insecurity in her voice. She heard it slip, and she knew he heard it too, and she hated herself for a moment, furious with her own vulnerability; she realized her hand had risen to her nose and she cursed herself again, wishing she didn't think about it so much.

"Hey," he said hastily, pulling her hand from her face. "Look, I was a dick earlier, but you look really pretty, okay?"

She nodded dumbly, wishing she could slap him again. Was there cause? Was cause necessary?

"You're clever, and you're funny, and if he has quick reflexes, then he's a lucky guy," Weasley added, and she realized she was smiling at him, and he was smiling at her, and they were smiling at each other.

Like idiots.

She wiped her face clear of emotion.

"Bye," she said impassively, but he was still smiling, his eyes on her lips.

"Bye," he said, and she turned and walked away, wondering if he was still watching.

The moment Blaise's lips met hers, Ginny was met with a vigorous flashback of herself. At that bar. That horrid bar, where she was just trying to have a goddamn drink, and forget for five seconds about her breakup with Harry.

The first one.

They were fighting about how much she was on the road with the team, or something. She barely remembered that part. You'd think she would; you would think it would matter, what she and the supposed love of her life had fought about, but fuck if she knew. All she remembered was having to turn around and get back on the road, and she and the girls were at that fucking horrid bar, somewhere in Spain, and Blaise was there.

Fucking Blaise was there.

He was right; it was his job. He wasn't there for her. She knew it, and the rest of the team knew it, and they were crawling all over him, and she hated it. They were trying to sweet talk him into shots and he was smiling, happy with the attention, his handsome face alit with pleasure as they practically groped him. Fucking Harpies.
Ginny was on her fourth drink - or fifth? - by the time she'd had enough. Losing Harry was one thing, but didn't those bitches know Blaise was hers? He wasn't some team mascot; it was her he always looked at.

She had been drunk and sad and watching his perfect smile and perfect eyes and thinking for the first time that he should be hers.

*Hey,* she'd said, grabbing him by the collar. *I need to talk to you.*

He'd politely obliged, rising to his feet and making vaguely coaxing apologies to the other girls as he followed her outside; she knew he would follow and so she wandered into the alley, looking for privacy and finding it.

*What is it?* he asked, with a smile so perfect that it nearly split open her chest.

*I want you to kiss me,* she told him. *I want you to kiss me like I'm the only fucking girl in this bar. I want you to kiss me so that I don't think about anything else, or anyone. I want you to kiss me so that I forget my name, or who I am -*

*That,* he interrupted firmly, *is the only way I would ever think to kiss you.*

And he did, and she did a lot more than kiss him.

And they did it a lot more than once.

And now it was just like then only better, only with more heat and more spark and more longing; he whispered a few charms to keep people away and then he was on his knees, her gown pushed up to her hips, his breath hot on the inside of her thigh as he trailed his tongue along her clit. Just how she liked it.

Just how *he knew* she liked it.

She saw sparks behind her eyelids and then he was on his feet, his trousers unzipped and then he was fucking her in the alcove, in her stupidly expensive dress, with her friends and ex-boyfriend just a few feet away; and she was whispering his name in his ear, over and over, thinking about the first time.

*Don't make this complicated,* she'd said.

*I wouldn't,* he replied, smiling. The smug bastard.

*You're cool, but I'm cooler,* she informed him between kisses. *You're pretty, but I'm cuter. And smarter,* he generously agreed, his hands tearing open her blouse.

They managed one of those miraculous simultaneous climaxes and collapsed against each other, their foreheads pressed together as he sank to the floor, her legs still wrapped around his hips and his cock still inside her.

"That," she said hoarsely, "was perfect."

He nodded, still breathless.

"The perfect goodbye," she whispered, pressing her lips against his still-closed eyelids.

He leaned back sharply, yanking her head back by her hair.
"What the fuck do you mean goodbye?" he demanded, his eyes flashing with fury.

Theo marched straight to Draco, who was breathless as he raced into the hall.

"Have you seen her?" Draco asked frantically, panting. "Is she - "

"She didn't read the book!" Theo shouted. "She thinks it's about the war!"

There was a clatter around them as people noisily shuffled around, trying to identify the source of the yelling; Draco grabbed Theo's shoulder, pulling him into the corridor and heading for the courtyard.

"You're a famous author now," Draco reminded him sternly, muttering in his ear. "You can't just go around yelling about things now that people are aware you're not one of the tapestries."

"She didn't read it," he repeated, at an only slightly lower volume because fuck you, Draco!

"Well, that's a real jab to the gut, isn't it?" Draco sighed, coming to a reluctant stop outside. "Sorry, mate."

"The jab to the gut is the idea that she could have somehow failed to notice my existence for over twenty years," Theo scowled. "Her failure to read the book, on the other hand, is a fucking twist of the knife."

They didn't say anything for a moment, both marinating silently in Theo's suffering. Arsehole though he generally was, Draco was still Theo's best friend, and he knew the catastrophic depths of Theo's disappointment without having to be told.

"You could have tried a more direct way of getting her attention," Draco suggested hesitantly, not meeting Theo's eyes.

"What, like calling her a mudblood for six years?" Theo countered, and Draco rightfully turned pale.

"Maybe not that," Draco permitted, coolly overlooking the slight. "But I'm not sure the book was an entirely practical plan."

"The book wasn't just to get her attention," Theo mumbled, and Draco eyed him expectantly.

"Then what was it for, if not that?" Draco prodded, nudging him. "Was it just your muse revealing itself for the first time, then?"

"It was - " Theo cut himself off, fearing impending judgment.

"Oh, fucking say it," Draco snapped, and Theo glared at him.

"It was to bring me back into the public's good graces, okay?" he said tightly. "My father was shitty and then everyone assumed I was shitty and I wanted to prove I wasn't, and I did it so that someday, she might consider me - " he paused, sighing again. Draco stood quietly, waiting for him to finish his thought.

"I wanted the book to do well so that someday she might consider me a real option," Theo confessed. "Which," he added, looking up to glare at Draco, "I'm aware makes me out to be a giant fucking fool."
Draco let out a lengthy exhale, smoothing his hair back in thought. "I'm not going to lie to you," he said, after about a minute of silence. "That is what one might call an overly complex plan."

"I know," Theo agreed, grimacing.

"Like, far too complex, honestly - "

"I'm fucking aware!" Theo exclaimed, glaring at him. "It has already been brought to my attention that I'm a dumb twat, I'm perfectly clear on that," he snapped. "And I know you think it's stupid - "

"What, the book?" Draco asked, furrowing his brow.

"Yes, fucking yes, the book," Theo spat irritably, shaking his head. "You certainly made that clear, since you complain about it constantly - "

"It's a good fucking book," Draco interrupted, shrugging.

Theo gaped at him, confused. "It is?"

"It's my favorite fucking book, you silly cunt," Draco sighed, throwing an arm over his shoulder. "I can't believe you didn't know that."

"Of course I didn't fucking know that," Theo grumbled. "I don't think you bothered to actually tell me."

"Funny what misconceptions a person can have when not explicitly told things," Draco mused, nudging him again. "Isn't it?"

"Hilarious," Theo agreed, pouting.

He felt a little bit better, but in some ways, ten times worse; there was nothing more infuriating, after all, than Draco managing to make an elegantly argued point.

Luna tilted her head, trying to make sense of his confusion. "Yes," she said, waiting. Perhaps he just needed time to sort it out.

"I don't understand," Harry said slowly, and Luna smiled. She had never met anyone else so willing to admit their own confusion; it was one of the things she quite enjoyed about him.

"Which part?" she asked patiently.

"I guess all of it," he admitted, then stopped. "No, wait. I guess my question is - " he paused again, squinting at her. "Are you trying to tell me you have feelings for me?"

"I have a wide variety of feelings for you," she confirmed, nodding. "Fondness, primarily, though a great deal of admiration - "

"No, sorry," he said quickly. "I mean," he amended, "do you like me?"

"I like you a great deal," she supplied, nodding. "It's definitely one of the feelings."

"No," he said again, though he laughed this time. "Sorry, I hadn't realized how so much of the things people say is really just dodging the point."
She nodded, trying to coax him with a smile. "Take your time," she said.

He took a deep breath. "Okay," he sighed, smiling as he exhaled. "What I want to ask you," he began uncertainly, and she nodded her encouragement, "is whether you are trying to tell me that you are interested in me. For dating," he suggested. "Or, I suppose, for -"

He trailed off.

"Sex," she supplied. "Is that the word you're looking for?"

"It is," he confirmed, nodding, and then laughed at himself again. "Sorry, I really thought I had it that time."

"You don't need to be sorry," she said. "I suppose I may not have made that clear before, which is my fault. Oh!" she exclaimed, feeling the weight of something settle in her chest. "I think I'm just realizing that I should have told you sooner." She smiled. "It's so nice to put a name to the feeling. Really lessens the risk of nargles," she added, looking around to make sure there were none in sight.

Her eyes lowered to rest on Harry, whose head was bent; he looked lost in thought, and she reached out, touching his wrist. "Harry?" she asked.

When he looked up at her, there was something new in his green eyes; something she hadn't seen before, though she'd seen it before in other people. It was warm, and yet it made her shiver a little.

"Why me?" he asked her, and she thought he sounded a little bit afraid; it made her reach out for him, and he took her hand, slipping his fingers between hers.

"You're kind," she told him, stepping in closer. He seemed to want her there. "You fight for people that you love," she added, "and you never let anyone stop you."

"Ah," he said, and then her hands were on his waist, and his were resting lightly on her ribs. "Ginny always hated that about me."

"Ginny is a flower," Luna explained softly. "And you're a flower, too."

He frowned, a little half-laughing frown, as his hands moved to join behind her back. "Are you saying I'm not very manly?"

"No!" Luna exclaimed, feeling her cheeks warm as he pulled her into the circle of his arms. "No, but a flower needs a gardener. Someone to help it bloom, help it grow."

"So two flowers," he mused. "Not good?"

"Beautiful," she said. "Flowers are beautiful, and everyone wants a flower."

"But?" he prompted, smiling at her. "Are you a flower?"

"Me? No," she laughed. "I'm a gardener. Well," she said, pausing. "For you, anyway. For you, I'm a gardener."

"You are, aren't you?" he murmured, and she rested her head against his chest, her heart beginning to pound as he leaned down to speak into her ear.

"I think," she said quietly, tilting her head up to look at him, "that I was correct. I have been looking for someone to measure up to you," she decided, nodding. "Someone just like you," she repeated
"Is there any chance," Harry said, and then cleared his throat. "Is there a possibility, I mean, that maybe what you were looking for is actually . . . me?"

She felt a rush of something then; the Harry feeling. She had only ever felt it with him, and she'd never really known what it was, but she was content to call it the Harry feeling, and let that be that. Seemed overly tiresome to question it, but she was glad to be feeling it again.

"Harry," she said suddenly, feeling something sneaky in her bones, "what time is it?"

He shifted her in his arms, checking his watch. "11:11," he said, and then smiled. "Muggles have a tradition for that, you know."

She smiled too. "I know it," she agreed, briefly shutting her eyes.

_Please, let it be Harry._

Chapter End Notes

_a/n: Okay, these are extremely long, what have I done. There will be three parts total and it will conclude sometime this week. Dedicated to i-heart-hogwarts and accio-echo for their tumblr song suggestions!_
Daphne wandered blindly through the castle, wondering whether to be furious or devastated.

Was she really so out of line? she thought morosely, making a face at her dress as it glittered in the dim lighting of the corridor. It had been so lovely and full of promise when she'd put it on, and now it just seemed gaudy and gratuitous. Like you, she told herself fiercely. All sparkle and no substance.

She was turning the corner, fighting tears, when she was suddenly hit by a tiny, sprinting figure in an equally blinding shimmer, causing Daphne to stumble and their dresses to become hopelessly tangled.

"Stupid gown," the other woman growled, looking up, and Daphne swallowed a gasp.

"Oh," Daphne said, wiping at her eyes. "Sorry, Gr- er. Hermione."

"Oh," Granger said nervously, "I'm sorry, I um - " she continued fidgeting, trying to unhook the snagged beading, "I'm so sorry, I didn't see you coming - "

"It's just as much my fault," Daphne muttered apologetically, marveling at how lovely Granger had gotten since they'd last seen each other. Not that she could ever admit such a thing out loud, being Pansy's best friend. "This is hardly the worst thing to happen to me this evening," she added, biting her trembling lip.

Granger looked up at that, pausing. "Oh," she said quietly, and her overlarge brown eyes softened. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, yes, everything is magnificent," Daphne sniffed, raising her arm so that Granger might have better access to the snag on her bodice. "I've only been completely horrible to someone who means a great deal to me, and have insulted his book, of course, which I didn't read, because I'm an illiterate degenerate who apparently has no heart - "

At that, Granger finally managed to unhook the snagged fabric and sighed. "You don't mean Theo Nott, do you?"

Daphne let out a frustrated wail, sinking to the floor. "He was right," she sobbed, fanning her skirts
out and letting her head lean back against the wall, covering her face with her hands. "Everyone knew, except me!" She let her hands fall, suddenly exhausted. "Stupid me."

Granger hesitated for a moment, but then settled herself carefully beside Daphne on the floor. "Well," she said delicately, "I don't really know if everyone knew."

"You knew," Daphne sniffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "You read it?"

"I did," Granger said slowly. "I was, um." She paused, her face reddening.

"You're witnessing the entire collapse of my psyche here, Granger," Daphne said desperately. "You could at least have mercy on me and share."

"Right, right," Granger said nervously, toying with her fingernails and sighing loudly. "I suppose that's fair."

She looked away for a moment, and Daphne, in her impatience, cleared her throat.

"Right, sorry," Granger said instantly, blushing again. "Well, fine. The truth is, I bought Theo's book because I thought that someone else might, um, make an appearance in it." She stared resolutely at a spot on the floor, not acknowledging Daphne's curious grin. "A friend of his."

"Ah," Daphne said, unable to prevent a tiny chuckle of amusement.

"Anyway," Granger said quickly, "I was expecting it to be about his life or something. Theo's, I mean. A memoir of some sort, I guess - "

"Right?!" Daphne exclaimed, straightening. "Sorry, go on."

" - but it wasn't," Granger continued, looking a bit professorial in her assertion. "It was actually this very lovely, very sensitive study on love," she admitted, and Daphne felt her heart sink in her chest. "It was quite moving, if I'm being honest." Granger looked up, meeting Daphne's eye. "It makes a lot of sense to me that it would be about you."

"I wish I had read it," Daphne said, sighing desperately. "I feel just terrible now, and I - "

"Well," Granger said slowly, "I do have a copy." She picked up her small beaded bag and opened it, reaching so far inside that her arm nearly disappeared.

"Don't you work for the Ministry?" Daphne commented, puzzled. "Isn't that - "

"Do you want the book or not?" Granger interrupted curtly, pulling her arm out and offering it to her. The cover was the same as the many copies Daphne had seen in shop windows; the same plain navy cover with the gold embossed print. A Sky Full of Stars by Theodore Nott.

"Yes," Daphne grumbled, holding a hand out, and Granger placed it in her waiting palm.

She felt a little flutter in her chest at the prospect of holding it and turned eagerly to one of the pages that Granger had dog-eared, holding her breath.

He envied the sun on her face. He envied the fabric on her skin, the words on her lips. He envied more than anything the men who had learned how to make her moan; whose names had escaped, breathless, traipsing off her tongue. Whether many or few, he envied them. He envied their closeness, envied the air they breathed, the lives they led, that they had been there to capture it; the sound of her, of yes, yes, more, harder, deeper - for how many times had he longed to run his
"Oh," Granger said, her cheeks tinted pink. "Sorry. That's for something else." She took the book back from Daphne and sought out a different page, handing it back to her. "Try this."

Daphne, who could not fight a smirk at that, nodded silently and bent her head to read the passage.

_**Love is truly the most humbling force in the world, he learned, bowing his head below the sky full of stars. You imagine there is someone out there whose heart was crafted for yours, whose body was designed to tuck itself into the acuteness of your angles. And then you realize you are wrong - you are so very, very wrong - for how could you be the one for her? How could you be the one for her, when you are so crude, so flawed? And then you learn, in love, that you are destined for pain; for however bright her eyes shine, you and your flaws - and the many ways in which you are a fool - can only be dull in them.**_

Daphne looked up in alarm. "Oh," she said softly, bringing a hand to her lips.

"What is it?" Granger asked, but Daphne closed her eyes.

_**You talk about that Nott boy too much,**_ her mother scolded. _**I don't want you hanging around with him.**_

_**Why not?**_ Daphne pleaded. _**Theo's my friend, Mother, and he -**_

_**His family is nothing but worthless, arrogant tyrants,**_ her mother replied angrily. _**His father is a monster and he will be too. Just watch.**_

_**No!**_ Daphne cried, horrified. _**Not him, Mother, I swear, you don't know him, you don't know what he's like with me -**_

_**I know the apple never falls far from the tree, and I know he and his father are well on their way to ruin,**_ her mother warned. _**Believe me, dear,**_ she cooed, twisting one of Daphne's dark auburn waves around her finger, _**you don't want a boy like that.**_

Daphne reached up, finding that Granger's arms were around her and that she was crying, remembering the way she used to feel; the way she **might** have felt, if she hadn't been so concerned with following the guidelines her name and family had determined for her.

"He's always been my friend," she whispered, resting her forehead on Granger's shoulder. "I didn't think I could let myself - "

"I know the feeling," Granger murmured, nodding. "But things are different now, aren't they?"

"They are," Daphne said, pulling away. She waited for a moment, seeing the genuine look of encouragement on Granger's face, before wiping her eyes dry and smiling.

"Thank you," she said quietly, reaching out to grip one of Granger's hands. "I really appreciate you being so nice to me."

"Oh, no," Granger said, shrugging and looking away. She really was infuriatingly humble, considering. "It's really nothing. I just - "

"Do you know why Pansy hated you so much in school?" Daphne interrupted, deciding to give back a little. It was only right, really, even if Pansy hated her for it. She would get over it.
Granger, not unpredictably, made a face. "Because I was a hopeless little swot," she sighed, "and incurably bossy."

Daphne laughed, rising to her feet and offering Granger a hand, which she accepted. "No," Daphne corrected primly, squeezing her fingers once before releasing them. "Not at all, actually."

"Oh no, something worse?" Granger joked, rolling her eyes.

Daphne laughed again and leaned in, turning to speak directly into her ear. "It's because Draco wouldn't stop staring at you," she whispered, then offered her a wink and strode away, ready to make amends with her new favorite author.

Hermione stood alone in the corridor for a moment, smiling after Daphne, before it occurred to her that she was wasting valuable time.

She was still buzzing from the knowledge that she had finally done it. She had finally kissed Draco Malfoy after years of curiosity, of countless awkward too-long stares and constant thrills of panic when they accidentally touched; after so long of no, don't do it, don't think about it, it had finally happened, and it had been breathtaking and perfect and she had yet to recover - not that running down the stairs had helped in that.

But of course the moment it happened, the moment she realized that kiss was what she had been waiting for - that it was one reason among many that Ron had been not quite right - was the same moment she felt a paralyzing pang of guilt, recognizing vaguely that before she kissed him again - or more than that, as more was surely coming - she had some logistics to sort out. She had to regain her capacity to think straight, and surely there was no way she could do that in the presence of Draco Malfoy, whose lips and face and hands were, with certainty, going to prove distracting.

She shook her head quickly, resolving to recover her ability to process. Did abandoning him in the tower now seem highly illogical? Yes. Did she desperately need the time to think that running around the castle had permitted her? Yes. Should she stop standing pointlessly in this corridor and sort herself out?

Resounding yes.

She took off for the Great Hall and caught the subject of her attention, yanking him to the side.

"Hey!" Ron grunted, scowling. "What is with the women of Hogwarts deciding to manhandle me tonight?"

"Do me a favor and don't explain what that means," Hermione sniffed impatiently. "I just need to tell you something, as I think it's best if I deliver it myself rather than you hearing through the rumor mill that - "

"Yes, go ahead, date Malfoy," Ron cut in with a grumble, rolling his eyes.

"I - what?" Hermione squawked, gaping at him. "Where on earth," she added, "did you come up with such a grossly miscalculated, totally far-fetched - "

"Mione," Ron said, gripping her hands and giving her an exceedingly stern look that, really, she might have given him. "I have known you for thirteen years."

"Yes," she replied, pursing her lips. "And?"
"And I have had the great benefit of learning your little ticks," he continued, patting the top of her head, "and the great misfortune of watching you stare at him for the last couple of years. Combined with my not inconsiderable ability to put two and two together - "

"I never stared at him!" she insisted, drawing her hand defensively to her chest. "I was nothing but completely faithful to you, Ronald - "

"I know that," he interrupted gently, a rare tone of affection returning to his voice for the first time in months. "I know you were, and I know you loved me."

She withered a little, sighing. "I did," she said softly. "I really did."

"And I loved you," he said adamantly, lifting her chin to look her in the eye. "And I still love you as my best friend, Mione, and I always will. I just - " he paused, a slow, languid grin spreading over his lips. "I look forward to being with someone who actually lets me make them happy."

She smiled at that; a sad smile, at the somewhat deflating idea that they were never going to be Ron and Hermione again, but a smile nonetheless.

"I want that for you," she told him. "I really do."

"And I want you to be with someone who can keep up with you," Ron said, shrugging. "Who wants to keep up with you, I guess I should say," he amended thoughtfully, before looking intently at her. "If that's Malfoy, then fine. He seems to have gotten his overall twatting under control in recent years."

"Ron," Hermione groaned. "Really?"

"His general fuckery has been greatly diminished," Ron said loudly, and she brought her hand to her face, massaging her temple.

"Fine," she said curtly, sensing they'd reached their limit of purposeful discourse. "As long as you're not totally destroyed over it - "

"Broken," Ron said dramatically, feigning a stab to the chest. "Bleeding all over the floor - "

"Then I'm going to go for it," she cut in, lifting her chin. "Give me that," she added, gesturing to his glass, and he relinquished it with a scowl. "I need this."

"I need it more," he grumbled, his eyes straying across the room.

"Why?" Hermione said suspiciously, furrowing her brow as she watched him. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing," he muttered, clearly lying.

"Ronald," she said warningly, glaring at him.

"Let me just say, I am not going to miss that ball-shriveling look of yours," he said, but at her stomp of impatience, he sighed. "Fine. I just - " he looked at the floor. "I had a thing. Maybe a thing. I don't know."

"What kind of thing?" Hermione asked, nudging him. "Are we talking a crush, or an ulcer?"

"Honestly, both," Ron said, making a face. "Pansy Parkinson," he finally said, scuffing his foot guiltily against the floor.
"Oh," Hermione said, surprised; but upon further reflection, she began nodding slowly. "She is your type," she said slowly. "Controlling and shrill."

"Look what you did to me," Ron sighed in agreement. "I'm ruined."

"Honestly, I think your mother did that," Hermione told him, grimacing. "Well," she sighed, "if I'm going to try something with Draco, I don't see why you wouldn't try something with Pansy." The words sank in and she looked up at him, her expression pained. "Are we insane? Are we terrible masochists?"

"I definitely am," Ron assured her grimly. "I sent Parkinson after some other bloke and now I'm here, talking to you about it."

"Yikes," Hermione said, taking a long sip of wine and letting it linger on her tongue before swallowing. "Well," she said, deciding to be practical, "who was it?"

"Corner," Ron said, gesturing to where he was talking to Pansy. "I don't know why I didn't stop her," he added glumly.

Hermione squinted at where Pansy and Michael were talking. "Oh Ron," Hermione said, shaking her head. "She looks horribly bored." She patted his shoulder, giving him back his glass. "I changed my mind. You probably do need this."

"You think?" he asked distractedly, taking a sip and staring. "That she's bored, I mean."

"Even if she isn't, I assure you, you're the better option," Hermione said, giving him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "You're a good man, Ronald Weasley."

He chuckled at that. "You're a good woman, Hermione Granger," he replied. "I'm just glad we're done trying to live together."

"Oh god, definitely," she agreed, and nudged him forward. "Go get her."

"Fine," he said, patting her head again. "Have a good night, Mione. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Please leave," she sighed, and he obliged, taking a last sip of wine and replacing the glass on an empty tray before setting off to where Pansy had been standing.

"And now," Hermione said out loud to nobody in particular, "I think I'll go find myself my own entitled Slytherin."

"Mhmm," Pansy mumbled indistinctly, listening to Michael Corner go on at length about some sort of real estate investment in Diagon Alley and feeling a bit of fury rise up in her bones at seeing Granger's hand tighten affectionately around Weasley's arm.

Not that Pansy cared, obviously. Not that it mattered. Not that she had spent the last ten minutes with Corner thinking about how curious she was about whether Weasley had actually filled out quite a bit around the shoulders and chest or if it was just her foolish, overactive imagination. She certainly had not been wondering if Weasley would have laughed at her jokes (Corner did not seem to grasp them), or if he had meant what he said about her being pretty. She was quite certain that none of that had happened, was happening, or was ever going to happen.

"Pans," Daphne said breathlessly, suddenly materializing at her side, "have you seen - "
"Oh, Daphne, let me help you!" Pansy cried frantically, grabbing Daphne's arm and turning over her shoulder to call back to Corner. "Sorry, so sorry, friend in need - "

"I'm perfectly fine," Daphne said once they were out of earshot, frowning as she pulled her arm out of Pansy's tight grasp. "What's this?"

"Needed an escape," Pansy sighed. "He's not exactly the thrill of the century," she added, jerking her head to reference Corner.

"Ah, a shame," Daphne said, smirking. "I have to go though, Pans," she said, like she'd just remembered something. "I, um. I just had a very crucial realization, and I - "

"What?" Pansy asked, squinting at her. "Is everything okay?"

"I think so," Daphne said slowly. "Or at least, it will be. It's just - "

"Yes?" Pansy prompted, nudging her. "What is it?"

"I think I'm in love with Theo," Daphne said thoughtfully.

"You are," Pansy agreed, nodding. "I thought you knew that."

"I didn't!" Daphne insisted, shocked. "What do you mean you thought I knew that?"

"I don't know, it seemed obvious," Pansy said, shrugging. "Is that all?"

"I mean, I guess so," Daphne muttered uncertainly. "I guess I didn't think I'd find love somewhere it wasn't supposed to be," she grumbled. "Specifically, right in front of me."

"I know the feeling," Pansy agreed, grimacing, "considering I think I might be interested in Weasley, but only figured that out after I left him to talk to someone else."

If Daphne was startled by the admission, she wisely did not show it.

"At least you didn't first fail to realize he wrote a book for you, and then proceed to insult it to his face," Daphne ventured tentatively.

"I didn't do that, no," Pansy replied. "Though, to be fair, I did violate his face."

"Violate it more," Daphne offered, shrugging. "Like, with your mouth."

"What?" Pansy exclaimed.

"To be totally honest, I'm not sure what I was specifically trying to accomplish with my phrasing, but my intent remains," Daphne mused pleasantly. "Why not just go for it?"

"Oh, I don't know," Pansy began, "maybe because I truly did not intend to fall in love with anyone tonight, and I'm very adamant about not letting him complete me?"

"That . . . seems a bit much for the first night," Daphne sighed. "I really just meant sex."

"Oh," Pansy said, relieved. "That I can probably manage."

She opened her mouth to say more, but felt her stomach lurch as Daphne's eyes widened at something over her shoulder.
"He's coming," Daphne whispered, squealing a little and leaning in to kiss Pansy's cheek. "Good luck."

Pansy, true to form, panicked. "I - Daph, wait - "

"Hi," Weasley said, sidling up to her as Daphne quietly slipped away. "I, um. I may have done something stupid."

"Don't blame yourself, Weasley," Pansy said instantly, falling back on her chronic acerbity. "It's not your fault you were born colorblind," she offered, gesturing to his terrible dress robes.

"I happen to know for a fact that this is a great color on me," he insisted, pouting.

"Did your mother tell you that?" Pansy countered breathlessly. "She lied."

"Okay, what is with - you know what? Nevermind," he sighed, shaking his head. "Glossing over the continuous slights on my mother - "

"What did you do?" Pansy asked quietly. "The stupid thing, I mean. Other than this haircut," she added, reaching up to fuss with a particularly mussed up section.

He seemed to be holding his breath as her fingers brushed over his hair. "I may have," he began, clearing his throat, "failed to have stopped you from talking to Corner. Which may or may not have been stupid," he added, as she brought her hand back to her side, fidgeting in her unexpected struggle not to reach for him, "considering that I would have preferred that you continue talking to me."

"I can talk now," she offered, looking at the floor. "I mean, I'm obviously very busy," she amended quickly, "but if it means you'd be willing to consider a serious conversation about your fashion sense - "

"Stop," he said quietly, reaching out to brush his thumb across her lower lip. "I want to talk to you," he offered, "or not talk. Whatever you want. But I don't want to pretend with you." He took another step towards her and she felt something terrifying course through her veins; she clutched his arms like stairway railings, trying not to fall.

"Obviously I have some kind of severe head trauma," he murmured, "but I don't care. I like you. I want to understand you. I want to learn the things you like, because I bet they're bloody weird and interesting."

"They are," she agreed, swallowing.

"I don't particularly want you to hit me again, but I do want to make you laugh. I want to make you feel beautiful," he added, his eyes scanning her face, "and I want you to believe me when I say it."

"And if I don't?" she asked, struggling to find her voice.

"Then you don't," he said softly, "and I'll try again tomorrow."

"I'm not good at tomorrows," she warned him. "I don't trust them."

"I'm pretty shit at them too," he replied, shrugging. "But I've done scarier things before. Followed a trail of spiders once," he said with a shudder. "Did not care for it."

She hesitated for a moment. The last thing she wanted was for this to go badly; to be humiliated by
Ron Weasley would be a disaster to outdo all possible romantic disasters. It would be mortification and tragedy all rolled up in one, and she couldn't bear the thought of him knowing how much he had eased her ailing, or the chance that he might see through all the pieces of herself she had carefully constructed to keep people out.

But then, she was equally afraid that if she didn't take a chance now, she might never rid herself of her thoughts of him. She might never feel his lips on her skin, and that, out of everything, just seemed too impossible to fathom.

She didn't want to let him go.

"Is there somewhere you can meet me?" she asked, and a smile slowly stole across his face.

"What the fuck do you mean goodbye?" Blaise asked again, releasing her to pull away, leaping to his feet and angrily zipping his trousers. "You can't be serious, Ginevra - "

"Stop calling me that!" she exclaimed, struggling to her feet and haughtily lifting her chin. "I don't know why you do it - "

"Ginny is a child's name, and sometimes I want you to behave like an adult," he snapped, crossing his arms. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Would you please stop being so patronizing?" she huffed back. "You can't fuck me and then call me a child. It's intolerable."

"Explain yourself," Blaise pressed again, trying to bite back his rising temper. It was utterly impossible to have a conversation with her that didn't make him want to shake her or kiss her, and it was particularly unbearable when he couldn't distinguish between the two.

"I can't be with you," she said stubbornly, staring him down from her diminutive height. "I can't. It doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't make sense?" he asked, letting his head drop in exasperation. He was embarrassed by the pleading in his voice, but far too exhausted to hide it. "How can we not make sense to you, Ginny?"

"That's - that's not it," she said quietly, sobering a little at his obvious pain. "It's not you, Blaise, it's - "

"Don't," he warned, thinking he would spontaneously combust if she said what he thought she would. "Don't do it."

"I just ended a long relationship," she sighed. "I can't invest in something right now. I just can't." She looked down, looking vulnerable and beautiful and pulling effortlessly at his heart. "We need to be apart."

"I don't want to be apart," Blaise said mechanically. "I've been away from you long enough."

"Blaise, I - "

"No," he said, and she winced at his volume. "No. Don't I get a say? Don't my feelings count?"

"You're yelling," she said stiffly, grabbing his arm and yanking him into one of the classrooms on the first floor. She cast a quick muffliato before turning back to him, placing her hands on his
shoulders. "You need to calm down," she told him, which only served to infuriate him further.

"How can I possibly calm down?" he countered, taking advantage of the silencing spell to shout to his heart's content. "I'm tired of being in love with you, Ginevra, I'm fucking sick of waiting for you -"

"Love?" she repeated, dumbfounded. "Did you -"

"Yes, I said love!" he spat bitterly, looking everywhere but at her. "I've been in love with you for months. Fuck, I've been in love with you for years. Not that that seems to matter to you in any conceivable way," he added, glowering at her.

"Well - I, that's not -" she sputtered, stumbling backwards. "You - I wasn't -"

"You, Ginevra Weasley, are beautiful, and intelligent, and violent and quick-tempered and alive," he said, advancing on her. "I would be blind and stupid not to love you."

"You shouldn't," she said nervously, tearing at her lip with her teeth. "I'm - I don't know if I -"

"What?" he demanded, taking another step towards her.

"Stop that," she said instantly, brandishing her wand at him. "Don't come any closer."

"Or what?" he scoffed, though he paused in his progression. "You'll hit me with another bat-bogey hex?"

"I might," she snarled. "I've improved them."

"Just tell me the truth, Ginevra," he begged. "Just tell me what you're feeling because I promise -"
he took one tentative step. "I promise I won't leave you if you do."

"I don't like this," she said, teeth gritted. "I feel too exposed."

"I was inside you earlier," he reminded her, in case she'd forgotten; though the covetous look on her face told him she had not.

"I'm just afraid," she said slowly, "that if we try to start something right now - if we were in an actual relationship -"

She looked up at him, terrified, and he took another step towards her, nodding reassuringly.

"Go on," he said, and she sighed.

"I'm just afraid you won't like me if you have me all the time," she whispered.

"Ginevra," he sighed, reaching out to trace the line of her jaw. "You fool."

At that, her eyes widened in frustration. "I'm trying to be honest with you!" she sputtered, swatting his hand away. "You asked me to tell you the truth, and I am -"

"I know that, and I'm telling you that you're a fool!" he snapped. "Aren't you listening to me? I'm in love with you -"

"How can you know that?" she pressed. "You've never lived with me - you've never been there when I've left the dishes in the sink for three days in a row, or decided not to fold the laundry, or forgotten to wash my hair -"
"So I'll learn," he retorted impatiently. "I'll learn to love those parts of you because I am so fucking captivated by the rest." He paused to glare at her for good measure. "Why is it so hard for you to accept that I might love you?"

"Because - because you're you!" she insisted, smacking his chest. "You're bloody perfect, and I couldn't ever measure up - "

"You're insane," he said tightly. "Would you like to see my flaws? I have a temper, for one thing," he seethed. "And for another, I process most of my emotions through my dick."

She stared at him.

"You're going to fuck me on this desk, aren't you?" Ginny demanded, backing into it as she finally ran out of room to escape him.

"Probably!" Blaise shouted back, scowling.

"Either I'm in love with you, or I'm going to murder you later," Ginny determined, glaring at him as he picked her up, depositing her roughly on the desk behind her.

"Fine by me," he growled, making good on his promise.

Luna was fully in his arms now and Harry was beginning to realize that he wished he'd tried it sooner.

"Did you make a wish?" he asked, and she looked up, smiling.

"I did," she said, and he wondered how it had not occurred to him to look at her this closely before. In the castle's dim lighting she was practically glowing in the dark, and he found it breathtaking.

"Did you?"

"Um," he said, pausing. "No, actually."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Why not?"

"I - " he paused, thinking it through. "I guess because I can't think of anything else I want," he realized, the clarity suddenly dawning on him; the unspeakable rarity of the fulfillment he currently had. He'd been dreading this night, had been so sure it would be awkward and uncomfortable, and instead, this was the most relaxed he'd been in months. "Besides," he said, trying to shake the immensity of that recognition from his mind as he realized she was waiting for an answer, "you're really not supposed to say your wish out loud, anyway."

Luna gave a little giggle. "Oh Harry," she said, giving him a look. "You know muggle jinxes aren't real."

"I - what?" he asked, laughing. "You mean, like wrackspurts?"

"Oh no, wrackspurts are definitely real," she said solemnly. "They look sort of like - "

He wasn't sure what came over him but he couldn't wait any longer to kiss her, and so he didn't. Her lips were soft and full and tasted like strawberries and she was so pliant in his arms; he felt a pang of something, some sharp opposition to the idea that she had gotten all done up for someone who wasn't him, and he held on tighter, pulling her closer, tangling his fingers in her dirty blonde hair. She kissed him back with the kind of breathless desperation that he felt he'd been waiting his
whole life for, and when they broke apart, he couldn't help but hate himself for missing it for so long.

"Like I was saying," she managed, "they look a bit like nargles, only the wings are - "

"You are so full of hot nonsense," he gasped appreciatively, and she laughed, bringing her lips back to his as his hands found their way to her hips, pulling her against him.

To his surprise, her hands found the button of his trousers, making quick work of the zipper and taking him in her hand.

"Oh," he said, startled. "Are you sure that you, um - "

"You don't want to?" she asked innocently, sliding her palm against him in a slow, languid stroke. "Would you prefer to wait?"

"I - " he swallowed, trying not to cry out as she brushed her thumb against the tip. "I mean, I suppose I'm not particularly busy at the moment - "

"I suspect it's always been you for me, Harry Potter," she mused absently, her grey eyes wide with sincerity as she looked at him. "Personally, I think it's been you from the beginning."

*Oh god, oh god, oh god* - "I think you're right," he said, and once he said it, he realized he meant it. "It was you from the beginning," he repeated, stunned. "I mean, I was hoping you'd be here, I didn't even realize - "

She smiled. "If there's one thing I know about you," she said, taking his hand and bringing it to the neckline of her gown, "it's that you eventually figure it out."

"Draco," Granger breathed in relief, appearing out of nowhere and panting, like she'd run there. "There you are."

"There I am?" Draco echoed in disbelief, and Theo fought a laugh at his expression, which was nearly identical to Narcissa's look of indignation. "Granger, I was sitting here composing your eulogy," he sniffed. "I was starting to think you might have fucking fallen off the tower - "

"Theo," Daphne said breathlessly, emerging from the opposite side of the courtyard, "I have to - Oh," she exclaimed in surprise, catching sight of Granger and smiling. "Oh, good for you."

"Oh, hi," Granger said, her cheeks flushing slightly. "Yes, um - same, I guess."

"You know, I had a dream like this once," Theo remarked, smirking as he let his eyes flick between the two witches.

"Tell me I wasn't there," Draco said, making a face.

"No, you were definitely there," Theo said, shrugging. "And you liked it."

"Please don't give me any reason to regret anything I say before I even say it," Daphne sighed, and Granger ducked her head to hide a laugh, reaching out a hand for Draco.

"Come on," she said softly. "Let me explain?"

Draco flashed Theo an impish grin and winked before dramatically accepting. "Fine," he said, feigning misery. "Though this had better be good, Granger."
She rolled her eyes and gripped his hand, pulling him towards the castle.

"I like her," Theo said aloud, nodding.

"Me too, actually," Daphne noted, watching Draco and Granger disappear.

"Don't tell Pansy," they said at once, and then both looked down shyly, realizing they were alone again.

"So," Daphne said, clasping her hands and looking down at them. "There are some things I need to say to you."

"Same," Theo said, wincing preemptively. "I wasn't entirely fair, I think - "

"Oh no," Daphne interrupted, looking up. "No, Theo, this one's on me - "

" - there's a lot I didn't tell you, and I can't have expected - "

" - I'm the one who didn't read your book, which was so stupid, but now I've - "

" - you shouldn't have to guess my feelings, Daph, I was being ridiculous - "

" - finally looked at it, and I had this realization, but Theo - "

" - the thing is, Daphne, I just - "

" - I'm in love with you," they said in unison, and then they promptly forgot how to breathe.

"What?" they both said. "You go first," they added in chorus, and Theo made a motion to his lips, promising silence and gesturing for her to go ahead.

"Theo," she said quietly, "why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I'm a fucking fool," he asserted, but at her pleading glance, he sighed. "Because I didn't want to hear you tell me you didn't feel the same way," he confessed. "I've just spent so much of my life being in love with you that I thought - stupidly, of course," he said, and she nodded, "that maybe if I could just show you in some hugely significant way, then maybe you might feel the same." He shook his head. "Believe me, the error of my ways has been made clear to me in several different forms today, your rejection included."

"Rejection," she echoed, and smiled. "No, Theo." She came towards him, placing her hands on his hips. "Not at all."

Well, he thought, that sounds bewilderingly like a good thing.

"I'm going to need you to explain that," Theo said slowly. "Possibly over-explain. Imagine you're speaking to a simpleton," he added. "Or even someone just slightly thicker, like Draco."

"Theo," she said, smiling up at him. "Hush."

He nodded.

"The thing is," she began hesitantly, "I think you know as well as I do that my family's expectations are . . . rigid," she determined, and he nodded again. "I was told a long time ago that you were never going to be an option for me, and I think I heard it so much that I started to believe it."
"I'm sorry," he mumbled helplessly, and she reached up, taking his face in her hands.

"No, you shouldn't be," she said, and her hazel eyes took on the fiery, blazing glimmer that he had always loved. "Because the reason I couldn't see what was right in front of me is the same reason I'm ashamed of the fact that I managed to build a life for myself. That old pureblood garbage," she said, waving her hand like she wished to shove it away from her. "All it did was keep me from seeing what was so obvious, and it keeps me from being proud of myself now. But I love you," she said, her eyes wide, and he wondered for a moment if he might just collapse in her hands. "You've always been there for me, you're the person I want to tell when good things happen to me, you're the only one who makes me better when I'm sad - "

"You're the same, for me," he murmured, and she nodded fiercely.

"There was a moment when you walked away that I thought I might never have you back in my life," she admitted miserably. "And I swear, I missed you more in those few minutes than I've ever missed anyone in my entire life."

He swallowed hard, still wondering if any of this could possibly be real.

"We belong together, Theo Nott, and to hell with my mother," Daphne said, a tear slipping from the corner of her eye. "I'll get Astoria out from her house and help her make a life of her own, I'm going to stop worrying about what all the fucking purebloods think, and I'm - " she stopped, her voice breaking as she started to cry. "And I want to be with you, Theo, if you want me - "

"Are you kidding?" he gasped, pulling her into his arms. "Daphne Greengrass, are you fucking insane? I want you," he said firmly, bending to kiss her cheeks, her nose, her eyes, her lips. "Of course I want you - I wrote a fucking book for you - "

"I read a bit of it," Daphne admitted, sniffling. "It's beautiful, Theo - "

"Fuck the book," he said loudly, pulling away to look her in the eye. "It doesn't mean anything if I can't just tell you that I love you. That I've loved you since the moment I saw you," he said, shouting it for everyone else to hear, and she laughed, wiping a stray tear from her cheek, before he lowered his lips to her ear. "And I will love you for the rest of my life," he promised her, bending to press a kiss to her shoulder.

"Is this what happens at the end of your book?" she asked hopefully, then grimaced. "I'm sorry I haven't read it yet," she sighed, "but I will, I promise - "

"This is for you," he recited, knowing the end by heart. "I don't care if it fails; go on and tear me apart. Because for me, you light up the dark; whether you want it or not, my heart is yours. And if I die in your arms," he finished, pulling back and lifting her chin to look in her eyes, "you'll be my sky, you'll be my stars."

He took a deep breath, letting his fingers travel the beautiful curve of her cheek. "And what a heavenly view," he finished as she raised herself onto her toes, bringing her lips to his.

"That was so beautiful," she whispered, before hanging her head slightly. "And now I feel bad, because I know I should say something equally beautiful," she admitted sheepishly, "but all I really want to do at this point is have sex with you - "

"Oh, fuck, poetry to my ears," he said, grabbing her hand. "Let's go."

"So," Draco drawled, suddenly quite grateful to have a reasonable show of indignation with which
"Sit, please," Granger said, patting the spot on the bench next to her.

"I don't know if that's a good idea for you," he sighed, taking a seat. "Easier for you to run away if we're standing."

"That," she said carefully, "was a one time thing. I promise."

"Well, I don't know about you," he sniffed, "but I think that I deserve - mphoonp"

He was abruptly cut off as she grabbed his face, pulling him towards her and kissing him with the kind of vigor he wouldn't have previously assumed she possessed. "Shut up," she gasped, and then she was kissing him again and he promptly abandoned his charade, gripping her hair with one hand and her waist with the other, pulling her impossibly close until she was almost sitting in his lap, the skirt of her gown spread over his legs.

"There is a chance," she began slowly, pulling away with her eyes still closed, "that I did not handle the situation quite as well as I might have done if I were thinking straight."

"I forgive you," he said at once, reaching hungrily for her again, but she stopped him with a laugh.

"No, I owe you an explanation," she said, and he growled in frustration.

"Granger, you're pushing me to insanity," he muttered. "But fine, by all means, explain - I'll just sit here and suffer - "

"I'll fix it later," she promised, and he huffed his agreement. "Just - listen?"

"Listening," he confirmed gruffly, shifting his grip around her so that she was now indeed sitting on his lap, perched there like she had always been meant to curl inside his arms.

"I only broke up with Ron a couple of weeks ago," she said, and he made a face at Weasley's name. "No, don't make that face - it's just that it wasn't that long ago, and I was very, very alarmed by how much I enjoyed kissing you. Which I did," she repeated adamantly. "Enjoy it, I mean. A lot."

"And plan to do more of," he offered, prompting a nod.

"Definitely," she agreed. "But you have to understand, it was scary," she said tentatively, and he buried his face in her shoulder, content to let her get her thoughts out. "I don't think I realized quite how long I've - " she stopped, biting her lip. "How long I've had feelings for you, I guess."

"You guess?" he prodded, hoping for certainty.

"Well, I know," she said, looking a little sulky at having to admit it even as he silently boasted his triumph. "I have feelings for you, which was made very clear to me when I kissed you. Which is what I need to bring up now, because I'm sorry," she added, twisting around to look at him. "If that's not what you want - feelings, I mean - "

"If all I want is sex?" he clarified, frowning.

"Yes. If that's all you want, I don't think I can do it," she determined grimly, staring fixedly at her lap. "Because the truth is, I've really started to make up reasons to go to your office," she confessed, looking at him regretfully. "I mean, you can't possibly think I need your signature on that many things."
"I had wondered," he admitted, chuckling.

"And I'm finally admitting to myself why that is," she said firmly. "So," she sighed, giving him a pointed look, "in conclusion, either you want me, and we do this thing for real, or - "

"Hermione Granger, if you can't see how wholly infatuated I am with you, then you are hardly the witch I thought you were," he informed her, squaring his shoulders and holding her closer in the same motion. "I want you to be mine immediately. I want you to be mine yesterday. I want to go back in time, steal you from under Weasley's nose, and have woken up with you this morning - "

"How about tomorrow morning?" she cut in breathlessly, and he let out a loud groan, pulling her towards him.

"I hope that's a promise," he muttered, resting his forehead against hers. "Because hell if I'm letting you go now."

He felt her smile, and a warm contentment settled itself in his chest.

"Oh," Granger said after a moment, nudging him. "Look."

Theo and Daphne emerged from the courtyard holding hands, half-running back through the castle.

"Hey," Draco called out to them, "where are you - "

"Going to catch the portkey," Theo supplied, not slowing down. "Very important business to take care of immediately."

"Let's do lunch tomorrow!" Daphne called brightly - "I'm going to marry this girl," Theo mouthed to Draco, pointing gleefully at Daphne's head - and Granger nodded back, smiling.

"What did he mean, catch the portkey?" Draco asked after they'd disappeared inside the castle, turning to look at Granger.

"In the literal sense? I think he meant the portkey to the Three Broomsticks," Granger said. "We set up a few in case people were interested in staying the night. Rather than drinking and apparating, you know, and risking splinching."

"And in the metaphorical sense?" Draco prompted, smirking.

"Ah, sex, I think," Granger supplied, her cheeks reddening deliciously. "I imagine, anyway."

"Hm," Draco said, clearing his throat. "I don't suppose you would find that portkey interesting, would you?"

"Well, there's another one in thirty minutes," Granger supplied primly, letting her hand drift confusingly to the band of his trousers.

"And until then?" Draco asked, deflating slightly. "Shall we talk more about our feelings?"

"Oh, no," Granger said, laughing. "I'm pretty sold on you, Draco Malfoy."

He couldn't fight a triumphant smirk at that.

"Actually," she continued, "I was thinking we could revisit the Astronomy Tower. The view, you know," she explained, shrugging, and he felt a slow smile spread across his face. "I have a proclivity for heights and, um," she coughed delicately, letting her finger linger on the zipper of his
"Don't be so coy, Granger," he murmured in her ear. "If you want me to fuck you in the tower, all you have to do is ask."

"Please," she purred in his ear, and he leapt to his feet, thinking he'd never heard anything more wonderful than her laughter as it filled the corridor.

"Okay," Ginny sighed, sitting up from where she'd been laying across the desk. "Fine. Let's date."

"Well, please," Blaise drawled snobbily, "don't smother me with your enthusiasm."

"No fuckery, do you hear me?" she told him, sternly pointing a finger in his face. "No flirting with other witches. No being stupidly handsome all the time and running off with someone better."


"Don't toy with me," she warned him. "This is what you get, okay? Insanity." She waved her hand around aimlessly. "Unbridled madness."

"Ginevra," he murmured in her ear, and she shivered, furious with his effect on her, desperate to have it forever. "I want you. Only you," he added, kissing the other side of her neck, "and all of you."

"You're cool, but I'm cooler," she reminded him. "You're pretty, but I'm cuter."

"And smarter," he offered. "And mine," he concluded emphatically, taking her in his arms to accentuate the point.

"And yours," she said, feigning a resigned sigh and smiling when she knew he couldn't see.

He held her hand as they walked back to the Great Hall and she let him, deciding it wasn't so bad, really. Being loved. Being loved by him, specifically. Her love with Harry was always rooted in a frustrating inequity, in the owing of her life to him, and in her childish obsession. It had stretched and waned as they aged, and then it didn't fit her anymore, like a jumper she'd adored but outgrown.

But Blaise was different, she realized, sneaking a glimpse at him. There were no exhausted concessions to please her. There was no letting her unreasonable expectations get the better of him. They fought, yes, but there was some understanding, for her, that he was eternally on her side. That he understood her, for all her gaps and rhythms.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he squeezed her hand tightly, and she smiled.

"Shall we take the portkey?" he asked. "I mean, I'm aware we've already - "

"Let's," she determined with a nod.

"You're insatiable, Ginevra," he said, shaking his head, and Ginny turned at a loud gagging sound.


"Heading to the Three Broomsticks, Pans?" Blaise asked smoothly, tucking an arm around Ginny. " Alone?" he added, his face expressionless.
"Yes and yes," she said pompously, just as they caught up with Theo Nott and Daphne Greengrass.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Blaise pronounced, eyeing them. "Did this finally happen?"

"It did," Nott declared, bowing. Daphne backhanded him in the stomach, sighing loudly.

"Oh, look how sad all the other girls are," Pansy said, smirking wickedly and gesturing. They were, indeed, quite crestfallen, Ginny noted with an inward laugh. She didn't know Blaise's friends well, but had some concept of their dynamic - and there was, of course, no getting around the obvious fame of Theo Nott's book.

Ginny had read it, of course, and devoured it. It wasn't *erotica*, per se, but if she concentrated hard enough -

"So this is a thing?" Daphne asked, smiling between Ginny and Blaise. "I like it, I think."

"As do I," Blaise nodded, and he nudged Ginny forward, offering her access to the portkey. "Just a few seconds, right? Is it midnight on the nose?"

Ginny heard someone confirm the time for him but was distracted by Pansy, who was eyeing something in her hand; it was a note of some kind, and the thin, spindly handwriting looked oddly familiar.

"Hey," Ginny said loudly, blinking in disbelief and pointing to Pansy's note with her free hand, "is that from my - "

"Oops, off we go!" Pansy said loudly, turning bright red as they were all sucked through the air with an uncomfortable slurp.

Ron started to fidget while he waited, wondering if she had changed her mind. They'd agreed it was best not to disappear together - too many questions, obviously, and they were in such a fragile state of only just barely not hating each other anymore - but he wished he hadn't been the one to leave first. He'd mildly enjoyed the walk to Hogsmeade, as it had given him plenty of time to think, of course; not that he'd done much thinking about anything other than loosening Pansy's dark hair from its complicated twist, letting it fall around her bare shoulders, reaching down to her breasts -

He coughed, trying not to delve any further. Wouldn't do for her to walk in on him already at attention.

He stood, pacing the room. This would be terrible for him if she didn't show up, he thought with a grimace, just as a key turned in the lock and she slipped in the door.

"Sorry," she said, pressing the door shut behind her and backing against it. "I, um, had a bit of an encounter with your sister."

Ron blinked. "Please don't bring her up ever again," he said, now trying to clear the image of Ginny from the room he hoped to have sex in.

Pansy grinned, and the pure wickedness of it was enough to put any other thoughts aside. Ron cleared his throat, eyeing her.

"I'm glad you came," he said hoarsely, stepping towards her.

He expected a snotty remark, but she flushed brilliantly, accepting the hand that he offered her and
gesturing for him to put it around her waist.

"I guess I decided you look well on me," she returned, and a smile sparked across her face.

"Funny," he commented. "I'm hoping to see how you look on me."

"Oh, wordplay," she noted silkily. "Nice."

"I thought you might like it," he said, realizing as her eyes glittered in the low light of the room that this, for her, was foreplay. "The wordplay. Seems up your alley."

"It's a lifestyle, Weasley, not a party game," she said breathlessly as he reached around, slowly dragging the zipper down her spine.

"Ron," he corrected her, leaning forward to speak in her ear. "I'm going to want you to say my name," he explained, feeling a rush of something inexplicable as he watched her shoulders tense at his voice.

She slipped the dress off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor with an audible drop, and he felt his jaw go with it.

"Damn, Parkinson," he gasped, and she bit back a laugh, pulling him by his tie.

"It's Pansy," she told him, falling back onto the bed and pulling him on top of her. "I'm going to want you to say my name," she whispered, and he murmured it against her skin well into the night.

There was no doubt about it. Harry Potter was exceptionally skilled with his penis. Though he did not seem comfortable with that information when she offered it to him, and Luna could not fathom why.

"Really," she said breathlessly, as she loosened her legs from around his hips and he pressed her one last time against the wall, cutting her off with a kiss. "That was quite inspired, Harry. I'm remarkably satisfied."

"I'm glad, I think," he replied uncomfortably, though he did look relieved on some level.

"I worry I'm not accurately expressing myself," she mused, closing her eyes as aftershocks continued to flood through her. "I think in the interest of accuracy, I should lean towards ecstatic, really, but the connotation there isn't quite spot on, or so I'm given to understand - "

"Luna," Harry interrupted, yanking her to him and kissing her slowly, biting down softly on her lip before pulling away to smile at her. "You can just say the sex was good."

"Good?" she echoed dubiously, letting herself sway towards him. "Are you sure, Harry? That seems underwhelming."

"Colloquially, you could say the sex was fucking fantastic," he amended. "Which it was," he added, looking a little hungry at the statement.

She paused, thinking.

"The sex was fucking fantastic," she determined with a nod, smiling as he threw his head back with laughter.

"Come on," he said, pulling her under his arm and leading her back toward the Great Hall. "Let's
go see what's left of this reunion."

Luna couldn't help noting how comfortable it was to walk with him, fitted snugly under his arm like a puzzle piece; she was also relieved to see that he was free of any wrackspurts or nargles, and the smile on his face was both handsome and gratifying.

She decided she would have to tuck away the muggle wishing concept. Evidently time symmetry was indeed quite crucial to good fortune.

"Oh, Mr Potter," Professor McGonagall said, approaching swiftly, Lee Jordan at her heels. "I had hoped you would be around for closing remarks, but - "

"Where is everyone?" Harry asked, looking around in confusion. The Great Hall was completely emptied, despite the room being littered with empty wine glasses and vacant floating trays.

"Gone, it appears," McGonagall replied with an audible sigh. "I am unsure whether to determine this event a success or failure, to be quite frank - "

"Success," Harry said instantly, and Luna caught a flicker of a smile. "Definitely a success."

"Mm," McGonagall said, suddenly eyeing the two of them with suspicion.

"What are you doing here, Lee?" Harry asked curiously, turning to him. "Wasn't your reunion - "

"Oh, McGona-girl here thought she might need a host," Lee replied jovially, nudging her with an impish grin. "It appears she may have overestimated her ability to throw a party."

"Oh, I don't think that's the problem," Luna informed him, surveying the room and recalling the very interesting energy that had tingled between the guests at the beginning of the night. "I imagine you've simply lost them all to congress."

"Congress?" McGonagall echoed, blinking vacantly. "Whatever do you - "

"Hermione!" Harry said loudly, catching her oncoming form and waving his arms manically. "Good, you're still here."

"Hi Harry," she said breathlessly, pulling Draco Malfoy in her wake. They both seemed consummately tousled, Luna thought, tilting her head in amusement as she eyed the pretty brunette and her uncharacteristically relaxed companion. About time, Luna thought with pleasure, thoroughly relieved to see that Hermione had finally been rid of her stray snabberwitches.

"Speaking of congress," Luna exclaimed in delight, and Harry immediately wrapped her in a very tight hug, entirely eliminating her capacity for speech.

"Well, I suppose we should all head out for the evening," McGonagall said stiffly, eyeing the messy hall. "The elves have all been promised double wages for this, so might as well leave them to their work."

"Oh, lovely," Hermione said brightly. "It really was a wonderful evening, Professor," she added, flush with happiness. "Very special."

McGonagall's gaze flicked skeptically between Hermione and Draco. "I'm going to leave," she sniffed, "before I find out anything I don't want to know."

"That's probably best," Draco agreed, smirking, and McGonagall promptly disappeared, Lee
following at her heels.

"Huh," Hermione said, staring after them. "Is it just me, or did that seem like - "

"Congress," Harry supplied, and Luna giggled in his arms.

"Was the sex fucking fantastic?" she asked them, and though Hermione reddened considerably, Draco seemed glad of the question.

"It was," he declared. "Life-alteringly fantastic. Explosively, uninhibitedly, unadulteratedly - "

"We should leave," Hermione cut in instantly, and Harry nodded.

"Let's go," he said, sighing, though he seemed secretly quite pleased. He wove his fingers between Luna's, squeezing them gently.

She smiled.

All was well.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: THE END. Not my neatest ending, but hey, there's a Hermione masturbation joke in there. This one's for nvrlnd-xassy, dr sally, and mechengmama - thank you for your song suggestions! I fear I am missing someone but I fervently hope I am not. Did you guys catch all the embedded songs?
Chimera

Pairing: Sevmione (Severus Snape x Hermione Granger)

Universe: EXTREMELY AU. So AU, in fact, that I do not have an explanation for where it takes place.

Rating: M for language, sex

Summary: Hermione Granger was a grad student until she woke up in some other world, where a handsome man and his eerily persuasive mother have taken her under their wing. She can't remember who she is or how she got there, but she does know that the surly stranger with a high place in court is not to be trusted . . . probably.

A gift for my friend oblivionbaby, both for being the thousandth review on Clean (!) and for being an overall delight. Plot heavily influenced by the book The Thinking Woman's Guide to Real Magic by Emily Croy Barker.

Chimera | noun, \kī-'mir-ə, kə-

Def: a horrible or unreal creature of the imagination; a vain or idle fancy; i.e., he is far different from the chimera your fears have made of him.

"What's this?" Merope asked impishly, nudging the thing's foot. "Did you put this here?"

"Of course not, Mother," Tom said smoothly, chuckling fondly at her foolishness. "Why would I?"

"A girl, is it?" Merope said primly, her hands on her hips. "What kind?"

"A human kind, I presume," Tom supplied with a sigh, bending to look at her. "Sort of pretty, I suppose." He stood. "Or will be, once you've finished."

"Too much hair," Merope sniffed in displeasure. "Good size, though."

"I think she'll be interesting for a time, don't you?" Tom asked whimsically. "You've been so bored lately, anyway."

"True," Merope agreed, sneaking a sharp kick at the girl's leg to see if she'd notice. "When will she wake?"

"Soon, I'm sure," Tom said indifferently, tiring of the conversation. "I've got to run, Mother, but you'll take care of her, won't you?"

"I suppose if I'm to be so tasked," she permitted, letting him kiss her cheek before he strode forward, his boots echoing through the vast, cavernous corridors of the castle.

"Now then," she said, bending again to look at her. "Yuck," Merope said to nobody in particular,
making a face. "Far too much hair," she mumbled, brushing her skirts aside as she started her work.

There are two ways to wake, as far as Hermione Granger is concerned. One is slow and comfortable, wherein one opens one’s eyes to find one is in the precise location one would expect to be. The bedroom in which one falls asleep, for example. Such is the preferred waking.

The other, of course, is with a start, like a cannon explosion, wherein one is entirely disoriented, and forcefully bolts upright. That, of course, was how Hermione awoke to her new life.

"What happened?" she gasped, frantically trying to wiggle her way out of a set of tightly tucked silk sheets. "Why am I - "

There was a small *tsk* from the corner of the room and Hermione looked up to find a beautiful woman she had never seen before; her skin was startlingly pale and her eyes, the most distinctive and alluring Hermione had ever seen, were dark and slightly unfocused.

"Too loud," the woman said impatiently, making a childish face of disapproval. She perched herself lightly on the bed - *impossibly* lightly, Hermione thought, wondering how she did not feel the shift of weight beside her - and reached over, placing her hands on either side of Hermione’s face.

"Um," Hermione said, swallowing with discomfort, "what exactly are you - "

"Quiet," the woman instructed briskly. "You will be quiet, yes?"

"Yes?" Hermione offered, and the woman shook her head unhappily.

"Say it," she demanded. "Say, ‘I will be quiet.’"

"I will be quiet," Hermione repeated, and she was startled to find that her tone had suddenly deepened in timbre, her voice taking on the kind of soothing, melodic strum she’d always secretly envied in other women. "Oh," she said, and the other woman nodded with satisfaction, removing her hands.

"Good," she said, suddenly clapping her hands with glee. "Excellent."

"Sorry," Hermione said slowly, "but could you tell me who you are, please?"

"Merope," the woman said, "and we have to get you ready."

"Ready?" Hermione echoed blankly. "For . . . what?"

"The ball!" Merope declared jubilantly, rising to her feet. "We have *ever* so much work to do."

"A ball?" Hermione repeated.

"*The* ball," Merope corrected, pausing to rest a hand on Hermione's head. "Listen better."

"Okay," Hermione replied numbly, wondering why she was now seeming to hang on Merope’s every word, as though her body urgently *ached* to hear the other woman speak. "The ball?"

"Yes," Merope said curtly. "The ball where you'll meet my son."

"Your son?" Hermione asked, her voice shaky with confusion. "Is he very young?"
As far as Hermione could tell, Merope looked scarcely older than she was.

"Oh no, my son is a man," Merope said quickly. "A human man," she added, as though that were in question. Somehow, Hermione didn't think it safe to ask. "I think," Merope added slowly, "if I do a good enough job - which I will," she amended confidently, "then perhaps you should marry my son."

Hermione made a low, strangled noise of protest. "But," she sputtered, and then Merope's hand was on her head again, soothing her.

"Don't fuss," Merope said with a sigh, narrowing her eyes in displeasure. "It's tiresome."

"Okay," Hermione agreed, feeling dizzy as Merope withdrew her hand and set about the room, which Hermione realized was a vast, elegant bedroom lined with floor to ceiling windows, each of which overlooked a stunning, palatial garden. "But does your son want to marry me?"

Merope, who had been opening the grandest wardrobe Hermione had ever seen, paused at that. "Hmm," she said, her oddly-shaped eyes widening. "What did you say your name was?"

"Hermione," she supplied. "Hermione Granger."

"Is that a name?" Merope asked in confusion, frowning into space. "Ah, well, I suppose," she decided after a moment, giving a pert little shrug. "Hermione, was it?"

Hermione nodded, finding that both her mind and body seemed frozen, awaiting Merope's instruction.

"Let's do something about your hair, Hermione," Merope mused, perching again on the bed to curl a ringlet around her finger; Hermione was surprised to see the curl, which had until that moment been its usual mess of frizz, bounce upwards in a golden-tinged ringlet. "And then we can set about concerning ourselves with whether Tom wants to marry you."

She hummed a little as she wandered through the room, returning to the wardrobe. "I think this will be just the thing," Merope said, pulling out a floor length satin gown. "Don't you?"

There's no way I'll look good in that, Hermione opened her mouth to say, but as she looked down at herself, she realized that wasn't true. She was suddenly quite reassured that her body would, in fact, be flatteringly framed by the flimsiest fabric she'd ever seen, and though she heard a faint voice in her head - Jesus Christ, Hermione, you'll spill something on that thing! - she found it pleasantly easy to ignore.

"Yes," she said happily, taking Merope's proferred hand and moving primly to sit, placid and doll-like, at the crystal vanity. Merope happily went to work on her hair and makeup, transforming Hermione's already petite features into the kind of breathless, delicate prettiness that she would have associated with a Hollywood starlet. It was a lengthy process but a fruitful one; Hermione wondered how she could have ever thought herself plain, eyeing her reflection. Was her skin not perfectly fair? Her hair not stunningly blonde? Her lashes not sensationally coquettish? "Ah, perfect," Merope pronounced after zipping her up. "Oh, except one thing," she said apologetically, giving Hermione's breasts a quick fondle. "There," she said, smiling as Hermione's cleavage swelled appealingly. "What more could he want!"

"You must be Hermione," a handsome man said, bowing low. "I'm Tom."
"Tom," Hermione said breathlessly, finding it difficult not to stare into his cornflower blue eyes. "Merope said - "

"Ah yes, you've spent the day with my mother," Tom said with a smile. "Did you take to each other?"

"I think we did," Merope supplied, materializing out of nowhere. "Didn't we, Hermione?"

"Yes, certainly!" Hermione said, ducking her head coyly. "A pleasure."

"You are stunning," Tom noted appreciatively, his eyes traveling hungrily over her. Hermione, who would normally have found such behavior repulsive, was instead pleased with his attention. "Was it difficult, Mother?"

"Only a little," Merope said brightly. "Overall, quite good, I think."

"Oh, absolutely," Tom agreed. "Quite pleasing. May I?" he asked, offering Hermione his arm.

"Of course," she returned exuberantly, giving Merope a broad smile as she took his arm. He swept them out of the ballroom, walking her to a balcony that overlooked a vast, mirror-like lake.

"Hermione," he said, her name dripping like honey from his tongue. "Are you happy here?"

"Yes," she breathed, leaning into his touch as he lifted her chin, his breath dancing across her lips. "Yes, Tom, I - "

There was a cool breeze from somewhere - inside the castle, she wondered in confusion - and she shivered, catching sight of a dark figure amidst the crowd.

A tall man stood there, at least as tall as Tom, though nowhere near as handsome; he was dressed in a long black cloak, his dark hair swept out of his face, and he was staring relentlessly at her.

"Who's that?" Hermione asked, blinking.

Tom turned. "Oh," he said, clearly irritated with the interruption. "That's Severus, my advisor."

"He looks terrible," Hermione said, bringing a scandalized hand to her chest, and Tom laughed - a lively, exuberant laugh that made Hermione want to never hear another sound for the remainder of her life.

"Oh, he is," Tom assured her. "Killed his wife, you know."

"No!" Hermione exclaimed, aghast. "And yet you let him advise you?"

"His wife was . . . unsatisfactory," Tom said darkly, a flicker of something appearing in his narrowed blue eyes. "I agreed with his decision."

Hermione frowned. "But - "

"Hermione," Tom interrupted. "Do you wish me to kiss you?"

"Yes," she realized, entirely consumed by him once more. "Yes, oh Tom - "

And then his lips were on hers, and she tasted euphoria.
"So," she heard a voice say behind her. "Are you enjoying the party?"

She turned from where she'd been watching Tom converse with his friends to face the man Tom had called Severus, who was, indeed, quite severe.

"I am," she cooed happily. "Isn't he wonderful?"

She waited for Severus to agree, but his mouth twisted strangely into something she guessed was disapproval.

"Well," Severus said moodily, "that is most unfortunate."

"What is?" Hermione asked, wishing the man would cheer up; his sulkiness was dampening her mood.

"How long have you been here?" Severus asked brusquely. "Do you know?"

"Of course I know," Hermione said, shaking her head at his consummate silliness. "I arrived earlier today, and Merope helped me get ready, and now I'm at the ball." She turned back to Tom, sighing dreamily. "Merope says I can marry him," she added, smiling broadly. "Aren't I lucky?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Severus grumbled, taking her by the shoulders and turning her.

"Ouch!" Hermione protested, startled by the jostling. "Excuse me, I - "

"You've been here for three weeks," Severus told her urgently. "You arrived at the first ball three weeks ago."

"That's impossible," Hermione assured him sweetly. "I saw you for the first time just about an hour ago - "

"Three weeks ago," Severus repeated emphatically, gripping her arms tightly. "Listen to me - "

"No," Hermione said stubbornly, tossing in a pout of displeasure. "I shouldn't be talking to you anyway," she added, a little distressed at the thought, "seeing as Tom might need me - "

She was cut off abruptly as Severus dragged her behind a tapestry, ducking them both out of sight.

"They've covered you in so many enchantments I'm surprised you even know your own name, much less who you are," he said, grimacing.

"Excuse me!" she snapped furiously. "I'm trying to - "

"Here," Severus muttered gruffly, placing his hands over her eyes; she fought him for a moment, then drew a ragged breath. "Now can you see them clearly?"

She thought she'd been standing in a castle; she was wrong. She could see now that they were in a dilapidated manor house, like something out of a dystopian novel from her studies - ah yes, she thought, remembering, I was working on my thesis, and then I found something in the library -

She was distracted as she realized that in place of Tom there was a thin, skeletal man, his skin a pale, chalky white, his face skull-like in construction, and with snake-like slits for nostrils; his blue eyes, which had charmed her to her very soul, were red and flashing and his fingers, which had held her chin only minutes before, were unnaturally long, more claws than hands.

"No," Hermione whispered, "no, no, this can't be happening - "
Beside Tom, a woman who should have been Merope was stooped at his side. Her eyes were slanted, seeming to face in separate directions, and she bore a heavy, miserable expression that could only have been described as grotesque; the rest of their friends, who had been so beautiful only a moment before, were masked and heavily cloaked.

"What did you do to them?" Hermione asked, panicked. "What is this? Where am I? Who are all of these - "

Severus clapped a free hand over her mouth. "Quiet," he warned; she realized that he, unlike the others, looked the same. There was a coldness to him, something that resonated in his eyes; but she, in her panic, clung to him.

"Who are you?" he asked. "How did you get here?"

"I'm Hermione Granger," she said desperately, struggling to remember. "I'm a graduate student studying literature - I'm from London, I was in the library - I found a book - "

She started to hyperventilate and he cautiously sunk to the floor, still holding one hand to her eyes. She ducked her head awkwardly between her knees, trying to breathe.

"Books," Severus sighed. "Dangerous things, at times."

"I - " she managed, struggling to speak. "I - I don't - "

"Breathe," Severus instructed, his voice low. He patterned his breath to set a cadence for hers. "In and out."

She nodded, slowly regaining her capacity to speak. "Why can't I see them like this?" she asked fearfully. "Why am I - "

"Merope is a very powerful witch," Severus told her. "A deeply unhinged one, as well," he added. "Very questionable handle on reality, though" - he paused, emitting a sharp burst of mirthless laughter - "the same could be said for everyone here."

"A witch?" Hermione repeated, horrified. "This - this can't be real, none of it is real, I must have been drugged - "

"It is real," Severus said curtly. "Unfortunately for you, it's all too real, and the moment I release you," he added, gesturing to his hands, "you will return to what you've been the last few weeks."

"Which is?" Hermione prompted, fighting back tears.

"A toy for Merope, and an object of desire for Tom," Severus told her. "Needless to say, I would caution you against marrying him," he added darkly. "Marriage vows are especially binding when there is magic attached."

"You can't let me go on like this," Hermione said fearfully. "You have to help me, you have to clear the enchantments - " she paused, hearing the ludicrousness of the sentence, "or whatever this is - "

"I can't just clear them," Severus pronounced flatly, with a finality that nearly broke something in Hermione. "They'll notice."

"So what if they do?" Hermione asked frantically. "So what if - "
"Tom will kill you," Severus said. "Or Merope," he added, thinking. "But more likely Tom."

"Surely," Hermione begged, "surely there is something - "

He looked scrutinizingly at her. "It would take days to unravel all of this," he deduced, sounding annoyed by the prospect. "Weeks, more likely."

She nudged her face up, trying to see him from under the visor of his hand; his eyes were dark and guarded but not cruel, she decided, and he seemed to soften even more at the sight of her expression.

"Hermione," Merope croaked from a distance, and she flinched violently, nearly upending Severus's hand from her face.

"Please," Hermione whispered desperately. "Please, I'm begging you - "

"Come find me," he muttered to her. "When I remove my hand, the enchantments will return. In the castle, I live in the dungeons."

"What are they really?" she asked hesitantly, and he grimaced.

"Nothing good," he assured her, and she jumped as Merope called her name again.

"What if I don't remember?" she insisted apprehensively. "What if the enchantments are too strong?"

"Stronger than you?" he countered, a flicker of a smirk tugging at his lips. "Doubtful."

He released her, nudging her forward, and she breathed in the warm, comfortable air of the castle, her gown restored and the pleasantness of her surroundings resurrected.

"Hermione," Merope said impatiently, her stunning eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Did you not hear me calling you?"

"I did," Hermione said apologetically, "I came as fast as I could, but something - "

She frowned. What had she just been doing?

"Come now," Merope said, reaching for her hand. "Tom is looking for you."

"Tom," Hermione said pleasantly, thinking eagerly of his jewel-toned eyes and following happily. "Oh, I hope he's not too upset!"

There was a cool rush of air behind her and she turned, catching sight of the man Tom had called Severus; Merope followed her gaze, hissing with disapproval.

"You weren't speaking with Severus, were you?" Merope asked venomously. "I don't know why Tom trusts him. Killed his wife, you know," she said pointedly, nodding at Hermione as though this information were encouraging.

"I don't know him," Hermione said with confusion. "Do I?"

"No," Merope said, brushing her thumb roughly against Hermione's cheek. "No, my dear, you don't."
She woke with a strange, pulsing need to visit the dungeons; it struck her with a jolt, and she realized it was the first time she had remembered waking since her first morning - which was itself only very hazy in her mind, and accompanied by loud, imaginary cannon fire - something she did not know what to do with at the time. A strange curiosity coursed through her and she, unaccustomed to the feeling, decided to pursue it, happily rifling through her wardrobe of silky evening gowns and selecting a cheerful turquoise to match her mood.

The castle was empty and Hermione hummed to herself as she walked, following her inexplicable urge for exploration. There was a tiny piece of her that whispered for her to be careful, to be quiet, but she ignored it.

Merope and Tom would want her to be happy, wouldn't they? Charming people that they were.

She made her way down a narrow, curving staircase, feeling a slight chill in the air that struck her as familiar, if not a bit unwelcome. It was drafty and eerie, and she wondered for a moment why she'd come; she paused at the foot of the stairs, considering whether she should turn back.

"I see you found your way," a voice said, coaxing her forward.

"Hello?" she called, squinting into the darkness. "Tom?" she asked hopefully, brightening at the prospect.

"Ah, not entirely present then," Severus commented gruffly, appearing in a doorway to her right.

"Why am I here?" she asked, and he sighed.

"Come on," he said, gesturing for her to follow. "Clearly" - he said the word with a slight lean, a weighty enunciation - "we have a lot of work to do."

He offered her a small vial of liquid, which she drank; he waited patiently until she blinked in confusion, feeling the heaviness of panic settle itself in her chest.

"Oh god," she said, looking around at the dingy walls and barely standing furniture. She was in a tiny sitting room which had the feeling of a dark, padded cell; the walls were completely covered in books, and she sat beside a rickety table that stood in a pool of dim light. "What is this?"

"Do you remember the conversation you had with me?" he prompted, searching her expression for comprehension.

"I do," she said, frowning. "Am I fixed now?" she asked hopefully, and he laughed.

"Not even remotely," he pronounced with a grimace. "I've merely administered a draught that will allow me an hour to sort through the enchantments on you. Easier," he explained, holding up his hands to gesture to their mobility. "Better than having to cover your eyes the whole time."

"An hour," Hermione sighed sadly. "That's it?"

He seemed uncomfortable with her disappointment and chose not to answer; instead he sat down in front of her, eyeing her like she was a puzzle to be solved.

"I'm going to have to leave your appearance the way it is," he informed her, his tone intently clinical. "I will also have to leave the thread that's blocking most of your memory. Though, to be fair," he added after a moment, "that is really for the best."

Hermione scoffed at that. "For the best? Really?"
"Ignorance is bliss," he muttered, taking hold of her face to look at something she was sure she'd never be able to see. "Best you not be forced to see Tom for what he is, given your circumstances."

She shuddered, resolving not to think about it.

"What do you see?" she asked, and he shrugged.

"It is my lot in life to see things for what they are," he provided ambivalently. "It is why Tom values me, I imagine."

He reached up, loosening something, and she felt a spring fall into place somewhere in her chest. She reached up in surprise, her fingers resting instinctively on her throat.

"Your voice," he explained. "It seems Merope didn't care for it."

"You think that's funny," Hermione noted sullenly, catching a glimmer of amusement in his eye.

"I think what she turned you into is funny," Severus replied easily. "The hair, the eyes. The breasts," he added, his lips quirking up at the corners.

"Like a Barbie doll," Hermione sighed, and he shrugged.

"If you say so," he returned, clearly not recognizing the reference.

She watched him for a moment, intrigued by the concentration on his face. He seemed entirely consumed by his task, his coldness abandoned as he focused, an artist set to work at his craft. He was strangely delicate, oddly elegant; she followed the movements of his fingers, a little entranced against her will.

"You work for him, then?" she asked, clearing her throat as she struggled to speak.

"I advise him," Severus confirmed, not looking up.

"But you're helping me," Hermione said, biting her lip.

"Ah," Severus warned, brushing a finger warningly against her mouth. "Don't do that."

"What?" she asked, puzzled. She brought her own hand up, replacing the spot where his touch had been. "Why?"

"A bad habit that Merope made a point to erase," he noted, glancing at what she imagined to be an intricate, invisible halo of magic floating around her head.

She sighed. "How much did she change about me?"

"More than you want to know," he assured her. "Though you survived it, which says quite a bit about you."

"Survived it?" Hermione repeated, alarmed. "Was there a chance I wouldn't?"

"More than simply a chance," Severus scoffed, shaking his head at her ignorance. "Many before you have not."

"Have you helped them as well?" she asked, trying not to think about how many might have come before.
He swallowed uncomfortably. "No."

She blinked. "Then why - "

He smoothed a hand around her face, tucking a curl behind her ear. "You ask too many questions," he noted, his dark eyes slowly settling on hers.

Her breath caught in her throat.

"Not to worry," he said smoothly, giving her a wry smile. "Merope took care of that."

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Tom asked, offering her his arm.

"Oh, of course," Hermione said brightly, accepting. "Merope's gotten me a new dress," she added, reaching down to run her fingers against the fabric. "Do you like it?"

"I love it," Tom said, his eyes sparkling with wolf-like hunger as he ran his fingers along the curve of her waist. "It suits you."

"Merope knows best," Hermione said with a smile, feeling a cool breeze nearby and shivering as a dark cloak came into view.

"What are my clothes really?" Hermione asked, leaning back in the chair and sighing. "All the silk gowns she has me wear, what are they?"


Hermione frowned. "But why do I - "

"She's a very gifted witch," Severus said, shrugging. "Illusion is her specialty."

"What's Tom's?" she asked, and Severus's dark eyes flashed.

"Control," he said tightly, and she watched the muscle tense around his jaw.

"Who are all your friends?" she asked Tom, pouting a little at not having been introduced. "Why haven't I met them?"

Tom gave her a weary look. "Jealousy," he noted with a grunt. "Mother overlooked something."

"I'm not jealous," Hermione said, a little hurt by his displeasure. "I only asked."

Tom sighed, letting his hand slip to her lower back. "I'll fix it later," he muttered. "For now, suffice it to say you would not find my friends interesting."

"But I find you so fascinating!" Hermione argued hopefully, batting her lashes as she looked up at him. "How could I not love them as well?"

"As well?" Tom echoed, flashing his teeth as he smiled. "Do you mean to tell me that you love me?"

"Of course," Hermione insisted breathlessly. "Surely you must know!"

Tom frowned, reaching around her face before finding what he was looking for. "Ah, Mother," he
"I feel sick," Hermione mumbled, fighting bile in her throat.

"Had a rough day yesterday," Severus noted. "You have a bit of Tom's magic on you now, too."

"It's like one step forward, two steps back," Hermione sighed morosely, wishing she could permit herself the luxury of sobs. "Am I ever going to get out of here?"

"I never said I could help you get out," Severus erupted sharply, letting his hand fall. For the first time, he seemed distracted from his work. "I specifically never said that."

There was something lonely and forlorn in his glance, and she remembered a little tickle of something in her brain; a word of caution.

"They say you killed your wife," Hermione commented, holding her breath as she waited for his answer.

"I did not kill my wife," he retorted sharply. "She died, and it was my fault. There's a difference."

"How -"

"She did not please Tom," Severus said curtly, drawing his shoulders back as he set to resume his work. "And as I mentioned," he murmured, his voice low in her ear, "I specifically never said I could get anyone out."

"What was her name?" Hermione whispered.

"Lily," he replied. "And if you ever mention her again, I will no longer be at your disposal."

Hermione nodded. Neither spoke another word.

"You've made it so far, Hermione," Tom crooned in her ear. "I'm so proud of you."

"Have I?" she asked, a little breathless.

"Further than anyone," Tom assured her, nuzzling her neck. "You've pleased me immensely."

"Oh," Hermione said, feeling a little shiver at a coolness somewhere nearby.

Tom leaned back abruptly, his eyes flashing. "Oh?" he repeated angrily. "That's it?"

"Oh, but I'm speechless," she amended quickly. "What words would possibly do my pleasure justice?"

He nodded his approval, his eyes still slightly narrowed. Over his shoulder, Hermione saw a faint smile on Severus's face.

"Tell me the truth," Hermione demanded. "Why are you helping me?"

She glared at him.

"Maybe I'm getting a little sick of being Merope's puppet," she growled. "And maybe I just want to know one thing that's real."

"Maybe," Severus agreed, frustratingly ambivalent.

She stood, tired of sitting in the goddamn chair; tired of being two goddamn people. Sick as fuck of having two different intuitions. Funny that it was this one she didn't trust, she thought, eyeing him from across the room.

Funny that it was this one she was afraid of.

"Tell me," she begged, and he stared at her.

"You reminded me of her," he said, and she knew he meant Lily. "The way you don't belong. The way you stand out."

"I stand out because of what Merope did to me," she grumbled, but he cut her off.

"No, not that," he said impatiently, moving to stand in front of her. "I told you, I can see things for what they are. I can see you," he explained, his gaze traveling from her eyes to her nose to the curve of her cheek, coming to rest on her lips. "I see you."

For a moment, she held her breath, hardly daring to trust it.

"I'm not her," Hermione warned him, her voice barely above a whisper. He was so close; if she reached out, she could touch him. If she were even a little bit braver, her hips could meet his.

"You're not her," he agreed. "You're you." He drifted towards her and she leaned into him, wondering whose nerve would fill the space between them.

"You're you," he told her, "and you are spectacular."

She shut her eyes, letting his words be the thing to fill her mind for once.

"I want something real," she whispered to him. It was a question, a request, and a demand. Give me something real.

He yanked her chest against his and she braced herself against him, breathless as he lowered his lips to hers; he kissed truth into her soul and she licked the cool flames of him, tasting him, frosty on her tongue.

"More," she pleaded, and he lifted her up, tucking her legs around him as he pressed her roughly against his bookshelf.

She bucked against him, rocking her hips against his, and he lowered his head to her neck, grazing his teeth against her skin as she moaned in his ear, shivering at his touch.

"More?" he asked her, and she whimpered as he nudged her dress aside, running his palm up her thigh and cupping her arse, sighing his satisfaction as she fumbled for his trousers, discarding his heavy cloak and rejoicing in the feel of his skin on hers.

She let her head fall back against the shelf as he slid inside her, tightening her legs around his hips as she closed her eyes, feeling at once the foreign pleasure of his touch and the soothing comfort of being in her own mind.
"I want you," she said, gasping as his mouth found her breasts.

"I'm yours," he murmured, and she felt herself unravel around him.

"Instead of a party tonight, perhaps a wedding?" Tom asked, his gaze flicking to Merope. "Don't you think she's ready, Mother?"

"What do you think, Hermione?" Merope asked, her voice puckish and testing.

"Oh," Hermione declared, clasping her hands in delight. "A wedding for me? For us?"

"Indeed," Tom confirmed, his narrowed gaze relaxing a fraction of a degree as he made a note of her elation. "You're pleased?"

"Pleased?" Hermione repeated in disbelief, her voice melodic with joy. "Oh Tom, I'm so honored!"

"A wedding it is," Merope determined, viciously pinching Hermione's cheek.

"Oh," Hermione said, seeing the dark cloak out of the corner of her eye. "Hello."

"Hello," Severus said smoothly, giving her a curt nod. "Tom has requested I escort you into your chambers."

"Oh, isn't he just wonderful?" Hermione asked, sighing. "He's so thoughtful."

"He is," Severus determined, offering her an impassive half-smile. "I wish you both a fruitful wedding night."

"Kind of you," she said, flashing him a bright, exultant smile. "He's so lucky to have such good friends."

She stepped forward, ready to head to what was to be her bedroom, when he reached out, gripping her wrist.

"My best wishes for you, Hermione," Severus said softly, closing fingers around a narrow metallic hilt. She deftly buried it in the folds of her gown, offering him a small curtsy.

"Thank you," she purred, gripping the knife and smiling. "I'm so looking forward to the prospects of the night."

There were two kinds of ways to wake, Hermione reasoned. One was the unpleasant way; a start, like a cannon explosion, wherein one is entirely disoriented, and forcefully bolts upright. That was how Hermione had initially awoken to her new life.

The other, of course, is slow and comfortable, wherein one opens one's eyes to find one is in the precise location one would expect to be. The bedroom in which one falls asleep, for example, after having killed one's husband and fallen into the arms of one's lover, having had one's true self restored.

Such is the preferred waking, she thought, reaching over to press her lips to Severus's neck.
Chapter End Notes

a/n: This skipped the queue for oblivionbaby because she's had a tough time recently, and I had to give her the one thing at my disposal: my unending nonsense. For you, my love! xx

(Also, thanks to Dr. Sally for pre-reading what is decidedly not her pairing, she says, giggling.)

In the queue and coming soon (I haven't forgotten, the muse is just quiet):
Krumione Year 4 fluff for Eidyia1
Breakup Dramione for MereWhispers
Marlene x Regulus for Mabel K
Dudley x Gabrielle for clausumcorneum
Dramione Marriage Law OS
How to Lose Her

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How to Lose Her

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: M for language, sexual references

Summary: Based on a Dramione prompt from i-heart-hogwarts on tumblr (MereWhispers) based on the song We Don't Talk Anymore by Charlie Puth ft. Selena Gomez. As always, this is my interpretation, but check out the awesome edit on tumblr! Prompt: we don't talk anymore like we used to do.

Despite the title, a decidedly happy ending.

HOW TO LOSE HER

Step 1: Work in her office.

"What do you mean we'll be sharing an office?" Granger barked sharply at the retreating Ministry aid, not having noticed his arrival. Draco knocked politely on the doorframe.

"Granger," he said, knowing he bore his usual irritating smirk. "Lovely to see you're as shrill and unaccommodating as ever."

She stiffened, firm in her oppositional silence, and in the harsh lighting of the wretchedly institutional building he could see the curls coming loose around her face, the dark circles under her eyes.

"Fuck, Granger, you look shit," he commented distastefully. "Have you been sleeping here?"

She glared at him. "I will deal with you later," she snapped, before bounding past him; heading directly to Potter's office, no doubt, to demand a rearrangement.

No such luck. Potter had been the one to put him there.

Step 2: Be nicer than you used to be.

"Here," he said gruffly, placing the mug on her desk with a resounding thud. "Drink this."

"What is it?" she asked, sniffing it suspiciously. He sighed, settling himself at his desk across the room.

"It is coffee, Granger," he replied, aiming for indifference. "Drink it."
She looked momentarily stunned, squinting at him like he were some kind of animal in the wild. "Why?" she asked, and he threw his hands up in consummate frustration.

"You're exhausted," he informed her. "Your workload is ridiculous and since you don't seem to trust me with any of it, you might as well continue to stay awake, tragically wasting away - "

"Fine," she cut in curtly, carelessly levitating a series of folders toward him. "Here. Take these," she said, as though she didn't particularly care either way. "If you're so concerned about my workload."

"I never said I was concerned," he informed her stiffly, but she rolled her eyes, smiling into the mug as she took a sip.

"Mm," she murmured, closing her eyes and leaning back in her chair. "Good coffee."

He wouldn't know. He didn't drink it.

He'd made it for her.

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**Step 3: Attempt something chivalrous. Fail horribly.**

"Oh, what are these?" she asked, delighted. "Ron sent flowers!"

"Granger," Draco said gruffly, "could you please - "

"I was so sure he'd forgotten," she sighed happily, bringing the gardenias to her nose and inhaling their scent with an uninhibited jubilance that made him want to vomit. "Ugh, I suppose I'll have to rethink the moody sulking I'd had planned for him tonight."

"Granger, once again, please do me the great honor of not including me in the details of your abhorrent love life," Draco grunted.

"Oh, hush," she said, swatting at him from afar. "Are you busy this weekend?" she added, still fussing over the bouquet. "Harry's throwing me a little get together, and while I would generally assume you would consider birthday parties to be stupid and utterly beneath you - "

"I do," he sniffed. "So plebeian."

" - I thought you might like to come. You know," she added quickly, "if you've nothing else planned."

He stiffened. "I'll think about it," he said, and she smiled at him, running a finger over the smooth petals of the flowers.

He looked at the dropped card on the floor and sighed.

*Happy Birthday, Granger. It's not been entirely unpleasant working with you. You hardly even look homeless anymore. Hope you get everything you want. - DM*

Oh well. He didn't like what he'd written, anyway.

So plebeian.

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**Step 4: Try again, only better.**
"I'm so glad you could come," she slurred, stumbling a little.

"Here," he sighed, offering her his arm. "Hold on, would you? You look like a baby giraffe."

"You are a giraffe," she accused, squinting at him and instantly knocking into a bush. "Whoops," she said, bowing apologetically to the shrubbery, and Draco threw an arm around her waist, prompting her forward.

"I had no idea you were such an incredible lightweight," Draco informed her, nudging her closer as she nearly collided with a planter. "You're a fully functional adult, and yet you are completely incapable of motion after barely three glasses of wine?"

"'s my birthday," she said smugly, shrugging and grinning up at him.

"True," he conceded. "Though shouldn't your boyfriend be doing my job?"

She made a face. "Ronald Weasley?" she repeated. "Him? He is - " she stopped, waving her hand around carelessly. "Elsewhere."

"I would have expected him to be at your party," Draco noted carefully, and she let out a loud, uninhibited groan, turning to face him and putting her hands on his shoulders.

"Draco Mlalfoy," she said, tapping his nose with her finger, then stopped, frowning in concentration. "Mralfoy. Meow-lfoy."

"That's me, I think," he muttered, waiting.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" she asked, narrowing her eyes as she considered him. "You hate me," she asserted, nodding with certainty, as if she were answering a question in class.

"I don't hate you," he corrected her. "Why else would I walk you home?"

"Don't know," she mumbled. "Because you're a gentleman?"

"I assure you," he said, inexplicably infuriated by her assessment, "I am not a gentleman."

She giggled. "Okay," she said happily, before slumping in a heap at his feet, curling up on the pavement.

He picked her up, sighing, and muttered in her ear. "I don't hate you," he told her. "I like you."

She nuzzled her face into his chest, mewling contentedly, and he cradled her in his arms.

She was definitely asleep.

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**Step 5: Okay. Keep trying.**

"All I'm asking, Ron, is for one night of your undivided attention, instead of having to continually share you with George, fussing over dungbombs or whatever it is that you - "

"Dungbombs? Hermione, you could have at least listened to me when I was telling you about our new products - dungbombs, Hermione? Bloody hell, what year do you think it is?"
"That is not the point, Ron!"

Draco could hear through the door that she was starting to cry; he raised a hand to knock but then stopped, feeling foolish. His parents had never fought. Not openly, anyway; his mother berated his father with cleverly veiled passive aggression.

You know, like civilized people.

"What do you want from me, Mione? I keep telling you, this is important - "

"More important than me?"

There was a pause, and even Draco knew that was a bad sign. Say something, he thought furiously, say something, you dumb twat -

"Get out," he heard her say coldly. "Get out of my office."

"Fine. We can talk later - "

"No. Get out of my office. Don't call me. We're done."

Draco drew a sharp breath, wondering whether to be sympathetic or elated.

The office door opened and Weasley shoved past him, not even bothering to look where he was going, and Draco stepped tentatively inside. She was leaning on her desk, her head bent, pretending to read a file. He, for his part, felt something low in the pit of his stomach - a feeling that he could only assume was indigestion - at her obvious sadness, her sniffles choked back as she put on an elaborate and thoroughly unconvincing show of ambivalence.

"Sorry about the noise," she said offhandedly, her voice muffled behind her hand.

He sighed, walking over to her and wrapping his arms around her.

"I'm sorry, Granger," he said, and she conceded to sob, her tears soaking through his Ministry robes. He patted her head. "It'll be okay," he said awkwardly, and she looked up, something defiant in her gaze.

"You know what?" she said. "It will be. You know why?"

His heart did something murderous in his chest. "Why?"

"Because I," she shouted, startling him with her volume, "am done with men. Done with them!" she added, brusquely shoving him away to turn to her desk and drop herself in her chair. "I will just focus on my work," she continued, aimlessly sorting through several piles of paper that he suspected were irrelevant, "on my many philanthropic endeavors that I have abandoned in my foolish attempts to be a good girlfriend, which were not even remotely reciprocated - "

She broke off at that, looking pained, and glanced up at him. "Thank you," she informed him. "From now on, I'm going to be like you. Cold," she explained. "Aloof. Thoroughly off-putting."

"Okay," he muttered.

"Totally closed off from society," she continued, "utterly incapable of meaningful human interaction - "

"That's enough," he told her, reaching a hand up to rub his temple in preemptive exhaustion.
Step 6: Abandon previous efforts. Kiss her.

"I don't understand what you're so upset about," he said, exasperated, and entirely at a loss. "You've been struggling with this case, so I thought I would - "

"I didn't mean for you to step in and - and just - take over!" she said, waving the parchment in his face. "Can you imagine how it felt, coming in here this morning and having found out my coworker thinks I needed him to do my work for me?" She stared down at the legal brief, sputtering her disbelief. "I mean, you would have had to stay over the weekend to get this done - "

He could not - for the life of him - understand what she was angry about.

"You've had a lot of things on your plate, Granger," he began slowly, testing the waters, "and I only thought that it would be helpful if I could just - "

"Helpful?" she scoffed. "Since when have you - "

"Oh, for fuck's sake," he yelled, throwing his hands up in the air. "Give me that," he added, wrenching the parchment from her hands and tossing it back on her desk.

"What are you doing?" she gasped. "Have you totally lost your - "

He took hold of her face and kissed her, pulling her into him, and he tried in that moment to tell her all the things he'd failed to say before - I like you, Granger, I like the face you make when you're concentrating, I like when I can do things for you, I like when you let me do things for you, I like when you ask me to make coffee because you want it the way I make it, I like when you laugh, I like when you smile, I even like when you cry because it means you might let me hold you -

She broke free of him, staring at him.

"Since when?" she demanded, and he glared at her.

"Brightest witch of your age, my arse," he grumbled, and her lips quirked up in a smile.

Step 7: Go much too fast, much too soon.

"Here?" he managed breathlessly, suddenly recalling that he had her against a wall in the storage room of their office, and perhaps now wasn't the right time to ask.

"Yes," she said, panting against his mouth, "and now."

"But - " he protested, but then her lips were on his neck and he shoved his conscience aside and yanked her skirt up, slipping inside her and biting his lip as she moaned his name, pausing momentarily in his utter euphoria to wish - like a child; like a fool - that he might never live another day without fucking her.

No, not fucking her.

Loving her.

Fuck, he thought, suddenly rigid with fear.
Step 8: Be an unbearable prat.

She was avoiding him. It was unimaginable torture. She came in early, left late; if he stayed for lunch, she went out. If he left, she stayed in. She ran to Potter's office periodically throughout the day and he was plagued in her absence by the thought of what she might be saying - what was I thinking? how could I be so stupid? how could I have done that with him? - and it tore at the core of his being.

He thought about showing up at her house, knocking down her door, demanding an explanation - but he didn't. Instead he was sullen. Obnoxious. He didn't blame her for not talking to him.

Step 9: Do something incomprehensibly petty.

"I want a transfer," Draco demanded. "As soon as possible."

"What?" Potter echoed, staring blankly at him. "But you and Hermione have the best case record out of anyone in the legal department."

"I know that," Draco replied testily, "but that does not serve to diminish the fact that I want a transfer, and I want one now."

"What happened?" Potter asked, and now his voice had an edge of concern to it. "Malfoy, if there's something wrong - "

"NOTHING HAPPENED," Draco roared, and Potter blinked.

"Okay then," he said. "I believe you, I guess."

Step 10: Miss her wildly. Miss her completely. Miss her so much you can't breathe.

Draco lay awake at night with the memory of her breath in his ear. Her perfume on his collar. Her fingers in his hair. After all this time, he still couldn't breathe at the thought of her. He couldn't stand to know what kind of dress she was wearing, or whether she was lying next to someone else. Whether there was a good reason she was gone, or if it just wasn't him; if it was someone else, someone who did things right, someone who knew what she wanted -

Fuck, he thought, loving her completely and hating every spare inch of himself.

Step 11: Say nothing at all.

"... which leaves step eleven," Draco said moodily, "which is to say nothing at all, and suffer in silence."

"Silence being optional, I take it," Theo replied. "Why didn't you bring this up sooner?"

"Because I'm writing a book," Draco retorted sullenly. "How to Lose Her, by Draco Fucking
"I'm glad you've summarized it so succinctly," Theo said, but seeing Draco's grim expression, he abandoned the would-be joke and sighed.

"We don't talk anymore," Draco offered simply. "I miss it. I miss her voice."

"She's not dead, mate," Theo said, patting his shoulder. "It's not over til it's over."

"But," Draco began, "if she really wanted -"

"Look," Theo cut in, "I know you're a Malfoy, and you're used to having the things you want handed to you. But unfortunately, you, along with the rest of us peasants -"

"Says the inheritor of the Nott fortune," Draco grumbled.

"- are sometimes required to put the pieces in motion," Theo continued. "And considering the utter stupidity you have exhibited thus far -"

Draco opened his mouth to argue, but at Theo's stern glare, shut it again.

"Continue," he said tenuously, and Theo nodded.

"Considering your stupidity," Theo repeated, "I think the obvious next step is to apologize -"

"Ugh, fuck me," Draco groaned petulantly.

"- and hope that she'll listen. And," Theo added, "maybe it might do you some good to ask her what went wrong."

"What is this, some kind of social experiment you are conducting on me?" Draco asked gruffly. "This sounds like some kind of new age psychological rubbish."

"It's called communication," Theo corrected, "and I am assured that it yields great success."

"Sounds like a trick," Draco muttered, but he decided he had nothing to lose.

He made his way to Granger's flat - he passed the hedge she'd had the drunken altercation with and barely suppressed a fond smile - and despite thinking about it for the entirety of his procession, arrived at her stoop with absolutely no concept of what to say.

Her eyes widened as she opened the door, then narrowed as he opened his mouth.

"Granger," he opened grandly, "the -" he coughed, still coming up empty. "The thing is -"

But she seemed shaken with nerves, and frantic with withheld speech, and he cut himself off, furrowing his brow as he waited.

"Where have you been?" she suddenly burst out, the words erupting from her lips.

"Um," he began, but he needn't have bothered.

"I was such an idiot," she told him, wringing her hands. "I don't know what came over me but I was just - I was scared," she confessed, and he, shocked into silence, merely stared.

"I realized that what I felt for you ran so much deeper than I thought," she admitted, her eyes cast
down sheepishly, "and I didn't know what to do, and I had to analyze my every feeling to death, of course" - of course, he thought silently, and then shoved aside the mad affection that bubbled up in his chest - "which was stupid, and horrible - and then when I finally realized what an awful twat I was being -"

He opened his mouth to argue, but figuring it best to let her continue, closed it again.

"- you were transferred and I didn't know what to say or do; I was just so nervous that you hadn't felt the same way and I was an utter fool, Malfoy, but I can't stand it," she said, tearing at her lip in anxiety. "I can't stand another day like this, I can't stand not talking anymore - I miss you," she informed him, her eyes brimming with tears. "I was afraid you didn't want me, but now I'm just afraid I'll lose you. And I can't. I can't."

She gazed up at him and he down at her, and he realized there was one more step. One more thing to do; Step Twelve. Say something meaningful. Sweep her off her feet.

"Well," he opened stiffly. "For fuck's sake, Granger. You could have just said so."

Or not.

She smiled tearfully at him. "Is that all?"

"No it's not all," he sniffed indignantly. "I love you, Granger."

Her eyes widened.

"Don't make a scene," he warned.

She shook her head. "Oh Draco," she sighed.

"Well," Theo said, "that's incredibly sad news."

"I know," Draco agreed. "I really thought I had an excellent product on my hands."

"It truly is unfortunate that How to Lose Her is going to be such a colossal commercial failure," Theo lamented. "Particularly once they see how unsuccessful the author was in his endeavors."

"I know," Draco said. "Truly. It stings."

"It should," Theo determined, straightening his tie and patting Draco on the shoulder. "Ready, then?"

"Yes," Draco said, then stopped. "Of course, I could just change the title," he postulated. "Don't you think?"

"How to Marry Her," Theo said, then grinned. "Sounds like a bestseller."

They looked at each other.

"Nah," Draco said.

"It would literally never work twice," Theo agreed, erupting in laughter. "Can you imagine?"

"I cannot," Draco replied drily, waiting impatiently for him to collect himself.
"Okay," Theo said, wiping his eyes. "Right then. Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: For MereWhispers! Fluffier than I'd intended, but I hope it satisfies!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ride or Die

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: American muggle AU

Rating: M for sex, violence, and language

Summary: Agnl9 asked for a Dramione based on the song Secret Love Song by Little Mix, so the prompt is: We keep behind closed doors / Every time I see you, I die a little more / Stolen moments that we steal as the curtain falls / It'll never be enough.

The Death Eaters are an outlaw motorcycle club run by Tom Riddle, a notoriously ruthless leader who is gradually working the brotherhood into higher stakes criminal activity after their previous leader dies unexpectedly. Draco Malfoy is practically heir to the throne, but his life abruptly changes when a near fatal injury lands him in the hands of a surgical intern who is about to get in way over her head.

"This is fucking insane," Theo muttered, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned against the wall. "Dumbledore never had us do shit like this."

"Relax," Draco told him, looking up as a car drove by. "Not them. "Dumbledore didn't exactly pay out, either."

"I'm not going to fucking relax," Theo countered roughly, raking a hand through his hair. The tattoo on his wrist was stark against his pale skin. "This is bullshit, Draco. Who the fuck are we meeting?"

"Theo," Draco warned, giving him a cautionary glance. It went unnoticed.

"Riddle's a fucking lunatic," Theo continued, scowling. "This is not our game," he growled, slamming his hand on the trunk of the Impala they rarely used. "Fucking guns and shit," he muttered under his breath. "I didn't fucking sign up to die today."

"Theo," Draco said coolly, shading his eyes from the afternoon sun. "Shut the fuck up."

Theo grunted his opposition to this idea, but did as he was bade. Hierarchy demanded it.

Besides, Draco was fucking right.

"There," Draco said, jutting his chin out to reference the approaching car; it was an XLR that looked more than a little out of place pulling behind a warehouse. "Fuckers," he added under his breath, shaking his head. "Incognito apparently doesn't mean what it used to."

Theo said nothing, swallowing uneasily as the driver got out, strutting towards them. He was thoroughly bearded; fully overdressed. He offered a stiff nod, his grey hair slicked back from his face.
"Malfoy?" he called gruffly.

"Me," Draco replied, stepping forward. "Greyback?"

"Call me Fenrir," the other man said, bearing his teeth as he smiled. "My associates," he added, gesturing to the two heavily muscled men behind him. "Scabior," he said, nodding to the larger of the two, "and Smith."

"Pleasure," Draco offered smoothly, nodding to Theo. "This is Nott."

"Nott," Fenrir repeated, his eyes flashing. He glanced at Scabior, who made a face of unveiled skepticism. "Thought he was older."

"Nott Junior," Theo clarified. The muscle twitched around his jaw.

Fenrir raised an eyebrow, turning back to Draco. "I take it you are Malfoy Junior, then," he said, and Draco heard something in his tone; insult, he suspected.

"We're better company than our fathers," Draco supplied. "Tom did you a favor."

Fenrir considered him a moment, eyes narrowed; Draco refused to back down, staring back until the other man suddenly laughed, clapping his hands together in a bewildering expression of delight.

"Too true," Fenrir determined gravely. "So." He raised a hand, beckoning. "Show me what Tom has for me."

Draco glanced at Theo, who popped open the trunk.

"Take a look," Draco invited, stepping aside. "Sample only. Full shipment in a week, if you're interested."

"Naturally," Fenrir agreed, grinning wolfishly again. He sifted through the trunk's contents and picked up the M16, peering over the barrel.

"Hey, man," Theo muttered, garnering a stiff glance from Scabior and Smith. "Maybe don't fucking wave that shit around."

Fenrir glanced up, eyeing him. "This shit hot?" he asked suspiciously, turning to Draco. "This one looks scared," he added, using the rifle to gesture to Theo's stiff-shouldered form.

"That's just his face," Draco supplied indifferently, glaring at Theo the instant Fenrir turned back to the trunk. It was harder now to keep his cool; it hadn't occurred to him to ask Riddle if the guns they were selling happened to be stolen.

Theo was right. Dumbledore never had us do shit like this.

He should've asked.

Fenrir looked up, gesturing for his two companions. They crowded around him on either side, and Theo slowly inched towards Draco.

"This doesn't look good," Theo whispered.

"I fucking know that," Draco hissed. "Fucking calm down."

Theo's frown deepened. "Maybe we should get them to move," he suggested, gesturing to Smith
and Scabior. "I don't like this."

"Sure, Theo, just fucking ask nicely," Draco suggested sarcastically, imitating him. "Please be so kind as to show us your goddamn hands - "

"Hey," Fenrir said, turning. He now held a pistol and was eyeing it closely; too closely. Draco heard the telling clicks from either side of him as Scabior and Smith drew their weapons. "You got rules on sampling the merchandise?"

Draco swallowed, trying to remain calm. "Could grab some targets," he offered, feigning ignorance. "Nothing if not hospitable," he added, reaching slowly for the Glock tucked into his waistband.

"Don't fucking move," Scabior grunted. "We already know these guns work."

"Love a knowledgeable customer," Theo offered weakly, before Draco shot him a silencing glare.

"Ask us how we know," Fenrir suggested, beckoning. "Go on. Ask."

Fuck, Draco thought. Fuck, fuck, fuck -

"How do you know?" he gritted out, struggling to breathe.

Fenrir aimed the Beretta at him. "These guns are fucking stolen," he said. "Tell Riddle I want his head," he added with a laugh, right before he pulled the trigger.

Hermione Granger stepped outside the emergency room and sank to the ground, feeling a thorough throb of exhaustion course through her. She thought medical school had been hardest thing she'd ever done; she'd been so, so tragically wrong. Her surgical internship was tougher than she'd ever imagined. She was used to being the smartest, the best in her class - but so were they. She'd never met anyone as intense and relentless as she was until she'd met the other interns, who seemed overjoyed to sacrifice food, sleep, and happiness in order to secure a residency.

She leaned her head against the wall, closing her eyes. Her shift was finally over, but she could barely bring herself to consider driving home. Just five minutes, she told herself, five minutes, and then you can get in your car and -

She heard the familiar loud screech of tires coming to a desperate halt, followed by a door being slammed. She cracked one eye, wondering where it was coming from.

"Excuse me," someone grunted, the male voice low and vaguely intimate. She looked up in alarm, her breath caught by a set of stunning grey eyes.

"Um," she managed, before her gaze traveled to the copious amount of blood seeping from his left shoulder. She could see he was clutching it and grimacing in pain. "Holy shit!"

She scrambled to her feet. "Come with me," she said instantly, reaching for him. "The ER is right this way, and - "

"No," he gritted out, clearly struggling through the injury. "No, I can't, I - " he looked around anxiously. "I need you to help me," he said, his voice still notably low. She couldn't quite work out how he was managing to be so calm; injuries like this usually came in with wailing and cursing.

"I can't," she said bluntly, blinking at him. "I'm not really a doctor," she added. "I'm - I'm only an
"You're surgery, though, right?" he asked, his knuckles white as he clutched his shoulder. "Green scrubs," he supplied, gesturing for explanation, and she looked down to check before kicking herself. *Obviously,* she fumed. *Hermione, you idiot.*

"I can't help you," she repeated apologetically, though her eyes slipped repeatedly between the blood seeping towards his chest and the piercing intensity of his eyes. "I'm sorry, but that's hospital policy. But the emergency room is right this way," she explained hopefully, trying to coax him, "and I'll help you with anything you need -"

"You don't understand," he told her, his face flushed; he was stunning, even covered in blood. Her eyes flicked momentarily over the tattoos that sloped over his neatly muscled arms. "I *can't* go in there."

"Why not?" she asked vacantly. "Insurance or something? Worry about that later," she advised, "surely we can figure something out -"

His expression instantly contorted into such an intensive display of agony and frustration that it immediately silenced her.

"I've got a fucking bullet lodged in my shoulder," he growled, tearing at his lip in agitation. "And I can't have someone taking it out of me and putting it some kind of fucking *police file* -"

He cut off, swearing in pain. "*Fuck* -"

"Police file?" she repeated, stunned. "Who did this?"

He stared imploringly at her. "Just fucking *trust me,*" he said, in a way that did not encourage any form of trust, "you really don't want to know - and it's either you help me," he added vehemently, "or I bleed out *right fucking now* -"

"You want me to break hospital policy *and* the law?" Hermione interrupted, aghast. "You can't be serious, I could lose my license, I'd - I'd never get a job -"

"I won't fucking tell anyone," he gasped, staggering forward to grip her arm. "Please, *please* -"

"You're insane," she insisted, trying not to pay attention to the way his skin was going sallow and pale, his color waning. "Even putting aside the trouble *I* could get in, I could - I could *kill* you, I could do something wrong - " she cut off frantically, flailing her hands in panic as he groaned loudly in pain. "I don't even have a *sterile environment* -"

"What's your name?" he interjected, his grasp on her arm uncomfortably tight.

"Hermione," she said, and then shook her head. "I mean Granger - *Doctor* Granger -"

"Granger, I'm fucking begging you," he pleaded, "take this fucking bullet out of my shoulder and end the *worst fucking day of my life,* or just inject me with something and put me out of my misery altogether -"

He broke off, squeezing his eyes shut and flinching, his shirt now soaked with blood.

"That's a little dramatic," she managed, appalled at the sound of her own whimper.

But she'd taken an oath, hadn't she? She'd gone to medical school to *save lives,* hadn't she? To do
some good in the world? She shifted from foot to foot, inexplicably torn.

They were outside a hospital. She could just make him go to the ER. He was going to pass out any moment anyway, one yell would get an EMT out there; there was no reason she couldn't do things by the book, no matter what he said, or how desperate he looked - god, he really did look like it was a matter of life or death -

She bit her lip, trying to focus. Think of your career, Hermione, think of your life - you don't know what he's done -

Does it matter? she scolded herself. A life is a life, isn't it, Hermione?

Even if this is the moral thing to do, are you even awake enough? she countered internally. Fifteen hour shift and he wants you to slice open his shoulder -

There are a million reasons not to, she reminded herself. She looked at his face, at the naked desperation etched into it, and tried to convince herself not to listen to what his grey eyes were telling her, tried to ignore the nagging feeling in her gut. Don't do it, Hermione.

"Please," he whispered.

She sighed. "Let me grab some tools," she muttered, rubbing her eyes. "You stay here and pray I don't kill you."

Draco heard a car door slam outside his apartment and came curiously to the window; he saw the pretty doctor - Granger, she'd said her name was - get out of the same old Subaru that she'd stitched him up in, slinging a bag over her shoulder and tucking her hands into her well worn jeans. Her hair was pulled back in a loose braid; she looked like she must have recently got off work.

Fuck me, he swore, hoping there was a way he could pass off her visit without Riddle getting wind of it. Tom wasn't much for outsiders. He wouldn't take kindly to anything that appeared suspicious, and he was a man who found most things suspicious.

Draco rushed to the door, opening it before she could knock.

"How did you find me?" he demanded, glancing around. "Get in," he added, pulling her inside quickly.

"Um," she began hesitantly, stumbling through the doorway, "well, I see you're still alive."

"How did you find me?" he repeated, crossing his arms over his chest. She seemed vaguely put out by his hostility, though she didn't back down.

"Draco Malfoy isn't exactly a common name," she informed him, pursing her lips. "Wasn't that hard. And shockingly," she added, "surgery is slightly more complicated than a Google search."

"Why are you here?" he insisted, ignoring her comment and wondering if he should rush her out. Someone would have noticed her car by now.

"I have to remove your stitches," she said, teasing her shoulders back indignantly. She had a prim kind of stubbornness, a little taste of don't fuck with me that he should have known was dangerous. "I didn't exactly get my hands on the high quality dissolving kind when I was MacGyvering you back to life in my car."
"Oh," he muttered, instinctively bringing his hand to his shoulder. MacGyvered or not, she'd done a solid enough job; it would scar, obviously, but not badly. "Fine."

"If you're busy, I can come back later," she offered, but he shook his head.

"No," he said sharply. "You shouldn't come back here. Ever," he added emphatically, hoping she would find that sufficient.

"Okay," she sighed, with a hint of snotty displeasure. "Or I could just go," she added, giving him a taunting look. "If you'd rather I not be here."

He fought a frustrated groan; she was a little exasperating, and more than a little enticing, which was just as much a problem. "It's not you," he said quickly, "it's - "

He cut himself off. She waited.

"Nevermind," he determined slowly, eyeing her. She was watching him curiously, chewing her lip as she waited; he tried not to let his gaze linger too long on her mouth. "Just - do what you have to do, then."


"Are you sure this isn't a social visit?" he asked her, smirking as he dutifully removed the thin white t-shirt he wore. Her eyes went instantly to his chest, and she promptly reddened.

"Purely medical," she determined, recovering quickly. "So sit here, and - is that a knife?" she asked, sounding vaguely horrified as she eyed the handle that protruded from his waistband.

"It is," he confirmed indifferently, removing it and setting it on the table as he took a seat. "Can't be too careful."

"But you're in your house," she squeaked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Ah, culture shock. Welcome to my world, Doc.

"Yeah," he agreed. "That's why it's a knife and not a Glock. Much more casual," he joked.

"Not a - " she trailed off, swallowing as she reached the word Glock. "Oh."

She stood still, suddenly uncertain. She looked small and lost, and for some reason, he almost smiled. Am I making you nervous? he wanted to ask.

He hoped so.

"This is what you came for, right?" he prompted, gesturing to his shoulder. The thick black stitches were stark against the yellowed bruising of the skin.

"Right," she agreed, suddenly snapping out of her temporary stupor and pulling up a chair next to him, rifling for things in her bag and getting to work. She seemed subdued by the prospect of something she understood; he recognized the compulsion. It was the moment of stillness and focus right before the engine roared to life. "How are you feeling?"

"Stressed," he replied. "With a touch of despondency. You?"

He watched her lips twitch into a small smile. "I meant the whole bullet wound thing," she
clarified, her brown eyes briefly meeting his.

"Ah, that," he replied, trying not to shrug and disrupt her work as she unwillingly dragged her attention back to the stitches. "You do great work, Granger. I'm perfectly healed."

"Really?" she asked dubiously, glancing at him again. Her eyes, normally wide and earnest, were glimmering with delicate skepticism.

"No," he grumbled. "It fucking hurts, Granger, what do you want from me?" he asked, frowning. "Can't you just let me be a man?"

He was gratified to see her smile again. "Right," she said, nodding solemnly and ducking her head to hide a laugh. "Of course."

He watched her work, wondering if he wasn't secretly relieved to see her again. The first time had been tainted by the disaster of the day, of course; Fenrir knew what he was doing. He hadn't shot to kill. He'd shot to injure, to inconvenience, and by the time Theo had his gun cocked the other three had practically laughed their way out, tires squealing as they left Draco behind to bleed all over Theo's car and face a raging Tom Riddle; to deliver the disappointing news that his stolen artillery was going to need a new fucking buyer, and Riddle himself was going to need better security.

His father had looked murderous. Lucius was a loyalist when it came to Tom; he'd been rewarded well for it, and he was a man who liked rewards. *Don't fuck up next time*, Lucius had spat, leaving Draco behind to nurse his aching shoulder and wonder firstly whether he was still Tom's favorite, and secondly, whether or not that particular role was going to eventually get him killed.

The concept of Draco having a near death experience was lost on Lucius; his pride in his son was dependent on Draco continuing to be the golden boy, the assured leader of the next generation of Death Eaters. Not that Draco could blame him. It was a source of pride for Draco, too. Or it had been, in any case, though he didn't care much for bullet holes. The phrase *don't shoot the messenger* suddenly hit far too close to home.

*But this is a different day*, he reminded himself, chasing the thought away as Granger's brown eyes met his again; she couldn't seem to help herself, and he found he wasn't opposed. Today, the pretty doctor was in his house, and he was already fucked by her presence, and her fingers were a little too inviting on his skin . . . not that it wouldn't be stupid, obviously. Completely idiotic.

But maybe - just once -

"There," she said breathlessly, smoothing her hand over it; her touch was cool and captivating. "I can give you something for the scars, if you want -"

*Fuck it.*

He leaned forward, gripping the back of her head and pulling her lips to his, the kiss not rough enough to bruise but certainly firm enough for her to know he meant it. Enough to tell her what he wanted - *I want you* - and then he slipped his tongue along her bottom lip; a question. *Do you?*

She swayed toward him in a helpless way, like she was fighting it, but she kissed him back just as earnestly and then her hands were slipping down his stomach, resting tentatively on his hips; he wondered if she could feel the way he instinctively leaned in at her touch, the hairs rising on his arms as her fingers moved to linger on the waistband of his jeans. He pulled her head back, moving to scrape his teeth along her neck, feeling her shudder in response.

She pulled away, her eyes closed. "I really, really, really," she began slowly, "honestly came to fix
your stitches."

"But?" he prompted, his voice husky. *I want you.*

She eyed him for a minute before speaking.

"I'm a surgical intern," she said, and he blinked, uncertain what direction she was taking. "I work horrible shifts and I barely have time for anything. *Anything,*" she repeated adamantly, and he realized she was telling him something.

"You want me to fuck you," he supplied roughly, and though she seemed momentarily uncomfortable with the vulgarity of the phrasing, she nodded.

He fought a smirk. *Fine by me.*

He yanked her to him again and she instantly put her hands on his chest; he smiled as she sighed into his mouth, her hands traveling hungrily over his curves and angles to prove what he'd suspected all along - *she'd been looking.* He pulled her sweater over her head, sliding his fingers along the cups of her bra, and she stood, shimmying hurriedly out of her jeans and carefully straddling him on the chair.

He slid his hands up her spine, unclasping her bra and tossing it aside, running a thumb over the hardened bead of her nipple and then taking it in his mouth, enjoying the sound of her breathy whimper and the feel of her grinding against him, wondering momentarily if it had been worth getting shot.

She reached down, unbuttoning his jeans and taking his cock in her hand; he slipped a finger against her slit and she moaned, already slick and as desperate as he was. He pushed her practical white cotton thong aside and slid inside her, swallowing a heady *fuck* of satisfaction as he thrust up; he growled his frustration at the obstruction of the garment and reached for his knife, ignoring the panicked widening of her eyes as he slid the cool blade against the material and tore it away from her. She made an incoherent, strangled sound as he tossed the knife aside and shoved the items gracelessly off the table, lifting her up and laying her on top of it; the look of alarm that had crossed her face melted as he brought his hand to her clit, sliding his thumb against it as he drove into her, her back arched as she raised her hips to his.

As her face went blank with pleasure he knew for certain he was fucked. He closed his eyes as she called out his name, considering with vague amusement that the concept of *just once* had been one of his finest delusions.

Hermione walked into her apartment and threw her bag on the ground, exhausted.

But not *too* exhausted. She picked up her phone, typing in a text message.

*Just got done at the hospital. Are you around?*

Okay, so it wasn't the romance of her dreams. It wasn't *not,* either, but there were certainly concessions made on her part. He didn't like her coming over to his place, for one thing; he was extremely secretive, and she had no idea why, nor did she really have any idea what he did for a living. The bullet wound and the tattoos indicated that he was probably not an investment banker - *sorry, Mom* - but he was clearly intelligent, and certainly wealthy to at least some degree. From what she could see, anyway; they didn't go out much - or at all - but that worked for her. She only had enough time to have sex and sleep in between shifts, and he didn't mind. He seemed to prefer it.
He was also available during the random hours between leaving work and passing out completely before going back, so convenience-wise, it was about the best she could hope for.

In general, though, answers were a rarity. She'd asked about him getting shot; trust me, you don't want to know.

She'd asked about why he didn't want her at his house; am I married? Don't be fucking ridiculous. It's nothing like that.

Other than that, he didn't offer up much, and it wasn't until she'd finally learned what the tattoo on his wrist was - the snake inside the skull that she'd assumed he simply considered badass or something - that she even came close to putting a finger on what he did all day.

"Are you a Death Eater?" she asked, her head on his chest as he played with her hair. She had about ten minutes before she promptly fell asleep, so he was usually willing to entertain her questions.

He looked down, squinting at her in confusion. "You didn't know that?"

"No," she admitted. "I didn't know that even meant anything until someone came in today with the same tattoo." She traced her thumb along the outline of his wrist. "I asked one of the other interns."

"I forget you're not from around here," he commented, which she found to be somewhat evasive. "Who came in?"

"An older guy," she offered. "Last name Mulciber, I think." It was easier to think of the patients in terms of their medical charts. "Stab wound."

She felt a strange lurch as she said it, trying not to recall the image of Draco setting his knife on the table; she still wasn't entirely accustomed to him pulling out a knife or a gun from his waistband before he undressed. He was discreet about it - he obviously sensed she wasn't entirely comfortable with the arsenal of weapons he seemed to need to carry around - but still, there was always an unwilling catch in her breath when she watched him do it.

"Fuck," Draco muttered under his breath, shaking his head. "Shit is getting really - " he cut himself off, his grey eyes flashing as he caught her curious look of concern. "Nevermind," he offered gruffly, clearly venturing back into trust me, you don't want to know territory.

"What's the deal with the Death Eaters?" she asked instead, tracing the outline of the tattoo on his chest; my family crest, he'd told her. Sanctimonia Vincet Semper; Purity Always Conquers. "What do you do?"

A blank look went over his face; predictably, he didn't want to talk about it. Trust me, you don't want to know.

"It's a motorcycle club," he supplied slowly, and while she suspected that barely scratched the surface, she nodded, running her hand absentmindedly over his abs and grinning as his cock twitched receptively.

"I have just one more question," she ventured, and he smirked, inviting it. "What's the deal with the whole 'ride or die' thing?"

He chuckled, pulling her closer. "It's an old biker phrase," he offered, shrugging. "If you couldn't ride, you'd rather die. Means something a little different now. Ride together, or die trying." He kissed her forehead roughly. "Some Bonnie and Clyde shit."
"Huh," Hermione had remarked, having about a thousand more important questions she'd rather have asked, and deciding instead to be satisfied with receiving one true answer. "Good to know."

Her phone jerked her back to the present, buzzing in her hand.

_I'll be there in ten minutes._

She smiled, about to set the phone down, when it went off again.

_Be naked._

"Tell me there's a way out of this," Theo muttered, looking even more gaunt than usual.

"I'm thinking not," Draco sighed, rolling the exhaustion out his neck. "Though I am assured this time the artillery's legit."

"Assured by whom?" Theo scoffed. "Lucius?"

_Obviously._

Draco said nothing.

"You'd think he'd know better," Theo grumbled, "but apparently one measly pipe bomb strapped to his bike isn't enough to scare Tom Riddle straight."

"You'd think Greyback would've tried harder," Draco added, a hint of bitterness working its way into his tone. "Severe lack of creativity, if you ask me."

Theo huffed his agreement. "Anyway, I didn't just mean _this_," he said, his voice low and conspiratorial. "Not just tonight."

Draco looked up warily.

"There's got to be a way out of _all_ of this," Theo clarified, swallowing what Draco knew was a lifetime of fury.

"Not so long as Riddle's in charge," Draco muttered, hoping that would be that.

A pause passed between them; Draco could practically hear Theo’s thoughts, but by the time Theo spoke the words out loud, he'd already forcefully shoved the possibility aside.

It was hushed, and rightfully so. "What if he weren't in charge?"

"Shut the fuck up," Draco said sharply, nodding to the approaching headlights. "They're coming."

She heard his motorcycle pull up and her eyes snapped open, checking her clock.

Three in the morning - that wasn't normal. She flew to the door, throwing it open as she heard his heavy footstep on the landing.

"Draco," she breathed, her chest tightening as his face came into the light. His eye was nearly swollen shut and his lip was bleeding, the purple bruising of new injuries already starting to show. "Draco, Jesus Christ, what happened?"
He didn't have to say anything. *Trust me, you don't want to know.*

She took his hand and drew him inside, letting the door shut behind him and wrapping her arms tightly around his neck; he pulled her in close and she stretched out against him, pressing every inch of her body against some spare piece of his.

He was shaking a little and she led him to the couch, collapsing with him. She agonized for a moment - she was a medical professional, she knew perfectly well that his face needed attention - but she couldn't let go, couldn't imagine being anywhere else but in his arms. She held him until his breathing slowed and his tremors subsided, stroking his hair and whispering in his ear.

She reached around for where she knew he'd be keeping something in his waistband, a pistol or a knife; but there was nothing, and she felt a chill run through her, her entire body going numb as her mind sorted through countless possibilities. *If there had been a weapon there, had it been drawn? Had someone else fared worse tonight?*

For a moment she tried to care, but quickly found that she couldn't; she rooted around in her conscience for morality and compassion but only found a selfish breath of gladness, of relief that he was here with her, whatever sacrifice that feat had taken.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, realizing she had been crying. "I can have sex in a minute, I just -" She felt him swallow. "I didn't come for sex," he confessed, the anguish in his voice prompting a shiver up her spine. He burrowed his face in her shoulder, breathing in the smell of her hair.

"I just want to be with you," he told her, and she wondered how much it cost him to say it.

"What's her name?" Theo asked innocently, and Draco looked up, startled.

"What's whose name?" he asked, feeling his heart pound.

"Avery's been seeing your bike," Theo said slowly. "Not somewhere it should be."

"I - " Draco began, cursing himself for his carelessness. He'd been with her every night that she wasn't working. "It's not -"

"Be careful," Theo warned. "She's a citizen, isn't she?" Draco knew what he meant: *she's not one of us.*

Draco's mouth went dry. Theo wouldn't have brought it up unless he'd heard something dangerous. He didn't need to hear the words; *Riddle won't like that.*

But still, it was Theo.

"She's a fucking surgeon," Draco choked out, suddenly finding the concept absolutely absurd. *She's a surgeon, and I'm a pawn on wheels.*

"Fuuuuck," Theo exhaled slowly, taking a swig from his beer. "You'd think she'd know better than to get involved with trash like you."

They glanced at each other and grinned.

"Granger," Draco provided, savoring her name on his tongue as he reached for a sip of Theo's beer. "Dr. Hermione Granger," he enunciated slowly, feeling a strange surge of pride as he said it.
Theo nodded, taking the beer back and tossing back a long gulp.

"Don't get her killed," Theo muttered.

"Dr. Granger, we need you, there's nobody else - "

"What is it?" Hermione asked, turning to run after the orderly. She dodged a few other nurses and staff, chasing him through the ER as people continued to call out her name. It was a busy day; a large scale car crash had come in hours earlier, and the attendings were elsewhere -

"Dr. Granger, there you are - "

The nurses were scrambling around an unresponsive body; Hermione's heart lurched as a pale wrist came into view, a skull and a snake clearly visible as the hand draped over the side of the gurney.

*It couldn't be - *

"Dr. Granger?"

She looked at the nurse, forcing herself to focus and swallowing her immediate urge to vomit.

"What happened?" she asked breathlessly, rubbing her clavicle; her pulse was racing and her brain was screaming, blood rushing in her ears. "What happened to him?"

"GSW to the chest," the arriving EMT called, "through-and-through - "

"Let me see," Hermione said desperately, half-shoving people out of her way. "Let me see - "

She caught a glimpse of dark hair and felt a cruel moment of relief before remembering that this was her *job*, rushing forward to see the injury. The blood loss was staggering and he was so similar to Draco, his build and height, and the tattoos; he had some of the same ones Draco did. She reached out, checking for a pulse.

Someone called for a code behind her. "Dr. Granger - "

"Granger?"

Her name had dribbled out of the Death Eater's mouth and she looked sharply at him, watching him try to slur something she thought she vaguely understood.

"Draco," he muttered. "Draco - "

She looked up frantically, gesturing to an orderly.

"Call Draco Malfoy," she begged. "Call him now, please - "

She turned back to the dark haired Death Eater. "You're going to make it," she told him fiercely, something wretched twisting in her chest as his eyes drooped shut, slipping back out of consciousness. "I don't know how, but I'm going to save your fucking life."

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Draco ran through the halls of the hospital.

"Theo," he panted, throwing himself at someone who appeared capable of operating a computer. "I'm looking for Theo Nott - "
"Draco."

He turned, seeing her. "Granger," he sighed, yanking her into his arms. "Fuck, Granger, what happened? Where is he?"

"Post-op," she supplied. She looked exhausted and pale, and there were dark spatterings of blood on her scrubs. "He's okay, he's in one of the rooms but it's - " she looked down, suddenly hesitant. "It's family only right now - "

"Fuck that," Draco gritted out in frustration. "That's my fucking brother, Granger - "

She grabbed his hand, pulling him behind her with a surprising strength and dragging him into one of the on-call rooms. He followed, knowing better than to roar his displeasure, but wanting to anyway.

"Calm down," she told him, trying to coax him to sit on one of the cots. The patronizingly gentle tone of her voice was infuriating. "I know, I know how you must feel - "

"No you don't," he shouted back, raking a hand through his hair. "You have no fucking clue, Granger - how could you fucking know - "

"I know a half-dead Death Eater showed up in my ER and my heart nearly fucking stopped," she spat back, rising angrily to her feet. "I know that I was in your exact position and I thought I was going to lose my mind - "

"And what position was that, Granger?" Draco demanded. "What makes you think you fucking understand anything?"

"Because I thought someone I love was going to die, and for a minute, I wanted to, too!" she yelled, tears stinging mercilessly as she rounded on him. "Every time I see you, Draco, I swear, I die a little more, and this - " she passed a hand between them, gesturing to the space that suddenly seemed to fill the room - "this, keeping behind closed doors, it won't be enough - it can't be enough when I can never know if you're safe - "

"I'm never safe!" he erupted, stepping forward to grip her shoulders. "You don't understand, I'm not fucking safe - " he broke off, hearing his voice creak with unspoken torment. "I couldn't keep Theo safe, and you're not safe - "

"What is this?" she begged. "Tell me, please, just tell me - "

Don't, he wanted to beg her. Don't do this. Trust me, you don't want to know -

But he knew better. Nobody could live like that. He staggered forward, taking her face in his hands and feeling a toxic agony course through him.

"We can't do this," he told her, his voice breaking. "I can't - I'm not the one for you, you'll never fucking be safe with me - " he brought his hand to his temple, suffering a rush of self-loathing. "I can't give you the things you want - "

"I want you," she said tearfully, and she kissed him savagely, like she was daring the world to drag her away from him; for a moment he got lost in it - fuck it, I want you -

"It's never going to be a normal love," he said, breaking the kiss to look her in the eye and force himself to stick to his fucking guns. "I can't hold your hand in the street, I'll never - " he faltered, not knowing what normal people wanted. "I'll never fucking, I don't know, kiss you in public - "
"That's not what I need," she said, breathlessly pleading with him. "I want you, and whatever stolen moments you can give me, but I - " she started crying, and if he'd hated himself before, it was nothing like what he'd known in that moment. "I just want to know, I just need to know you're not going to - to come in bleeding on my operating table someday - "

"I can't promise you that," he cut in, brushing a loose curl away from her cheek and cupping her face in his hands. "I can't, Granger - "

"Tell me what you can," she begged him, her eyes wide. It was torture, and he couldn't stand it anymore; he couldn't see that look on her face anymore.

And so against all odds - over the volume of trust me, you don't want to know - he told her.

He told her about Dumbledore; how his death had been clumsy turmoil and it left them in shambles and Tom Riddle had picked up the pieces, Tom Riddle who treated them like pawns and trapped them in his cycle of violence and greed. He told her about how it wasn't what he came for, it wasn't what he wanted, but it was what he was fucking born for; nothing else but this.

After he said it, he thought for sure she would run; she was smart, he reasoned, and she would know a lost cause when she saw one. She would recognize a bad thing - a bad person - and she'd know how to leave. But instead her brown eyes had gone focused and clear - the moment of stillness and focus right before the engine roared to life - and she'd kissed him like she'd never kissed him before, taking the breath from his lungs and tearing the clothes from his back, more than hungry, more than wanting - a desperate, craving need -

His fingers shook as he hastily untied her scrubs, her nails scratching against the stubble on his jaw. Take it, he thought, take me, take everything -

She pulled him back onto the bed and wrapped her legs around his hips and he fucked her with the kind of yearning he'd never let himself feel before, suddenly determined to leave everything behind him; her fingers dug into his back and he hoped she drew blood, hoped that she was taking something from him as selfishly as he took from her.

I love you, he didn't say.

They'd both be dead if she ever knew.

Hermione slipped inside the administrative office; she'd said something about needing to look at an autopsy report from a surgery she'd assisted. It had been a particularly flimsy lie - I just wanted to see how procedure was recorded, sir, if you don't mind - but this wasn't a hospital that cared much about logistics; those reports are mostly for lawyers, she'd gotten in response, but fine, suit yourself.

She went straight for the file cabinet marked A-D and dug around at the back, hunting for Dumbledore, Albus. Something Draco had said had stuck out; something felt slightly off in her highly organized mind, and she had to see it for herself. She hadn't mentioned anything to him, but it had been nagging at her. He was in some kind of freak accident, Draco had said, the gun went off and he died in surgery.

She picked up the file and opened it; it was particularly sparse, considering that based on Draco's description of what happened, it would surely have led to all kinds of administrative headaches, including an M&M conference, which were not such common occurrences as to have escaped her attention. She read the EMT's notes first, glancing carefully over the scrawled handwriting.
"You fucking killed him," Draco snarled, staring furiously into Riddle's remorseless blue eyes as he pointed the gun from across the room. "You fucking killed Dumbledore, and you really thought nobody would ever figure it out?"

"Did your pretty doctor figure that out for you?" Riddle offered blandly, shrugging with indifference. "That's easily sorted out, you know." He looked skeptically at Draco. "I'd put that down, if I were you," he added, unfazed.

Draco swallowed, stunned at the mention of Granger. "I - " he started. "I have no idea what you think you're talking about," he lied, though he pointedly refused to lower the gun.

"Sure you don't," Riddle agreed, feigning amicability. "But please," he added, with the air of someone who had never once felt threatened, "do continue."

"Nobody will fucking stand for this," Draco told him venomously, trying to shake the thought of Fenrir being found dead and fighting not to picture Granger's face where Greyback's had been, blank and lifeless. "Not even my father - "

"Are you so sure about that?" Riddle cut in, blinking innocently. "You sound more confident than I would advise you to be, personally."

"You can pretend all you want," Draco snapped, "but there's proof, and nobody will stand for it, not after knowing you were the one behind this - "

"Are you so willing to gamble your life on this?" Riddle asked nonchalantly, raising one arched brow. "Are you really this happy to paint a target on her back? Tell me, Draco," he added, rising from behind his desk and leaning forward in mock interest. "Did you check to make sure she was safe before this conversation began?"

Draco's heart thudded in his chest; he hadn't known Riddle knew about Granger. He cursed himself for his own idiocy, begging every unknown deity he could think of that she was at the hospital working, or at least not alone.

"You didn't, did you?" Riddle sighed, his lips curling up an a repulsive, heartless smile. "How truly unfortunate for both of you."
"Don't," Draco growled, "don't think you can fucking threaten her - "

"Ah, have you remembered her now?" Riddle commented. "Convenient. But alas," he continued, taking a step towards Draco, "it's not a threat. I think you'll find I've got quite a bit more loyalty than you realize, young Mr Malfoy," Riddle added, "and it's the kind of loyalty you're about to learn right now."

Draco's finger shook against the trigger of his Glock. "Don't," he repeated, his teeth gritted, but Riddle ignored him.

"Do you think Dumbledore is the first person I've killed?" At that, Riddle laughed; a jarring, maniacal laugh. "Or the last, for that matter?"

"Stay away from her," Draco muttered, jabbing the gun at Riddle a second time. **Pull the trigger, Draco, do it -**

"Oh, you can shoot me, if you want," Riddle offered generously. "If that would make you feel better. **But,** he added, and Draco felt a bead of sweat drip down his back, "if you do, then who will tell Avery to stop watching her house?" He leaned back against his desk, eyeing his fingers. "Or advise Rowle to leave the hospital?"

"You're fucking bluffing," Draco growled, though he wasn't at all convinced. "You're just saying that."

"Maybe," Riddle agreed, shrugging. "Why don't you shoot me," he suggested, laughing again as though such a thing would only bring him joy, "and we can see which one of us is right?"

Draco's breathing was ragged, his vision swimming as he processed the words; it was only a game to Riddle, a fucking joke, but this was **Granger** on the line, and Draco was dizzied by the choice, paralyzed with indecision.

It was only when he heard two loud shots ring out from behind him that he even realized there was someone else in the room.

"Sorry," Hermione said quietly, her ears ringing as she let the pistol fall to the ground with a loud clatter, the sound echoing in the room. "I, um - borrowed something."

Draco stared at her; she stared back at him, her breath caught by the feverish look in his grey eyes. She tried not to think about the particular puppet-like way that Tom Riddle had dropped limply to the ground, his blood quickly seeping into the gaudy carpet. She was a surgeon, after all, and an efficient one. She knew exactly where to aim, and she had very, very reliable hand-eye coordination.

The best in her class, or so she'd been told.

"How would you feel about disappearing for a little while with me?" Draco asked breathlessly, and he was suddenly right in front of her, his arms tight around her, his fingers tangled in her hair. She nearly laughed in spite of herself, leaning in as he bent to kiss her neck.

"I love you," she murmured in her ear.

There had been no question. He'd never had to say the words.

"Ride or die," she whispered back.
a/n: Disclaimer - I don't actually know anything about 1) guns 2) any medical professions 3) motorcycles 4) the show Sons of Anarchy . . . the list goes on. Apologies for any inaccuracies.

That being said, this is my take on Agnl9's forbidden love prompt, and I hope you liked it! This is one I would consider expanding later if there was sufficient interest. I have some vague concept that Harry and Ron are cops, there's more going on with Theo, background to the Tom Riddle plot, lots of secret sex-having . . . but, you know. Let's start with this and see if anyone is into it. **Edit from the future: Ride or Die is now a completed full length fic.**
"I am about to die," Harry whispered, and the metal shell broke open. There was confetti inside.

Just kidding! dead people.

They were neither ghost nor truly flesh, he could see that; but they were all much younger than they had been in the movies.

James was exactly the same height as Harry, which was probably why it took so long for Lily to take any interest in him. He was wearing the same clothes in which he died, and his hair was untidy and ruffled, bearing some fatherly markers despite being not even old enough to rent a car.

Sirius was tall and handsome. From afar, Hermione dampened slightly.

Lupin was younger too. Even Harry was sort of down, all things considered.

Lily's smile was widest of all.

"You've been so brave," she said. "My genes, I expect."

"Fucking - what did you say, Evans?" James squawked, turning to face her. "I thought we agreed you wouldn't say shit like that to my son."

"Potter, you unbearable swine!" she yelled. "I am trying to have a moment!"

"Um," Harry managed. "Mum?"

"Oh, yes, hello darling," she said, shoving James away. "Get away, Potter, I'm quite busy, or did
"I fucking noticed!" James shouted. "Anyway, it's my turn - "

He nudged her aside, blocking her from view as he attempted to speak to Harry.

"Nearly there, son," he said, before Lily elbowed him in the ribs. "Evans, you brute!"

"Brute?" she echoed in disbelief, elbowing him a second time. "Come here and say that to my face, Potter, I dare you - "

"I will!" he roared, staring her down. "Don't you toy with me, woman, I am five seconds from putting you up against that tree - "

"Yes, hi," Remus interrupted, stepping smoothly between them. "Just a thought - Harry has a question?"

Lily squinted at him. "Oh yes," she said, remembering. "Do ask."

"Does it hurt?" Harry asked childishly.

James scoffed loudly, stepping in front of Lily to face Harry. "Listen, son - "

"How about Padfoot takes this one?" Remus cut in, gesturing for Sirius. "Sirius, what do you think about this" - he paused, looking meaningfully at the other man - "very sensitive question?"

"I have thoughts," Sirius announced definitively, and Remus nodded.

"Good," he said apprehensively. "Good start."

"So, in terms of metaphysical being, no," Sirius began, "but pain, of course, is classified in a number of different states, which is to not even begin to address the fucking inconvenience, obviously - "

There was a loud, collective groan.

"What he's saying is no," Remus yelled casually. "He's saying no. It's fine. Super easy."

"What, dying?" Harry asked, confused, having lost track of the matter at hand.


"Moony, you fuck," James interrupted, nudging him aside to look at Harry. "Dying's a real bitch, son."

"Oh, here we go," Lily announced, rolling her eyes. "James Potter, the fucking expert in everything - "

"Evans, you have no idea the kind of epic railing you are about to receive later," James warned, glaring at her. "And anyway - " he turned back to Harry. "What was it you wanted again?"

"Just like … advice would be cool," Harry ventured. "Like, any tips, you know?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, is it too late to suggest you don't trust Dumbledore?" James offered, and Lily sighed loudly.
"Don't listen to him," she cooed reassuringly. "It's fine, darling."

"Easier than falling asleep," Sirius added, and Remus threw his hands in the air.

"Where was that five minutes ago?" he demanded crossly.

Sirius shrugged. "I don't know, it just came to me."

Remus sighed. "It seems like -"

"Art takes time, Remus!" Sirius barked, crossing his arms over his chest and pouting.

"I think," James said slowly, "we may have gotten slightly off track."

"Brilliant, Potter," Lily mumbled. "Discovery of the century."

"I tell you what, son, I'm going to fuck your mum later," James informed Harry, his voice low in his ear. "Honestly, fatherly advice: this is just foreplay."

"Okay, excellent," Harry agreed warily, wondering if he had been wrong to wish he'd had parents all those years, "but in the meantime -"

"Oh, right," James realized, straightening. "You wanted advice."

"Yes," Remus sighed emphatically. "Yes!"

"Okay, cool, well - here's the thing," James ventured. "You are - how old are you?"

"I'm seventeen," Harry reminded him. "Sort of a big deal."

"Yeah, totes," James agreed. "So, just for reference, I'm twenty one."

Harry burst out laughing. "No you aren't!"

"No, we definitely are," Lily agreed, making a face. "I know. It's ludicrous."

"So," Harry said hesitantly, "like, in terms of what to do in this particular instance …"

"Honestly? I have no fucking idea," James supplied, shrugging. "I mean, we barely made it further than you did."

"We did make it further in school," Lily said hopefully. "Do you need help with homework?"

"No I don't need help with homework!" Harry exclaimed in disbelief. "Mum!"

"Yeah, okay, so," Remus interrupted, attempting to be productive, "back to the question of dying being painful -"

"Easier than falling asleep!" Sirius declared, now quite impressed with his own assessment. "Poetic as fuck, that is."

"Right," Remus sighed, "and Voldemort will want it quick, of course, because this has lasted far too many books at this point."

"So you're saying not to drag it out?" Harry asked. "Avoid forcing an additional decade of web commentary from the author?"
"Well, let's not be too hasty," Remus amended quickly.

"I didn't want you to die," Harry said, suddenly unable to prevent the words. "Any of you. Especially not you," he added, turning to Lupin. "Right after you had your son - "

"You know, honestly, seeing this whole exchange has me questioning whether I was even father material to begin with," Remus said, frowning. "I can't even get these idiots in line."

"We can never be governed!" Sirius trumpeted.

"You see?" Remus offered, shrugging. "Anyway, I'm sorry I'll never know him, but maybe some other old dude can manipulate him in order to save the wizarding world. I mean, there's obviously a limited number of opportunities, but I think he could edge his way in."

"Oh, his personal statement will be fucking obliterating," Harry agreed. "Totally."

"I mean, not trying to get ahead of myself, obviously," Remus amended.

"Naturally," Harry said, nodding. "Understood."

"And anyway, I died for a reason." Remus looked around. "We all did. Right?"

"I'd like to remind everyone that I am twenty one and still an idiot," James announced. "In case there were some lingering questions."

"No, we've got it, Potter," Lily said briskly.

Harry, realizing that he had chosen perhaps the most ineffectual sources of advice he could have sought out - he watched his father eye fuck his mother and considered if even Snape would have been more helpful - determined that they would not tell him to go; it would have to be his decision.

"You'll stay with me?" he asked hopefully.

"Okay, did nobody explain this whole stone thing to him?" James asked loudly. "Moony, did Dumbledore not tell him - "

"Prongs," Remus sighed. "Please."

"FINE," James barked irritably. "Yes, sure, we'll be here."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Yes, yes, until the very end," James muttered. "Because again, that's how the fucking stone works, it's not like I can run off for tea while you've got me captive here, son - "

"And they won't be able to see you?" asked Harry.

Sirius and James exchanged a glance.

"Is he not listening, or- "

"No, no, it's a whole thing," Sirius assured him, shaking his head and patting his best friend's shoulder. "Don't take it personally."

Harry cleared his throat. "So - "
"Oh for the actual sake of fuck," James muttered. "You take this one, Pads."

"Again, in terms of the metaphysical - "

"PADFOOT!" Lily and Remus shouted in unison.

"Right," Sirius sighed. "We're, um. We are part of you," he informed Harry. "Invisible to anyone else."

Harry looked at his mother.

"They're idiots," she informed him gravely. "I'm aware."

"I'm just wondering," Harry broached carefully, "your taste in men - "

"Completely suspect," Lily agreed, nodding. "Solid hair genes, though."

"Right," Harry sighed. "So - "

"Hey man," James said, his voice oddly patient. "In terms of defeating evil wizards, you really have us beat."


"I'm thinking you're probably best off taking your own advice," James continued, tilting his head in consideration. "Agreed, Moony?"

"Oh, agreed," Remus nodded. "Certainly. We are fools."

"Utter fools," Sirius said vehemently. "Moronic twats over here on the dead side."

"Oddly, that does help," Harry commented, nodding in surprise. "Thanks."

Sirius pumped a triumphant fist in the air. "Nailed it!"

"Any last minute advice?" James offered hopefully. "Transfiguration? I'm a fucking whiz at transfiguration."

"Um, maybe later," Harry agreed, before turning to his mother. "Stay close to me," he added quietly, his last request reserved for her.

Lily tossed her head back, sighing petulantly. "Fine," she agreed, glaring at James. "This is your fault, by the way."

James shrugged. "You forgot the contraception charm."

She made a face. "Fuck, that's right." She smiled fondly at Harry. "Ah, well. I've done worse things."

"Yeah," Sirius agreed. "Like James."

All was well.

Chapter End Notes
a/n: Just posting this now while I continue to slave away on Nocturnes and other one shots. Thanks as always for enduring my absurdity!
Perchance to Dream

Due to its darker content, this story has been moved to the story collection *Draught of Living Death* and can be found as Chapter 4: *Perchance to Dream.*
Birds

Due to its darker content, this story has been moved to the story collection *Draught of Living Death* and can be found as [Chapter 6: Birds](#).
**Three Wishes**

*Pairing:* Krumione (Viktor Krum x Hermione Granger)

*Universe:* Hogwarts/Post-Hogwarts AU, EWE

*Rating:* M for sexual content

*Summary:* Eidyia1 requested a light fourth year Krumione based on the quote "Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul," from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. This is that, and then some.

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**Three Wishes**

*Or, the Same Wish, Three Ways;*  
*Or, Three Dances With Viktor.*

Not even the mirror had made her feel as beautiful as Viktor did when he looked at her; and that was really saying something, as the mirror was enchanted to be supportive.

*You look lovely dear,* the mirror squeaked, and Hermione almost believed it, trying not to run her fingers too many times through the rarity of her silkily tamed curls. *You are a breathtaking marvel.*

Viktor's eyes though, they flamed; *You look like how it feels to catch my breath,* he might have been saying, though he was a man of remarkably few words.

"Hi," Hermione said, taking his arm. His lips turned up almost imperceptibly in greeting. *Hi,* he said back, with the way he brushed his comfortingly fingers across hers.

He never said much if he could help it. She read to him, mostly, and not even really because he liked to read - or be read to, for that matter, as far as she could tell - but because he didn't much care to chat, she suspected. She could see from her position on the outside that his life was full of noise, and that it relieved him to be silent.

He was a physical being, really, and as strange as that was to say - as strange as it was to even be around, because even if Harry and Ron rarely wanted to talk about things that interested her, they still constantly talked - she found right away that she liked spending time with someone who knew the value of a touch, or the meaning in a glance; or the particular fleeting enchantment of his hand meeting her waist, right before they took the first step.

They'd danced before this - and thank god, too, or she'd never have managed to stand in front of so many people without collapsing - on a particularly cool day, when he'd somehow led her outside to the lake. She'd heard one too many not-so-subtle coughs of quidditch groupie and fame-chasing swot and on that particular day, when Viktor's furrowed glare hadn't been silencing enough, she'd reluctantly followed when he offered her his hand, her cheeks flaming as the others stared.

She thought she would have been used to it by now, the meaningless name-calling and hollow
accusations that she associated herself with boys who were so far above her; but there was still a throb of loneliness somewhere in her chest, a piece of her who would have traded Viktor's attention just to be invited when Lavender and Parvati went shopping in Hogsmeade or studied together, whispering little jokes that Hermione would never understand.

She wished she even liked quidditch; then, maybe, she could at least appreciate Viktor the way Ron and Harry did, and maybe she might have more to say - to all three of them.

Luckily, Viktor didn't seem to mind, and so she learned to value him instead; the breath she took of cool autumn air that day had been as soothing as his presence, and she relaxed, looking up into his solemn, dark eyes.

"What are you reading," he'd asked gruffly, pointing at her book; she showed him the cover: The Picture of Dorian Gray.

"Who?" he asked, his face betraying confusion, and she stifled a giggle.

"Here," she offered, "let me read you a page - "

And that's how it had begun.

"Lord Henry went out to the garden and found Dorian Gray burying his face in the great cool lilac-blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume as if it had been wine," she read, the wind nudging her wild hair from her shoulder. "He came close to him and put his hand upon his shoulder. 'You are quite right to do that,' he murmured. 'Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul - ""

"The senses," Viktor had interrupted, his brow furrowed. "Vat senses?"

"The senses," Hermione repeated. "Sight, sound, smell - "

"Touch?" he asked tentatively, leaning back, and his fingers brushed hers.

She reddened, looking away. "Yes," she replied, and he got to his feet, reaching his hand out for hers.

He was surprisingly coordinated; although, perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised - he was an athlete, after all, and she'd seen the Wonky-Faint thing he'd done at the World Cup - but there was a lightness to his step that she wouldn't have predicted from a glance. She, by contrast, had felt awkward and clunky, somehow, like her limbs wouldn't move as she wished them to, and he had seen the growl in her frustration, tilting her chin up.

"You vill dance vith me, yes?" he asked. "At this . . . ball. You vill, von't you?"

"Me?" she'd echoed, aghast. "But - but look at me, I'm - "

He'd spun her then, twirled her out, and despite how silly she'd felt she had laughed, the cool air bursting in her lungs and whipping color into her cheeks. He pulled her back in, coiling her into his chest, and then lifted her in the air -

And while she might have felt unsteady on a broom, she delighted in flying in his arms.

"You're qvite good," he assured her once he'd lowered her to the ground, and though she had to assume he was lying, she was too breathless to protest. "These are the senses, yes?"
The look in his eyes; the smell of him, freshly showered, clean and sharp; his voice, low and hopeful in her ear; his fingers gripping tightly to her waist.

"Yes," she had whispered back then, and for a moment, her soul had been cured.

"I'm nervous," she whispered to him now, her breath catching in her throat as she smoothed down the floaty chiffon of her periwinkle robes. He, normally not one to concern himself with his appearance, had clearly gone to some lengths, his hair neatly swept aside and his black robes impeccably pressed and fitted. He had a tendency to look a bit severe and while she might have guessed black robes would not have helped, he looked slightly relaxed; even glad.

"Not to worry," he murmured back, covering her hand with his for a moment before sweeping her onto the brightly lit dance floor. "You are a wonderful dancer."

"I'm not," she started to say, but then the music had started, and she considered to herself that maybe he was right, and maybe she was a wonderful dancer; the colors and smells of the feast whirled around her, and she, always having been burdened by troubles, suddenly felt herself float on air.

She might have thought to question the stares she was getting but Viktor had a way of capturing her attention; and when she saw the trace of a smile on his lips she realized that for all his fame, for all his skill, he was still seeking a moment of freedom, and if she could be that - if she could only let go - perhaps they might have a moment's reprieve from the demands of their lives.

"Some air," he'd suggested, taking her hand like he'd done once before, and led her outside. They walked the courtyard of the castle, catching their breaths, and he seemed to grow younger in the moonlight, his cheeks warmed by the glow that came from inside the castle.

"The senses," he said, and she shivered, though it wasn't from cold. "Sight, smell, sound, touch, and - "

"Taste," she supplied instantly, and her breath caught, his eyes moving curiously to her mouth.

"This is what cures the soul?" he asked, lifting her chin to look at her.

"According to Oscar Wilde," she agreed, swallowing. "But I suppose he's just a muggle as far as I can tell, so - "

Mercifully, he lifted her chin, his dark eyes searching hers before he lowered his head, brushing his lips against hers and silencing her. With Viktor, it was always a peaceful silence, and she lost herself in it, unfurling in his touch and immersing herself in his taste.

She'd read the books, she thought, as the lingering sweetness of the butterbeer they'd drunk fizzed on her lips; she'd read with fascination as Juliet had sacrificed her lips of prayer to Romeo's breath of trespass - the tiny sips of piety from Lolita - the heart-quake of Byron, between Haidee and Juan - the perishable breath between Gatsby and Daisy -

And yet she'd never imagined it would feel like this; like comfort, like home - like excitement and like her knees would shake, but she'd be held up by the breath between them, propped up by something that fluttered in her chest and lifted her to her toes, pressing her against him.

It seemed to Hermione an appropriate moment for a wish; and so she thought, in the cool breath of their parting, that she would make one.

*I wish,* she thought, *I could live this night over and over.*
"Ronald, for the last time," Hermione said, fussing one last time with her hair, "you'll have to stop comparing yourself to a house elf, it's deeply insensitive -"

"You're deeply insensitive," he muttered back, and she smirked at him.

"Clever," she said, rolling her eyes. "It's nearly three, there can't be much left for your mother to ask you to do -"

"If there is, I'm sure she'll find me," Ron grumbled, tousling his hair and pivoting to exit with an indignant grunt. " Anyway, Mione -"

"Yes?" she asked, turning to look at him. He paused, looking thoughtful, before walking over to join her, offering her free hand a squeeze.

"You look really nice," he offered, and she smiled, watching his eyes travel longingly to her lips.

Butterbeer, she thought, and peaceful silence.

"I'll see you out there," she said quickly, blinking away the memory to squeeze his hand and nudge him toward the door. "Go, won't you?"

He gave her a tiny grin before nodding, loping out the doorframe and disappearing. She sighed, fixing her makeup one last time before stepping out of the Burrow, heading for the orchard.

It was hard not to feel a bit lonely at the wedding; for all that Ginny and Molly were hard on Fleur, Hermione found she quite envied the lovely blonde witch. The time she'd spent at the Burrow had allowed her to watch the way Bill and Fleur occupied each other's space so effortlessly; they seemed to knit together by some unseeable force, always pulled towards each other, and Hermione had both admired and envied them their closeness.

It reminded her of something she'd once had - or nearly had, as the case had been. Unfortunately, letters were not quite a replacement; particularly not when so much of what they'd had together relied so heavily on the unsaid.

She shook the thought of Viktor away, trying to focus. Ginny and Harry had had their moments, and it appeared Ron was seeming to make an effort of some sort - though that hardly mattered, she reminded herself, reaching instinctively for her small beaded bag. They had to be ready, and she had to have her mind focused, and free of distraction - just in case.

Not that anything could have prepared her focus for when she caught sight of a certain dark head coming towards her; you look like how it feels to catch my breath, he seemed to tell her again, and she reveled in the look on his face, floating towards him - part dream, she thought, and part memory.

"Viktor," she said breathlessly, but was interrupted as Ron appeared at her elbow.

"Mione," he urged, his gaze flicking impatiently at Viktor, "come on -"

And then she was pulled away, the slow smile on Viktor's face serving as a promise for later.

She sought him out again as soon as she was able, but it was no easy feat with Ron's narrowed eyes on her. She stood alone, keeping her distance, until dancing began at the reception and Bill and
Fleur took the floor, the easy rhythm reminding Hermione of something she'd once had.

A touch that had once been on her waist, a lingering stare at her lips, the sound of his voice; the smell of him, clean and sharp -

"Her-my-on-ee," he pronounced slowly, and she smiled, turning to face him.

"You learned," she ventured brightly, and his lips turned up in a blissful expression of warmth.

"I learned," he agreed, offering her his hand. "A dance?"

She took his hand, her fingers sighing contentedly at his touch. "I might have forgotten the steps since I last saw you," she confessed, though she quickly found that her body knew differently. Her feet had known just where to step, and the curve of her waist kissed his hand with ease, like no time had parted them.

"Things are different," he murmured observationally, and she grew uneasy for a moment, wondering if he meant the war - or if, perhaps, he had just meant the improvement in his English, and the ease with which he seemed to speak. "Though some things remain, don't they?"

"Some things," she whispered, a question; and he leaned down, placing his lips near her ear.

"Nothing can cure the soul but the senses," he said quietly in answer, and he looked down, reaching to nudge a curl behind her ear.

"The senses," she repeated, sliding a hand to his chest. *Touch.*

His eyes met hers, his tongue dragging slowly across his lip.

*Taste,* she thought, shivering.

He took her hand, pulling her out of reach from the marquee and the party, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm as they walked. She might have looked over her shoulder to see if Ron was watching - he was, she was quite sure - but there was something about Viktor's presence that always made her forget everything else.

*Something that cured her soul,* she thought, as he swept her into his arms, pulling her against his chest.

"I have missed you," he confessed, his eyes shutting as the admission left him; she reached up, running her fingers along the sharp angle of his jaw.

"I've missed you, too," she said, and he bent his head to hers.

It was different now, the kiss; there was an urgency now that hadn't been there before, back when the world had been ever so slightly simpler, and they thought they might have more time. His lips had been slow and gentle then, but now they were feverish, expressive, like he would tell her his secrets and pour out his truths into the waiting chasm of her breath. She, more lost this time - if such a thing were possible - and more fearful, clung to him in the darkness, rejoicing in a moment of escape.

He pressed her back against a large tree and she gasped, the kiss changing character; if it had started as *I miss you* it evolved into *I want you,* and she discovered with the softest of moans that perhaps she even meant *I need you,* and *I need this,* and *deliver me, if only for a moment-*
His fingers traveled slowly down the front of her lilac dress and she pressed her breasts against his hands, her heart pounding as he took her silent cue and ran his thumbs over her nipples, caressing her through the thin fabric.

"Viktor," she choked out, and he looked up, his chest rising and falling in earnest as he looked at her.

"Sight," he said, and she held her breath, "sound, smell, touch, and - "

"Taste," she whispered, and he lowered himself to his knees, his hands slipping under her dress.

She fumbled for her wand, casting a hasty disillusionment charm as he gently nudged her legs apart, letting his fingers travel from the curve of her inner thigh to her slit, slipping a finger inside her and tearing a shallow sigh of longing from her lips as she closed her eyes. She felt him swallow, her hands near the pulse of his neck, as he brought his mouth to her clit, dragging his tongue against her opening as his fingers continued exploring her, her head falling back with a gasp.

She lost herself, her breath and her sanity, and let go of the stress of her world for the length of a moment; only one thought remained, she realized, and it was a wish.

_I wish_, she thought, _I could live this night over and over._

---

**Three Years Later**

"Congratulations," Hermione said, giving Ginny a hug. "You're the perfect bride."

"Oh, shut up," Ginny sighed, kissing her cheek. "Are you having fun?"

"Of course," Hermione said quickly, and Ginny gave her a look.

"Not too bothered about Lavender, are you?" Ginny asked quietly, and Hermione forced a smile.

"He's perfectly at liberty to move on, you know," she said, and Ginny made a face.

"This isn't _Witch Weekly_, Hermione," she sniffed. "I'm the bride, and I demand truth."

Hermione sighed, knowing a losing battle when she saw one.

"It's . . . not my favorite thing," she conceded, biting her lip as she saw Lavender throw her head back, laughing at one of Ron's jokes. "But, better this way," she managed chipperly, giving Ginny's waist a squeeze. "He was never much of a dancer, anyway."

"Too true," Ginny agreed vehemently, shaking her head. "It's a disaster to watch him try, truly, it's like watching him try to block all the hoops at once with just his feet - "

"I'm familiar," Hermione said with a smirk.

"I can't imagine the sex was much better," Ginny commented, and Hermione gave her a shove, promptly reddening.

"_Ginny_, for heaven's sake - "

"I'll take that as confirmation," Ginny trumpeted, as Harry suddenly materialized behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist.
"Alright, Hermione?" he said, planting a kiss at the nape of his new wife's neck and grinning as she giggled.

"Oh, go dance, you two," Hermione sighed, smiling fondly at them. *They were still awfully young,* she thought, *but stranger things had happened.* *"No need to hang around with me."

"If you insist," Ginny agreed, taking Harry's hand and pulling him; he, however, paused, turning his head to mutter something in Hermione's ear.

"I do have one surprise for you," he said, and then gestured behind her.

Her heart flipped. "What did you - "

"Have a nice night, Hermione," Harry announced with a wink, and with that, he and Ginny were off, racing each other to the dance floor.

"They look happy," a voice behind her noted, and Hermione turned, coughing as she choked momentarily on a breath.

"Viktor," she managed, and he smiled at her, reaching out a hand for hers.

"Hermi-one," he said - *nearly perfect,* she thought, taking it as a sign - and before she realized she had slipped her hand in his, he was leading her away from the corner. *"Dance with me."

Luna would say she had been rid of Nargles, Hermione imagined as she followed him; she'd regained the floaty weightlessness she associated with his presence, her feet always familiar with the steps. He would lead her out to the dance floor, give her a moment of contentment, lure her and tempt her and adore her, and then something would part them; she knew the routine. She'd grown fond of it, despite the nights she'd ended up alone.

She wondered what would drag them apart this time; whether a Dark Lord might appear from the depths, if only just to torment her.

He spun her around on the floor, the steps quicker than she was used to, until she was flustered and pink, her hair come loose around her face, and he was laughing - a rarity in itself. *How was it always so easy?* she marveled. *Like no time had ever passed.*

By the time he had led her away, after dance upon dance that ended, as it always did, with *a walk,* and his hand on her waist became a scream in her mind; by the time she found herself alone with him, the piece of her that longed for romance - for the enchantment of hearing Oscar Wilde on his lips - yielded gracelessly to the thudding in her chest, the racing of her pulse.

"Hermione," he began, and she cut him off -

"Taste," she begged, and she might have been embarrassed by the edge of pleading to her tone, but he - thankfully - lowered his mouth to hers with a growl, sparing her the anguish.

She scarcely knew how they made it to her room at the Three Broomsticks; all she knew was that this wasn't a time for *muffliato* in the dark - she wanted passion, she wanted freedom, she wanted liberation -

And she wanted space to move around, she thought hazily, as he unzipped her dress and nudged it to the floor, letting it pool victoriously at her feet before lifting her around the waist and throwing her back on the bed.
Was it the thrill of it? she thought as he tore his shirt over his head, athleticism gleaming from the lines of his chest. Was it the thrill of him? she corrected herself, wrapping her legs around his hips as he slid himself against her, pressing his lips to the base of her neck.

He was power uncoiled as he lifted her hands above her head, holding her wrists as he entered her; he was cool flames of control as he brought her to a first, breathless ripple of bliss, a crushing wave of delirium flooding her as her mind went luxuriously blank.

It's this, she realized, pausing to tangle her fingers in his hair; it was the feeling he gave her, the way he looked at her - you look like how it feels to catch my breath - and even amidst wild exhilaration, against the rhythm of gasps and moans, he still brought a peaceful silence to her life, and she surrendered her trials in his arms.

Nothing cures the soul but the senses -

The darkness of his hair, the artful craftsmanship of him; the smell, clean and sharp, with sweetness on his tongue - a second pulsing ache that had built inside her unfurled in a whorl of bitter rapture, leaving her lips in a breathless gasp -

Just as nothing cures the senses, she realized - pleasure and pain subsiding as he fell against her, his eyes full of nothing but her - but the soul.

It had been his soul she wanted all along.

I wish, she thought, I could live this night over and ov-

"Hermione," he said, silencing her thoughts as she caught her breath, "stay with me."

"This is my room," she whispered back playfully, and he caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her fingers.

"No," he murmured, with a shake of his head. "Stay with me."

It finally dawned on her, and she smiled.

I could live this night over and over, she realized, and she found euphoria in the thought.

"Yes," she whispered back. "I'll stay."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Apologies for how long this took, but I hope this pleases you, Eidyia! Also, hopefully this arrives in time to distract any of you from the election (if you need it). Lastly, I don't have to travel this weekend for once, so expect another Amortentia, and keep an eye out for the expanded version of Ride or Die, which should post tomorrow if all goes well with the end of Youth . . .
Better

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Better

Pairing: Parkweasel (Pansy Parkinson x Percy Weasley)

Universe: Post-War AU

Rating: M for language, sex

Summary: So, I had an idea for a one shot based on the song Heartbeat by Childish Gambino, and I knew it had to be Pansy Parkinson, but I hadn't decided who the pairing would be until I got an ask for Pansy x Percy and it dawned on me that he - strangely enough - was perfect. So here is this, based on this line: I wish we never fucked and I mean that. But not really - you say the nastiest shit in bed and it's fucking awesome.

There's a LOT more explicit language/dirty talk in this than normal; please skip if that's not your thing!

"Susan fucking Bones, have you lost your fucking mind?" Pansy demanded, letting her head fall back as he ripped open the buttons of her thin white oxford. "I thought the point of breaking up was to choose someone who was actually worth something - "

"Since when do you worry about my choices, Pansy?" he asked lazily, giving her a hard shove against the wall. "I thought the issue was that you were the one who wanted someone more" - he paused, thrusting her chin up to nip at her throat - "suitable."

"Is that what I said?" she asked, smirking, and at his mocking chuckle, she gave him a playful shove. "Well," she purred, "it would at least lend you some fucking legitimacy if you didn't go for such an incomprehensibly boring" - she broke off, gasping as he shoved her on top of his dresser and pushed her knees apart - "mousy swot of a - "

"Watch your language, Miss Parkinson," he murmured in her ear, reaching under her dress to yank her panties down her legs and over her knees before kicking them aside. "That's my girlfriend you're talking about."

Pansy's chest tightened.

"Not yet, she's not," she muttered, swallowing a possessive growl as she reached down, fumbling to remove his belt. "Believe me," she added, rooting around for her sense of cool as she nudged his trousers down over his hips, "you should find someone better."

He laughed, sliding her hips forward to nudge his tip at her entrance. "Better than Susan?" he whispered in her ear. "Or better than you?"

She felt her breath catch in her throat. "If you could do better than me," she said slowly, running a thumb over his tip, "I wouldn't be here, would I?"

"Funny," he remarked, reaching up to tangle his fingers in her hair. "You say that like you want to
be here."

He wasn't wrong; not that she appreciated it.

"Shut up and fuck me, Weasley," she determined brusquely, pulling his hands from around her face and placing them on her breasts.

"Are you sure you want me to stop talking?" he asked, peeling back the lace of her bra to run his thumbs over her nipples. "I seem to recall that you like hearing my thoughts on your pussy, Pansy."

At the word *pussy* on his ever-so-proper, meticulously law-abiding, former-Head-Boy lips, she felt an instant rush of craving; she arched her back as he reached under her skirt, sliding a finger into her.

"Do I?" she prompted.

He, despite her prodding, merely smiled, biding his time.

Oh, fuck me, she thought furiously, completely incapable of understanding how this narrow-hipped ginger menace had invaded her so completely.

"I love how wet you get for me," he murmured, turning his head to whisper into her ear as she shut her eyes, swallowing a whimper. "I love how fucking soaked you get for me. Have you been waiting all day, Pansy?" He gave her clit a slow, lazy circle with his thumb. "Tell me," he added, his blue eyes unfocused as he pulled back to look at her. "You know I want to hear you say it."

"I - " she began, closing her eyes as he slipped two fingers into her, rotating them slowly. "I just want your cock, you fuckstick," she managed, fighting a moan; he lowered his head to her nipple, laughing as he flicked his tongue over it.

"You're upset about Susan," he commented offhandedly, his fingers still stroking her clit, "and yet you haven't mentioned anything about McLaggen."

"It was just three dates and he's a boring twat," Pansy hissed, her fingers tightening around the back of his neck. "And don't talk about him right now," she added venomously, "and especially not about her."

Susan fucking Bones. *Unbelievable*, she thought with a grimace. It was enough to make her want to turn and walk out the door - only she couldn't possibly stop. He was too damn good to walk out on unsatisfied.

"I changed my wards for you, as you may recall," he reminded her before suddenly pulling her forward, picking her up. "I haven't for her," he said quietly, and Pansy instinctively tightened her legs around him.

He always knew what to say.

"Just fuck me, dickhead," she sighed in resignation, and he laughed, throwing her back on his bed and slipping out of his trousers. He was impossibly catlike, she realized, and while she might have thought herself drawn to someone more muscular, she'd come to appreciate that he had an undeniable elegance to him; a strange, entrancing aloofness to him that he must have developed after years of *yes sirs* and *no ma'am* before he finally grasped at power for himself.

It was the same concentrated sureness that he used to whisper jolting impossibilities in her ear; the same incongruous *control* over her that he seemed to have, whether she wanted it or not.
"What do you want first?" he asked, his blue eyes traveling the length of her, skirt twisted around her waist and shirt torn open. "My mouth?" He crawled over her, nudging her chin back to scrape his teeth along her neck. "Should I lick your pretty cunt, Pansy?"

"Fuck," she muttered, reaching down to take his cock in her hand. "Yes - "

"Pretty Pansy," he whispered, sliding two fingers on either side of her clit. "You're so fucking wet," he said again, and she shuddered. "You always taste so fucking sweet, Pansy."

At her wordless groan he reached back to unzip her skirt, yanking it away from her before lowering himself to press his lips to the curve of her thigh.

"I'm going to make you come," he informed her casually, with the same ease that he might employ while laying out a presentation for the Wizengamot. "I'm going to make your pussy throb for me - "

She moaned. "Oh, fuck - "

"And then I'm going to fuck you," he added, dragging his tongue along her entrance, "up against that wall."

*How does he manage this?* she thought, writhing as he made good on his promise, ghosting a hot breath against her inner thigh as he closed his mouth around her clit, sucking lightly before reaching his hand between her legs to slide his fingers in and out. She'd had plenty of good head before - she silently gave Draco his credit, as he would be deeply upset to know he'd been upstaged by any Weasley, much less this particular one - but *fuck*, there was something about this straight-laced, slender know-it-all and the way he talked about her pussy like it was fucking *art*.

She came quickly; he knew what she liked. And when he'd let her ride out the convulsions, her hips lifting off the bed as she moaned her aching satisfaction, he yanked her up, carrying her again and angling himself at her slit as he pressed her against the wall.

"Tell me what you want," he said, panting now; he was impossibly hard, and however little his face betrayed, that much he could never quite hide. "Say it, Pansy - tell me what you want me to do to you - "

"I want you fuck me," she said breathlessly, "until I can't feel my legs - "

"Done," he said, sliding his tip inside her. His patience was *extraordinary*, she thought, squeezing her legs around him to lure him inside her, but he was far too calculated to allow her to break his concentration. "I'm going to fuck you until you scream my name," he added mercilessly, biting softly on her clavicle. "I want to hear you say it when you come."

"You have a fucking *stupid* name, Weasley," she argued, gritting her teeth. "I'm not doing it."

"Fine," he said, pulling out slightly, and she let out a frustrated groan, coiling her legs tighter around him.

"Fucking hell, I'll say whatever you want," she amended, nearly shouting in desperation, "just would you *please* - "

He, to her intense relief, chose that particular breath of exasperation to relieve her suffering, and the moment he slid his cock inside her she felt her mind go euphorically blank, knowing she really *would* say whatever he wanted; she doubted she'd even know what she was saying by the time he brought her there. He angled one leg higher, positioning himself against her clit as he thrusted into
her, and she threw her head back, groaning.

"You feel so fucking good," he panted in her ear, "you're so wet for me, Pansy, your cunt's so fucking tight - "

_Oh for fuck's sake_, she thought, her heart thudding as he bent his head down to her breasts. _How is he so good at this?_

"Tell me you love this," he said. "Tell me how much you like my cock inside you - "

"Fuck, yes, I - I love it - your cock is fucking _perfect_ - "

"Do you want to come, Pansy?" he asked gruffly, his voice muffled against her skin. "Say my name, Pansy - say my name when I make you come - "

"Oh fuck" - _oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck_ - "Percy," she choked out, his name escaping like a sob as she felt the ache inside her build to oblivion, finally going limp in his arms.

He came as soon as she did, holding her up just long enough to ride out the pulsing of his cock inside her before lowering her to the floor, settling her head against his chest as they lay back against the cold wood, spent.

"Her aunt was the head of Magical Law Enforcement," he murmured eventually, stroking her hair. "Susan, I mean." He paused. "She's well connected."

Pansy swallowed, saying nothing.

"Cormac seems right up your alley," he continued, and she looked up, glaring at him. "Oh, you play coy, but I know you, Miss Parkinson," he reminded her, giving her a knowing smirk. "You forget, Pansy, that I know exactly what you like."

_He really does_, she thought murderously, digging her nails into his chest; _mine_, she thought helplessly, and she instantly regretted it.

"I hate your name," she burst out, as soon as she could speak.

He shook his head, chuckling. "You just don't like other people playing with your toys," he corrected, as though the two thoughts were somehow related.

"That's irrelevant," she snapped, but he pulled his arms around her, holding her closer.

"Fine," he conceded softly, pressing his lips to her forehead. "No Susan, then."


He looked down at her, expressionless, before turning his head to the side, his heart skipping a beat below her ear.

"I should really get carpet installed in here," he remarked thoughtfully, closing his eyes and sighing.

She knew the moment that she laid eyes on him that Percy fucking Weasley was going to be a goddamn thorn in her side, though she had no idea then that it was going to be _this_ out of hand; if she had, maybe she wouldn't have taken the job.
The event planning business that she and Daphne had started with Narcissa's help had been off to a slow start, so she liked to think she had simply been unusually vulnerable at the time; it was hard to break right into weddings and galas, so they'd had to settle for Ministry conferences at first - which was how she ended up speaking to the world's most unlikable man in the first place.

He was reserved, a rigid stickler for rules - for fuck's sake, she'd never had to do so much paperwork in her life - and looked like he'd never had a moment of relaxation during the course of his entire existence, much less at any point over the span of the three-day Wizengamot conference about Ministry procedures that she'd been hired to arrange for him. She didn't think him much of a threat - he'd somehow failed to notice that she referred to him exclusively on a rotating cycle of dipshit, fuckstick, and thundertwat behind his back, or so she'd thought - until she'd been alone with him the first time, setting up the coat check for the dinner that was to take place that evening.

They'd argued about something; some protocol detail she was sure nobody would care about - but, of course, he did - and then suddenly he had her on her back, her dress torn up the side as he fucked her into mindless confusion.

You certainly talk a big game, Miss Parkinson, he'd said, dripping with skepticism as he pressed her back against the wall, and for a girl who always had a clever retort, she was shocked to find she struggled to speak.

Watch out, she managed furiously, my bite's worse than my bark.

He'd leaned in, his breath teasing across the side of her nose, and threw out two effortless words that made her knees buckle: Prove it.

It had been euphoric - or, at least, as euphoric as floor sex could be, she supposed.

He'd had the last word afterwards, too - the arsehole. After dinner, he'd said, tucking his shirt back into his trousers, I'll spread you out on the donors' table and fuck you until you scream.

God, she'd thought, rolling her eyes, he's even got protocol for my orgasms - but it had been the best lay of her entire life, and she'd made sure to do it again - and again, and again - as many times as possible for the next three weeks; right up until realizing that she couldn't admit to Daphne who she was seeing.

Percy Weasley, she'd attempted to say, feeling instantly uneasy. Percy motherfucking Weasley. The worst family, and the least likable of the bunch; and so, rather than admit to her sins, she'd simply broken it off, sick to her stomach - though not before he made her come three times on all fours atop his desk.

That had been three months ago. And it had only happened twice - no, she thought with a sigh, three times - since then; so really, it could be worse.

She was looking for someone better; unfortunately the more she dated, the less she was sure what better actually meant. More socially acceptable, she supposed. Arm candy, she thought fancifully, for when she inevitably did start hosting galas for the privileged and moneyed. Which was surely any moment, she was convinced.

"Really, investment opportunities in the Wizarding World could not be better," Michael Corner was saying. It was their second date, and likely to be their last; Pansy, bored to tears, had said next to nothing the entire dinner, and they had already finished their entrees. "Commercial activity is at a generational high, I'm telling you."
"Mm," Pansy agreed faintly, glancing around. Ugh, she thought firmly, watching the hostess seat Hermione Granger at a table near the bar. She was alone; meeting someone, Pansy guessed, though she secretly hoped they wouldn't show.

"I keep telling everyone, Knockturn Alley will be the new Diagon Alley as soon as the Ministry approves our permits," Michael said, and Pansy couldn't fight a quiet scoff of disagreement.

"Unlikely," she remarked, taking a sip of wine and responding without much thought. "The Ministry's taken an anti-development stance since petty thefts increased in Diagon. Foolish, I think," she added, straightening, "since I don't think development is the problem - "

She stopped as Michael blinked in confusion.

"What?" he asked blankly. "Who told you that?"

"Who told me?" she asked, somewhat indignantly. "I'm an informed citizen - "

"You're a party planner," he corrected skeptically, and while the slight upturn of his lips indicated that he meant to be playful, she experienced a deep surge of loathing.

The truth was that she'd already had this conversation before, though not nearly so obnoxiously. Percy had drafted some of the early legislation on development permits in the Wizarding World's high street retail, and he'd invited her thoughts on the matter before fucking her twice in the shower. They'd disagreed, but in the end they came.

To an agreement, she corrected herself, giving herself an internal shake.

"I specialize in event planning, yes," she said, forcing patience as she took another sip, "but I consider myself fairly educated on local business issues."

"Well, you're wrong," he said crisply, as she fought the urge to kick him resolutely in the midpoint of his shin, "but I think my point will be proven once the contracts go through."

"Mm," she said again, fuming into her glass and banishing her gaze elsewhere, just in time to catch Granger's date arrive.

Pansy choked on her swallow of wine. She'd know that particular loping gait anywhere.

"That cocksucker!" she exclaimed, slamming a fist on the table, and Michael - along with several people seated at tables around her - jumped in alarm. "Sorry," she mumbled, catching Percy's eye as he sat down across from Granger, facing her.

He, unsurprisingly, did not react to her eye contact; he looked at her very intently, unblinking, for the span of a moment before returning his attention to Granger, smiling politely in greeting.

"That was . . . something," Michael remarked, pursing his lips in disapproval, and Pansy forced a laugh, reaching forward to place her hand on his forearm.

"Oh Michael, you're so funny," she exclaimed loudly, and at the sound of her voice, Percy glanced up again, smirking slightly and raising an eyebrow. Nice try, he seemed to say, and then turned back to Granger, his blue eyes fixed on her.

Fuck, Pansy swore, frowning; he knew her too well for that to work.

"What exactly is happening?" Michael asked, glancing over his shoulder. "What are you - "
"Nothing," Pansy sighed irritably, suddenly desiring to escape. "Bathroom," she offered by way of explanation, tossing a careless "be right back" over her shoulder before hurrying to the ladies' room, eager to break something, even if it was just her own heart.

She opened the door and fell back against it as it closed, leaning her head back.

*What the fuck are you doing,* she demanded from her reflection. *He's not yours, and he's at perfect liberty to do whatever he likes -*

There was a knock at the door and she groaned. "Occupied!" she shouted, shutting her eyes. "Give me a goddamn minute, would you?"

"Pansy," came the voice on the other side. "Open the door."

*Fuck,* he really knew her.

She turned, yanking the door open, and stepped back as Percy entered, leaning back against it as she had done moments before. She could see from the mirror that her eyes were wide and her makeup ever so slightly smeared from wiping furiously at them, but he only glanced slowly up and down the shape of her before giving her the world's most subtle smile.

"I like the dress," he commented. "You look pretty."

*Pretty Pansy,* she heard him say, and shivered.

"Prettier than Granger?" she asked hoarsely, and his smile broadened. On anyone else it might have been mocking, she knew, but he had a particular way of reading her.

"Colloportus," he muttered, locking the door, and she felt her heart wrench with longing, the twist of it seeping into her bones. "Do you want me to fuck you now," he asked, walking up to her and reaching out to caress her cheek, "or would you rather I simply be at the bar when your glass is empty?"

She swallowed. "Both," she whispered, and he laughed.

"Not Susan Bones, not Hermione Granger, not any of the women I've dated over the past three months," he mused offhandedly. "But not you, either, it seems."

"No," she said, shutting her eyes and trying to force some mettle into her tone. "Not me."

"Because you're ashamed of me, is it?" he asked, nudging her back and lifting her onto the lip of the sink. "Worried what your friends will think?" he pressed, sliding the back of his hand down the front of her cleavage, caressing the line of her clavicle.

"We don't make sense," she reminded him. "We're just -"

"Friends?" he prompted, slipping his hands under her dress. "Best friends," he added, a laughing glint in his eye as she widened the gap between her knees, pulling his hips towards her.

It was a joke - or his version of one - but she couldn't laugh. "We're just fucking," she whispered. "That's all."

"You could fuck Michael Corner if you wanted," he reminded her, slipping the straps of her dress from her shoulders to let the material slip from her breasts. "McLaggen was better looking than Corner," he remarked, and she wanted to hex him in the fucking *face* just for letting their horrifying
inferiority touch his lips.

"I don't want them," she muttered indistinctly, and she knew it was a misstep when he looked her in
the eye, a startling sense of triumph suddenly appearing on his face and filling her with the need to
stomp furiously all over his heart.

"I wish we never fucked," she erupted bitterly, trying to save her pride even as she slid her hips
towards him, digging her fingers into the shallow crevices of his ribs. "And I mean that."

"Do you?" he prompted, his lips against her neck. He let his hands travel covetously down the
length of her thighs, his touch as light and inviting as ever, and despite her fervent wish to be cruel,
she sighed.

"No," she confessed, hating herself and him in a stunning, breathless gasp of resignation. "You say
the nastiest shit in bed and it's fucking aweso- "

He promptly cut her off, the words trapping against his lips as he kissed her, and brought his hands
up to place them on either side of her face; he held her between his hands like he would worship
her and she felt a strange sense of calm, washing over her like she might come clean. His tongue
slipped along her lip and she sighed, an odd, girlish sigh of contentment - one that she might have
ordinarily resented herself for - that made Percy kiss her more fervently, his fingers tangling
themselves in her hair.

They broke apart and she was breathless, and for some odd reason, when she met his eyes, she
thought she might cry.

A few deep breaths, she told herself, a matter of heartbeats; it'll pass.

It did not.

"I think we've been gone long enough," Percy commented eventually, clearing his throat as he
glanced down at his watch, and for a moment Pansy experienced a lurch of fear. He seemed to
catch it, bringing his thumb up to brush reassuringly against her cheek. "I'm just meeting Hermione
as a friend, by the way," he added nonchalantly. "Ministry things to discuss."

"Oh," Pansy agreed, clearing her throat and letting out a breath of relief. "Not that you have to
explain yourself to me. You know," she added weakly, "since we're not . . . anything."

He didn't smile this time; he didn't move.

"If you did want something," he began slowly, "I might have some relevant information for you to
consider."

As it often happened with Percy Weasley, half of her wanted to grimace - he was always so fucking
formal - and the other half fought the onslaught of a smile.

"What's that?" she invited, aiming for neutrality.

"I'm going to fuck you in about an hour," he told her, and she felt the familiar twist of longing that
never failed. "When you've made your excuses to Corner and I've finished meeting with Hermione,
I'll be at your house, and I will fuck you until you forget your name. And then," he continued, his
tone never shifting from its cool objectivity, "I will love you."

That was new; she coughed suddenly, not sure what to do with the air she'd just inhaled.
"I will love you the same way I do everything that matters," he explained. "Fiercely, and with devotion. And you will let me," he added, "because being loved matters more to you than your fear of introducing me to your friends."

"Big words, Weasley," she managed roughly, and he lifted her chin, meeting her eye.

"There is no witch on this planet that you'd approve for me," he reminded her, "nor do I wish you with another wizard. Thus," he finished, "your foundational theory that someone better exists is inherently flawed."

It was, she knew; not that she was in any hurry to admit that, so instead she shook her head, sighing in feigned exasperation.

"This is precisely why I can't take you anywhere," she informed him primly, giving his shoulder a light shove. "You're an unbearable swot, not to mention - "

He leaned forward, kissing her quickly as he banished the end of her pointless sentence with a contented sigh against her lips. "Perhaps you should tell Mr Corner that you are otherwise occupied for the evening," he suggested softly, and she slumped forward in his arms, resting her cheek against his shoulder in resignation.

_Fine, she thought, you win -

But really, she didn't feel much like a loser.

"I still hate your name," she reminded him, and he shook his head, chuckling. "But," she added, glancing up to meet his eye. "I will love you."

His gaze swept searchingly over her face. "You're certain?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "There's nobody better."

_And besides, she thought, as he took her hand, I already do._

Chapter End Notes

_a/n: OH, CORNY ENDINGS. It's been a rough week, forgive me my sap. For the anon request; I have had Pansy inexplicably in my head, so I needed to get her out. Apparently this is how I decided it needed to be done._

Technically, only one more Amortentia one shot remains, and then this collection will go on hiatus. Which is not to say that I will not update - the D/Hr Advent OS will go in here, as will my Quills and Parchment OS Comp once the authors are announced - but there won't be any regularly scheduled programming, as I will soon begin expansion on "Chaotic Good" (in here as chapter 22; it will be retitled for the full fic as "Nobility").

For those of you that follow my other work, "Nocturnes" will update this weekend (sorry for the delay, but the Voldemort Wins AU hit a bit close to home this week), and also, "Ride or Die" has officially begun its expansion. Lastly, for those of you who read "Clean" and "Marked," "Youth," the prequel, is now complete, which rounds out the series. Hope you enjoy, and many thanks for reading!
The Fairer Sex

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Fairer Sex

Pairing: I'll leave it a surprise for you. More fun that way.

Universe: Canon-ish

Rating: M for language, sexual situations

Summary: This was submitted to the Quills & Parchment Scandal One Shot Competition and was awarded Overall Winner, Judges' Favorite, Fan Favorite, Best Character Development, Best Relationship Development, Best Humor, and Best Stand Alone One Shot. I'm honored, of course - I didn't expect this pairing to be nearly as appreciated as it was! If at all, honestly. So this was a wonderful, truly pleasant surprise.

Thanks ever so much to the judges and all who voted, and special thanks to Mr. Oblivionbaby, who dared me to write this pairing (with great skepticism - as though I wouldn't make it work, she scoffs) and who receives a brief cameo in the story!

Without further ado . . .

THE FAIRER SEX

"Ladies and gentleman, witches and wizards, it gives me great pleasure to be the one to present this year's Author of the Year award to what will surely be a familiar face to everyone in the room," Abraxas Malfoy proclaimed, gesturing to the table at his right. "Wizards wish to be him, witches wish to be with him, and we all count ourselves lucky to be in the presence of such a brilliant, captivating literary mind."

There was a rousing spattering of applause and Gilderoy smiled, pretending not to know that such effusive praise could not possibly apply to any other man in the room. He winked at Kennilworthy Whisp, raising his goblet in mock salute, and was filled with an unspeakable rush of satisfaction as the other man glowered sulkily, crossing his arms over his chest.

Better luck next year, you hulking buffoon, Gilderoy thought smugly, taking a hearty sip of mead from his monogrammed goblet. This is my year, and you know it.

Twat, Kennilworthy clearly mouthed back to him, but Gilderoy gleefully ignored him, fixing his gaze instead on the pretty witch holding the trophy that would soon grace the mantle of his London townhome. She smiled discreetly at him and he sat up slightly, recognizing promise in the pert curve of her lips. He watched curiously as the young brunette tossed her hair around her shoulders, emphasizing the window of silk that draped against her neatly framed breasts and asserting the kind of deliberation that Gilderoy was loath to disregard.

Ahh, he thought with certainty, downing the remainder of his glass as he watched the witch's face. He would be getting his cock sucked within - he paused, checking his watch - twenty minutes or less, he determined, the window of exactitude depending entirely on whether or not Abraxas, the
owner of the Wizarding Press (among several other Malfoy commercial ventures) would fucking get on with it.

"... and so it is an honor and a pleasure to present this award to my most profitable writer," Abraxas continued, "the greatly esteemed, effortlessly charming, truly inimitable man about town - Gilderoy Lockhart!"

Gilderoy stood, letting his best who, me? expression paint itself gratuitously across his lips before tossing a smirk at Kennilworthy and rising to his feet, the deafening sound of applause ricocheting around the room. He strutted handsomely to the stage, shaking Abraxas' hand and noting a surreptitious slip of the witch's fingers, depositing something in his pocket as he accepted his trophy.

"Well," Gilderoy said, facing the crowd. "I'm not one for speeches of course - I'm a writer," he explained with a wink, "I let my quill do the magic - but in this instance, I must thank my publisher, Abraxas," he gestured, and Abraxas nodded his head, "and the many men here today who have helped further my career." He paused, jauntily raising an eyebrow as the crowd leaned in for the punchline. "Or else their wives," he added with a smirk, "who helped make it palatable."

"Oh Gilderoy, you dog!" Abraxas laughed heartily.

Gilderoy smiled, a gentleman's smile, and a thousand shutters clicked.

"Another round of applause for Gilderoy, please!" the announcer suggested, gesturing, and the men and women at every table rose, showering him with boisterous shouts of congratulations.

"Oh please," Gilderoy said humbly, gesturing for them to sit. "Nonsense, friends, I must protest."

Across the room, Kennilworthy threw his napkin down on the table and walked out, the double doors swinging shut behind him. Gilderoy cheerfully returned to his seat, unfolding the slip of parchment in his pocket to reveal the presenting witch's name and address. He looked up and smiled, a smile of satisfaction.

In that moment, all things considered, Gilderoy Lockhart might have confused himself for God.

Lucius Malfoy wandered through the halls of the manor home which his father Abraxas, thankfully, was finally vacating. Once his parents had settled themselves elsewhere, he assumed, Narcissa might finally consent to actually wed him rather than continue to drag her feet in purposeless hesitation.

Speaking of Narcissa, he thought, frowning as he eyed the clock, she's late.

Being her fiancé, Lucius reasoned that he would be permitted at least the right to collect her from her home, and so he approached the Floo, tucking his elbows in purposefully and enunciating the name of the Black family's northern estate. He stepped out, his heels sticking soddenly against the eroding wooden floors that had not seen renovation for centuries, seeking out his future bride.

"I don't know about this," she was saying, and he could hear the frown in her voice. "Lucius and I are only engaged, you know, and I'm not sure I'm really in a position to ask any favors of his family yet, considering the concessions they've made on my dowry - "

"Oh Narcissa, surely you've not forgotten," the other voice said, a mix of girlish sweetness and careful cunning that Lucius guessed was one of her friends from school, "that you owe me a favor? I'm referring, of course, to the time that Bellatrix and I caught you with your hands down the
trousers of a certain - "

"Yes, yes, I remember," Narcissa said hurriedly, her poised, authoritarian voice squeaking slightly, and Lucius frowned, glancing down at his own trousers with disappointment. "I haven't forgotten that I owe you, of course - I'm merely questioning why this, of all things, would be the payment!"

"I want it," the other woman replied, her tone even. "What's it to you why I do?"


"It's called The Fairer Sex," the other woman supplied, "and it's important to me. A pet project." She paused, and there was a rustle of skirts as she must have stepped closer to Narcissa. "I believe there will be a great payout in its publication."

"Well," Narcissa ventured hesitantly, "I suppose I can vouch for your writing talent."

"You certainly can!" the other woman sniffed. "And surely you, with that face and that figure, should have no trouble getting whatever you wish out of Malfoy's father," she added, in a tone that struck Lucius as a challenge of sorts.

"I suppose," Narcissa confirmed, sighing. "Fine, then. I'll speak to him this afternoon after I meet Lucius at Malfoy Manor for tea."

"Oh, Cissy, darling," the woman proclaimed warmly, "you absolute treasure - "

"No promises," Narcissa warned quickly. "And I'm sure there will have to be some concessions on my part, which I do not thank you for."

"What kind of concessions?" the other woman asked curiously. A bit too curiously, in Lucius' mind. "Surely not - "

"No, not like that," Narcissa said hurriedly. "Just - I assume he'll want me to go forward with the wedding."

"Which you are planning already, are you not?"

"In pieces," Narcissa ambiguously agreed. "I suppose I'm not quite in a hurry to tie myself down, though I'm realizing that's probably foolish. What with an engagement and all that."

"Not foolish at all," the other woman cooed reassuringly. "Though it is inevitable, don't you think?"

"True," Narcissa conceded. "So if that will move things along for your book, then so be it. Oh," she added, as though something were just occurring to her, "are you publishing under your real name?"

"No, I plan to use a pseudonym," the other woman said. "No need to drag the details of my identity into my work, don't you think?"

"I suppose not," Narcissa agreed. "What name will you use, then?"

"I hadn't decided," the other woman said. "I had a lovely cat named Rita once. Had these adorable markings around her eyes, like spectacles. That's a bit charming, isn't it?"

"Rita," Narcissa replied thoughtfully. "Hmm. What about . . . Rita Skeeter?"

"That's an absolutely dreadful name," the other woman said with a violent shudder, then paused. "Narcissa, darling, it's just perfect."
There was a shuffle in the kitchen as the two women prepared to exit and Lucius tiptoed quickly back to the Floo, sending himself home and heading straight for Abraxas' office.

"Father," Lucius barked, bursting into the room. "Narcissa is going to ask you something, and you must agree to her request."

Abraxas looked up, a look of dubious boredom passing across his wrinkled features.

"Fine," he muttered, glancing back down at his newspaper.

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**Six Months Later**

"I'm so sorry." Anna - or Adeline? No, Aurora, he was quite certain it was Aurora - whimpered imploringly, hiccuping through her incoherent speech of apology. "Mr Lockhart, I'm so, so sorry, surely there is something I can do - "

He sighed in exasperation. "Aurora," he began, "you have to understand - "

"It's Marjorie," she wailed.

"Right, as I said, Marjorie," he continued, a bit perturbed by her cheek, "this is really one mistake that simply cannot be undone." He stepped forward, patting her shoulder. "Really, love, I don't think there's a need for all this fuss - "

"But Mr Lockhart," she sobbed, making him increasingly uncomfortable with her hysteria, "I really need this job, and I know you're very particular with your staff - "

"I am," he agreed. "And that, my dear Marlene, is why - "

"Marjorie," she sniffed, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Yes, fine," he sighed, "that, my dear, is why I must let you go. I'm very choosy about my pomades, you know," he said, gesturing to his expertly coiffed hair. "My look is my brand, you see, and I can't have my brand being tainted by careless mistakes by my employees. You've very nearly destroyed me, Miranda, and I - "

"Please," she sputtered, reaching out to press herself against him. "Please, Mr Lockhart, if you would only just give me another chance - "

He glanced down at where her body was flush against his and willed himself not to give into the same mistakes he'd made the previous week. They were so hard to get rid of after he'd fucked them, and it was truly a burden to deal with an unending river of tears.

"I have to run, Aurora, you understand," he said, patting her head and pulling away. "Very important things to attend to, being who I am." He disentangled himself from her grasp, slipping out the door. "I wish you the best of luck, darling," he added, flashing her his most beatific smile. "Oh, and before you go" - he gestured around his office - "pick up a bit, won't you?"

She hiccuped again, nodding slowly.

"That's my girl," he said with a wink, and then slipped out the door, apparating to Malfoy Manor for Abraxas' latest to-do.
Fuck, what he wouldn't give for a decent shag, Gilderoy lamented, appearing within the front hall and striding purposefully through the foyer. The guests were mostly youthful and attractive women this evening, he noted immediately, pleased that this was clearly not another gathering to celebrate one of Kennilworthy's latest catastrophically dull homo-erotic quidditch narratives.

"Hello, gorgeous," Gilderoy said, slipping over to a woman in a set of alluringly fitted ivory robes and placing his hand amicably on her waist. "Have you seen -"

"Excuse me," she demanded, slapping his hand away. "How dare you?"

"Oh, come on, love," he tsked, bowing low. "Apologies if I've managed somehow to offend -"

"Managed to offend?" she repeated, scowling. "If your hands are so eager for a place to rest, I'd suggest you go home," she sniffed, "and put them on your -"

"Ah, Gilderoy!" Abraxas barked, suddenly materializing to grab him by the arm and pull him firmly away. "So lovely to see you!"

"And you," Gilderoy returned, slightly bemused. "That woman was not exactly -"

"Hush," Abraxas said instantly, clapping a hand over his mouth. "Did you read the book like I told you to?"

"Which book?" Gilderoy asked, frowning as he tried to remember. He smiled at a lovely witch in turquoise robes and she - quite rudely, in his estimation - made a point of turning her back on him and raising her nose in the air.

"The Fairer Sex," Abraxas reminded him. "You know, the book that this release party is for."

"Ah, right, that," Gilderoy said vacantly, offering a wink at a witch in marigold. She glared at him, crossing her arms over her chest. "Merlin's bollocks," he determined, feeling as though he had stepped through another dimension to a world where he was somehow less handsome. "Is my hair out of place or something?"

"You didn't read it, did you?" Abraxas hissed, yanking Gilderoy off to the side and fuming in his silent, slightly comical way.

"Don't be ridiculous, Abraxas," Gilderoy sniffed, grabbing a glass of elf-wine from a levitating tray. "People read my books, not the other way around."

"This is an exception," Abraxas snapped in agitation. "I specifically told you not to attend this party without having read it, did I not?"

"Abraxas," Gilderoy said, giving him a look, "I'm your most celebrated author. You can give me a synopsis." He took a sip of his wine, thinking. "The Fairer Sex, you said?" he recalled. "Is it some kind of silly romance novel?"

"Worse," Abraxas determined, lips pursed. "It's some kind of feminine empowerment manifesto."

Gilderoy laughed, a gentleman's laugh. "Oh, how kind of you to humor them," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sure it will still sell its twenty copies, whether or not I've read it."

"That's the problem," Abraxas growled. "Every woman at this party purchased an advanced copy. My wife bought a copy," he added, "and she loves it. She's promoted it to all her friends, to all my daughter-in-law's friends - and I tell you what," he sighed wearily, "it's been hell on earth since."
"Have you read it?" Gilderoy asked, feeling a sullen pout creep over what he knew to be his impeccable set of lips. "You can't possibly think - "

"I have," Abraxas confirmed, "and I have to say, the author is quite a skilled wordsmith. I'm hardly her demographic, of course - "

"Of course," Gilderoy snorted.

" - but I can't deny, she's got style."

"What is she, some fifty year old spinster?" Gilderoy asked, making a face. "All alone, and aiming to bring other women down with her?"

"Not quite that, Mr Lockhart," a pert, feminine voice said from behind him. "Aiming to bring other women up with me, as it were."

"Gilderoy," Abraxas said quickly, glaring at him, "this is the author, Ms Rita Skeeter."

Gilderoy stiffened, preparing himself to be revolted as he turned to face her. "Lovely to meet you," he said, with a forced, unpleasant sneer, "and I'm ever so - "

He paused, gaping at the witch before him. She was far younger than he would have ever expected, scarcely over some twenty years old, her extraordinarily lithe figure wrapped appealingly in stunning emerald robes that served to emphasize both the iridescent green of her eyes as well as the honey-blonde sheen of her hair. She lifted her hand, politely offering it to him, and he accepted, his eyes caught on the elegance of her crimson-polished nails.

"Ever so?" she prompted, her scarlet lips twisting into a mirthful smirk. "Have words managed to escape you, Mr Lockhart?"

"It appears so," he managed, making a questionable recovery from the blow of laying eyes on her. "A rarity indeed, Ms Skeeter."

She smiled. "Then I've certainly done a service for womankind."

"Oh, you hardly need to flatter me, Ms Skeeter, I - wait." He blinked, taking a moment to register the insult. "What?"

"Sorry, I'll have to limit my wit for present company, it seems," Rita determined, looking far more pleased than a woman should for not having his face between her legs. "I expect you've not sampled my work yet, then?"

"Haven't had the pleasure," Gilderoy mumbled, and then to his relief, he glanced up to catch a familiar eye, the same lovely blues of the witch who had presented his Author of the Year trophy six months prior. "Oh, excuse me, Ms Skeeter," he said, gesturing gallantly, "but I really must greet my friend, er" - he looked down at her, fighting to recall - "Amelia - "

"I believe you mean my assistant, Felicity?" Rita said, gesturing for the witch to join them. "She did mention that you two had met previously."

"More than met," Gilderoy purred, reaching for her hand and brushing his lips against it. "We had quite a memorable evening, didn't we, love?"

"Did you?" Rita said, cutting in before Felicity could speak. "Tell us, Mr Lockhart, whatever did you do?"
"Well," Gilderoy replied, stiffening in irritation, "we had a lovely dinner at one of my favorite chateaus," he began, guessing wildly, "and spent a long, pleasurable evening in my hotel suite." He smiled at her. "An evening I'll never forget."

Rita glanced sideways at her. "Well?" she prompted. "What does the book say?"

Felicity sighed, meeting Gilderoy's eyes with reluctance. "That I have to be honest with myself about my experiences and demand the respect I deserve," she said, appearing a bit sulky.

"And?" Rita prompted, in a way that simultaneously terrified Gilderoy and also prompted an ill-timed twitch of his cock.

"And the story Gild- Mr Lockhart just told was likely of some other conquest, and I must recognize my error and make a solemn promise to myself not to repeat my past indiscretions," Felicity sighed dutifully.

"Oh, come now, Felicia," Gilderoy said, reaching out to wrap an arm comfortably around her waist. "I'm sure I was just describing our next date, seeing as our first one was so supremely satisfying."

Rita glanced dubiously at Felicity. "Was it?"

Felicity lifted her chin. "Not for me," she determined, and Gilderoy laughed.

"Surely you are mistaken, love," he informed her, his hand slipping to her lower back.

Rita, obnoxiously, raised one eyebrow, looking expectantly at her assistant; to his utter displeasure, Gilderoy shortly found himself covered in wine, having had the beverage tossed in his face by the rapidly retreating form of his last shaggable hope that evening.

"Good girl," Rita said, turning to follow her, and then paused, beaming over her shoulder at where Abraxas and Gilderoy stood, dumbfounded in disbelief. "Oh, and do enjoy the party, Mr Lockhart," she said softly, batting her lashes and then walking away, cursing them with the enticing sway of her hips.

"I hate her," Gilderoy determined, sputtering with loathing as he watched her disappear.

"Ah, I'm sure you won't have to see her again," Abraxas said, patting him reassuringly on the shoulder.

"What did you just say?" Gilderoy demanded, slamming a fist down on Abraxas' desk. "How many copies has she sold?"

"Well over ten thousand in her first month," Abraxas said, drumming his fingers listlessly. "Which means she's sold more copies than - "

"Don't say it!" Gilderoy shouted. "Don't you dare say it, Abraxas, for the ever-living sake of fuck - "

"More copies than you," Abraxas continued irritably. "Your last book sold perhaps a thousand fewer copies in the same time period and stagnated shortly after, which means I must now shift my focus to - "

"No!" Gilderoy yelped. "No, no, no - "
"To her," Abraxas sighed. "I'm a businessman, Gilderoy," he explained helplessly, leaning back in his chair. "I'd thought publication was my least profitable enterprise, but suddenly here she is, sending witches everywhere into an utter commercial frenzy -"

"I can do that, too!" Gilderoy exclaimed. "I am made of frenzy-whipping material, Abraxas, unless you've managed to forget -"

"Things have been different over the past few months, unless you've managed to forget," Abraxas reminded him. "Or are you going to dispute that?"

Gilderoy promptly shut his mouth. He was practically a social pariah, cast out of his favorite social clubs because the wives of his sponsors disapproved of his womanizing, disinvited to society events because Rita Skeeter and her hoard of harpies considered him damaging to their gender.

Ludicrous. As though he had ever been anything but a lover of women!

"Give me a new project," Gilderoy suggested, leaning forward. "Anything. A biography, even, some horrible tross you'd normally give to a waste of space like Kennilworthy -"

"She likes him, you know," Abraxas said, reclining in his chair. "Whisp. Reviewed his last piece as 'not terrible,' and now he's outselling you."

"Balls!" Gilderoy erupted.

"Those are out of fashion now," Abraxas quipped, looking pleased with his joke.

"Give me something," Gilderoy demanded breathlessly, pacing about the room. "You must, Abraxas, as surely you'd rather I succeed than that -" he paused, making a face, "that horrible shrew -"

"She has something at the moment that I suppose you can collaborate on," Abraxas remarked thoughtfully. "A piece on Armando Dippet that I'm sure would fantastically bore you."

"I'm bored just thinking about it!" Gilderoy groaned, throwing his hands in the air. "And you want me to collaborate with her?"

"I imagine it might help your reputation," Abraxas mused. "Perhaps you might win her over, don't you think? You're charming, Gilderoy. You're only a little" - he paused - "rough around the edges, I think, considering the sensitivity of the times."

"What if I don't want to win her over?" Gilderoy asked stiffly.

"Then you must consent to disappear into obscurity," Abraxas determined matter-of-factly. "Times only move forward, Gilderoy, not backwards, and you're a relic of a more antiquated past."

"But it's me!" Gilderoy reminded him pleadingly. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Man About Town!"

"You'll have to be a Man About something else," Abraxas sighed. "Perhaps prose?"

"You're a monster," Gilderoy growled, crossing his arms peevishly over his chest.

"Anything?" Gilderoy asked desperately. "She seems intent on destroying me, Tim; of lessening me to nothing." He slunk down in his chair, sulking. "Tell me you have something on her."

"Unfortunately not, sir," his P.I. responded sullenly. "Rita Skeeter appears not to have even existed
before a year ago, and nobody seems to know who she was before that."

"Balls!" Gilderoy shouted, launching himself up from his chair. "Testes, dicks, and balls!"

"Those are out of fashion now," Tim informed him apologetically, ducking as Gilderoy promptly threw a quill at his head.

She arrived in a set of lovely magenta robes, looking more like an angel than any woman he'd ever seen. He immediately choked on a compulsion to kiss her or light her on fire, either option seeming equally stimulating upon sight.

"Mr Lockhart," she said sweetly, placing her crocodile-skinned purse on his desk. "Would you prefer to start right away, or shall we get familiar first?"

"Get familiar?" he echoed, smirking. "Well, I'm certainly not opposed to - wait." He paused, frowning. "That's a trap, isn't it?"

"Ah, not as slow as you look," she determined with a smile. "Lovely."

"I hate you," he muttered under his breath. "You know," he added, louder, "if we're going to be working together this extensively, perhaps we should venture into informality. I'm Gilderoy," he offered. "And you are?"

"Rita," she said primly, "as you know."

"No nicknames?" he pressed curiously. "No pet names you might prefer? To add to your comfort, of course," he added, shoving desire from his bones as he eyed the cut of her robes. "My office is your office."

"Rita will do," she said, a knowing smirk twitching at her lips. "Shall we start?" she prompted, pulling a quill and parchment from her handbag and taking a seat across from him. "I thought it might be practical to begin by splitting up responsibility for the events of Dippet's life."

"Fine," Gilderoy sighed, falling into his chair. "You can do his early life, and all the other insufferable details. And I," he thought carefully, "can cover his political career, including his scandals before becoming Headmaster of Hogwarts - "

"Gilderoy, please, I would hardly entrust the task of writing scandal to you," Rita scoffed, pursing her crimson lips. "Surely we'd like to sell these books, wouldn't we?"

"Are you implying that I can't write a sex scandal?" Gilderoy asked, insulted to the very core of his being. "I assure you, Rita Skeeter, you have crossed a line!"

"Let's see then, shall we?" she said, a metallic glimmer flashing in her green eyes. "Get ready," she snapped at her charmed quill. "Armando Dippet was little more than twenty-six when he first encountered the lovely Gabrielle Moreau, as a special guest at her husband's home - "
Gilderoy waved his wand furiously, conjuring his quill and prompting it across the page. "Armando Dippet, whose roguish good looks at twenty-six years old drew the attention of the voluptuous temptress Gabrielle Moreau - "

"It is said that over dinner," Rita said loudly, "the two were never able to remove their gazes from one another, nor was Gabrielle ever said to leave Armando's line of sight all evening - "

"Gabrielle swung her hips lasciviously for the entirety of the state dinner at the French ministry, her lips plum-red and full, her figure set off impeccably by the haze of expensive champagne that both had drunk, their eyes locked in a battle of seduction - "

"The moment her husband's back was turned," Rita continued, her voice half a shout, "Gabrielle pursued Armando, drawing him into the dim light of her quarters and letting him run his hand along her bare thigh in the silvery gleam of moonlight, drawing him close to her breast - "

"Her breasts, which were full and heaving as she panted Armando's name," Gilderoy yelled, "glowed temptingly, her breathy moans filling Armando's ears as she brought her lips to his - "

" - their tongues dueling for dominance," Rita belted hoarsely, "tangled and tormenting, the carnal vibrations coursing through them as their hips ground in a synchronized dance of desire - "

" - he grasped the swelling piston of his manhood in his hand, springing free from his fashionably tight trousers and leaking his damnable craving, demanding its heady release - "

" - the explosive tingling of her thighs, the slick quivering of her quim as she lowered herself to her knees, hungering for a taste of his engorged, thirsting member - "

" - abandoning sanity in pursuit of the THROBBING PULSE OF HER SEX AGAINST HIM - "

" - STRUMMING THE CHORDS OF HER BODY, THE PRECIOUS TANGLE OF NERVES SWELLING EUPHORICALLY BENEATH HIS FINGERS - "

" - LONGING FOR HIM TO SPILL INTO HER SOAKING WETNESS - "

" - SHE SCREAMED HIS NAME, CONVULSING IN ECSTASY AS SHE ABANDONED ALL CONCEPT OF SPACE AND TIME - "

" - HE CONTINUED HIS RELENTLESS ASSAULT OF PLEASURE AGAINST THE BUD OF HER CLITORIS - "

" - UNTIL NEITHER COULD BREATHE, SOAKED IN SWEAT, SEED, AND PASSION-FUELED SEX-FIRE - "

He gasped, realizing he had somehow come across the desk, yanking Rita against him; their bodies were tangled together, their breaths short and panting, and he had backed her against a wall, both enchanted quills continuing to scribble along behind them as they stared at each other, a horrible realization striking him as he longed desperately to lower his head, to brush his lips against hers, to hold her against him -

"You write it," he managed after a moment, releasing her and backing to his desk, trying to cover his incredibly inconvenient and thoroughly unsurprising erection. "Just - write it and send me the pages, and then we can - "

"Collaborate later, yes, I agree," she said hurriedly, reaching behind her for the office door. "Yes, good plan Mr Gilderoy, Sir Lockhart, well spotted - "
When the door shut behind her, he unzipped his trousers, sighing with relief.

"Hello, old friend," he said, reaching a practiced hand to the swelling piston of his manhood and picturing the curve of her lips, her name traipsing off his tongue like a secret.

"Should we talk about yesterday?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Fine."

"New pages?"

"Yes. 5,000 words on Dippet's trip to Liberia."

"Great. Excellent."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

"How's it going?" Abraxas asked, glancing up at Gilderoy from his desk. "Has she grown on you?"

He swallowed. "A bit," he confessed, trying not to mention the way her curves begged every day to be touched, and he was growing weaker every minute to deny them; or worse - much worse, as it meant a single fucking couldn't suffice to satisfy his want - that even the most innocuous morsel of conversation with her had become the highlight of his day.

"She's a smart broad," Abraxas muttered gruffly. "Can't deny her that, unfortunately."


Perfect.

"She's fine," he offered evasively, wishing instantly to melt into the floorboards.

"Rita!" Gilderoy shouted, brushing dust from his shoulders as he stomped into her office. "Rita, I was expecting more pages today on Dippet's early Hogwarts years and you, irresponsibly, have shirked your duty to me, to our entire publication, to history itself - "

"Ah, Gilderoy," she sighed, appearing in the doorframe. "Apologies, but I was entertaining a guest." She gestured inside. "You know Kennilworthy, don't you?"

Gilderoy's eyes traveled slowly from the man who sat at her desk to the open bottle of elf-wine and the two glasses, one which featured a signature crimson stain.

"I do," Gilderoy said, narrowing his eyes. "Ken."

"You know I hate diminutives, Gil," Kennilworthy replied, nostrils flaring in distaste. "Looks like you'll have to come back."

"Like hell I will!" Gilderoy snarled. "Work comes first, Whisp, so scurry off and - "
"Rita wants me here, and you'd better - "

"Boys, boys," Rita said coolly, stepping between them. "While I do enjoy this devolution to your more primal selves, I'm afraid I'll have to side with Gilderoy on this one. I do have new pages to share, and I suppose we" - she leaned forward, kissing Kennilworthy on the cheek in a way that drove Gilderoy to madness - "will have to take a raincheck on this lovely bottle of wine." She smiled at him, a smile full of meaning. "You understand, don't you?"

Kennilworthy stood, glaring at Gilderoy. "Fine," he spat. "But you'll owl me tomorrow?"

"I'm sure I will," Rita said, gesturing to the Floo, and Kennilworthy stomped out. "Now," she said, turning to Gilderoy, "as for the new pages - "

"What is this?" Gilderoy demanded, gesturing to the glasses and the wine. "Is this some kind of . . . clandestine fraternization?"

"Ah, aren't you such a writer," Rita determined with a chuckle. "It's a date, Gilderoy. Call it what it is."

"It isn't," he informed her. "I won't let it."

"You won't let it be a date?" she repeated, quizzically lifting a pale brow. "My apologies, did I ask you for help with semantics?"

"No, you didn't, and don't think I'm thrilled about that either!" Gilderoy shouted, knowing he was being childish but determining that he didn't care. "You can't date him, Rita - "

"And why not?" Rita asked, perching daintily on her desk. "He's an attractive enough man, an excellent author, he treats women with respect - "

"I - " Gilderoy began, immediately floundering. "$I'm attractive!"

"That you are," Rita agreed. "And you're also a terrible human being."

"So?" Gilderoy squawked. "$You're a menace! And maybe I made mistakes in my past," he added, "but I can change, and I - "

He hesitated, not wanting to meet her eye.

"You what, Gilderoy?" she prompted.

"I would treat you with respect," he muttered. "I would treat you like the goddess that you are."

There was a pause as the implications settled around their shoulders, dusting them both in a regrettable sprinkle of his sincerity.

"Well aren't you poetry in prose," Rita mused eventually, crossing her legs at the ankles.

"Don't mock me," he snapped. "I may be terrible, but you don't have to be cruel."

He barely realized she had moved until she was standing before him, the smell of her perfume breezing gloriously through his senses.

"No," she agreed. "I don't. It's only that I'm so good at it."

"You are," he croaked. "You are, and I'm only - "
He cut off as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her lips to his, the kiss better than he could have dreamt it, the taste of wine and victory joining up to slip euphorically into his lungs. She was fire on his tongue, scalding him to his soul, and he backed her against her desk, lifting her on top of it.

"You're a man who enjoys accolades, aren't you, Gilderoy?" she murmured hazily, nudging his chin up to press her scarlet lips to his throat. "Perhaps you'd like to earn one now?"

"I perform well with praise," he admitted, his heart thudding mercilessly against his chest.

"Good," she said, shoving his head down to her lap and smiling. "Be a good boy and make me come."

"I think I'm in love with you," he panted, shoving her back against the wall and thrusting firmly as she moaned, scraping her crimson nails against the bare skin of his back.

"I'm quite certain you are," she replied, before sinking her teeth into his shoulder, biting his name into muscle and bone.

"And you?" he asked, sweeping her desk clean and laying her on top of it, pushing her back to rub against her clit as he slammed into her. "Do you love me?"

There was a glimmer in her eye, and she opened her mouth to answer -

And then she was gasping his name as he fucked her to breathless satisfaction, and he saw stars as he came.

Rita Skeeter stepped through the Floo in her fireplace, colliding with her assistant within the span of three steps.

"Oh, sorry Felicity," Rita said, helping the other witch straighten. "Are you quite alright?"

"Mm," the other woman replied evasively, her eyes darting away.

"Felicity," Rita repeated, trying to catch her eye. "Is everything alright?"

Felicity sighed, a burdensome sigh, full of things unsaid.

"Tell me," Rita demanded, sitting her down; part mother, part employer, all brusque authority. "Whatever it is, tell me."

Felicity looked far away, dragging her mind back to the present. "Are you sleeping with Mr Lockhart?" she asked, tentatively biting her lip. "I know it's not any of my business," she added, though it was an empty gesture, as her eyes clearly called for an answer.

"I'm fucking Gilderoy, yes," Rita confirmed, choosing her words with utmost care. "As a utilitarian matter of efficiency and logistical ease."

"Do you think," Felicity began, then closed her mouth, thinking better of it.
"Out with it," Rita commanded, and Felicity sighed, relenting.

"I just wonder if it's really such a good idea," Felicity mused. "I thought you had something to prove."

"I do," Rita agreed, though Felicity could not have known the half of the matter. "His cock has nothing to do with what I showed up to prove."

"No, I suppose not," Felicity said thoughtfully. "But I thought better of you," she said, casting her eyes to the ground, and Rita felt a stirring of stinging remorse. "For all that you've done for women, I would have thought you might - "

"I might not choose a misogynistic fool?" Rita supplied, and the other witch nodded. "Yes, that is always the hope," she muttered in agreement. "I suppose I may have lost track of the broader scope of things when he changed his attitude about me personally."

"It's just that we - I - look up to you so much," Felicity said hopefully, lifting her chin. "I want to see you succeed, and not to share your success with anyone." She made a face. "Least of all him."

"He is better," Rita sighed. "But I do see your point."

"It's your year, you know," Felicity informed her, smiling wanly. "Author of the Year belongs to you, and I hate to see everything you worked for become a farce when held up to your romantic life."

Balls, Rita thought fiercely, acknowledging the salience of the other witch's point; though, truly, the phrase was well out of fashion now.

"You're right," Rita agreed, rising to her feet. "Owl him for me, will you?" she asked, straightening her lilac robes - his favorite color, she thought with a pang of guilt - and heading to her desk. "And then owl Abraxas." She paused, running her fingers over the manuscript that sat atop her desk. "Tell him I'll finish Dippet's biography on my own."

Felicity smiled her approval. "I'm proud of you, Rita."

Rita forced an endearing smile, a liar's smile, kicking one of Gilderoy's ties back under the desk. "This is what I live for, darling."

"... and so it is an honor and a pleasure to present this award to my most profitable writer," Abraxas continued, "the greatly esteemed, effortlessly charming, truly inimitable lady about town - Rita Skeeter!"

The room erupted in applause and she stood, bowing her head gracefully as she took the stage to shake Abraxas' hand and accept her trophy.

"Congratulations, Ms Skeeter," the young presenting witch told her brightly. "Because of you, I plan to be an author myself, if I can!"

"Good for you, dear," Rita said, smiling serenely and turning to the podium.

"Well," Rita began, "I'll make this quick. A thank you to those who failed to believe in me," she said, "because without you, I would never have written a book. And a thank you to those who
didn't know who I was," she added, "because now, you'll always know my name." She glanced around the room, catching Gilderoy's eye. He looked sad but was smiling, a lost lover's smile, and when he met her gaze, he seemed sincere.

"To my publisher, of course," Rita added, glancing at Abraxas, "and most importantly, to us." She raised her trophy, blessing them all with her unfailing smile. "The fairer sex."

The applause was tumultuous. She'd always loved an accolade.

"So," Narcissa said, sipping her tea. "Are you satisfied?"

"It's the most successful book in a generation," Rita reminded her. "I'm a celebrated author."

"I know these things," Narcissa said, flashing her a look of patrician irritation. "I asked if you were satisfied."

"I suppose," Rita lied, stirring a little lemon into her cup.

"You never did tell me the purpose of the book," Narcissa reminded her. "Not that I mind," she added. "It was quite a good idea, marrying Lucius," she decided, tapping an expensive shoe against the rare marble of her floor, "and clearly your book was a success."

"It certainly was," Rita agreed. *In nearly every way, as planned.*

"Even the name is starting to suit you," Narcissa commented, taking another placid sip. "I've nearly forgotten you aren't a Rita."

"I have to get glasses soon," Rita informed her, making a face. "I'm becoming more Rita by the day, I'm afraid."

"Ah, well, nothing wrong with that, is there?" Narcissa countered, though she softened, warmed by the thought of their history. "Of course, I liked you just fine when you were - "

"Nobody," Rita supplied quickly. "But yes, you did, and for that I'm grateful."

Narcissa nodded, surveying the landscape of her elaborate manor home.

"So, one more time," she ventured, careful not to let her voice betray the telling curve of her lips. "Are you satisfied?"

Rita, who was not a Rita at all, sighed, a storyteller's sigh.

"Not like I thought," she replied, and Narcissa reached over, squeezing her hand.

There was a knock at her door, and she turned to glimpse his tall frame, his foolishly moussed hair, his ridiculously snug trousers.

"Gilderoy Lockhart," she pronounced, smiling at him.

"Helena Burke," he replied, and she froze, dropping a pot of ink and watching it seep into the floor.

"How did you," she began, choking on the sentence. "Why - "

"I hired a private investigator to look into your background when we first started working
together," Gilderoy explained, meeting her eye with his jaunty smirk. "You were intent on damaging my reputation, and I felt some leverage would someday be necessary."

"And he just figured it out?" Rita asked, confused.

"Oh, balls, no," Gilderoy sniffed, waving the thought away. "No, then I learned from you that one should never hire a man to do a woman's job. I found another one," he explained. "Took her less than three days to come back with a name."

"Oh," Rita - who was really Helena - said, lost and uncertain without the shield of her persona.

"I know who you are," Gilderoy added, and Helena crossed her arms.

"Clearly," she remarked. "You've just said my name."

"No," he corrected, "I know who you are." He looked sorrowfully at her face. "We went to school together, didn't we?"

"Yes," Helena confirmed, shifting uncomfortably. "I was - "

"In Slytherin," he asserted with a nod. "You lent me a quill once in Transfiguration, and I never returned it."

*Neither that, nor my feelings,* she thought morosely, though she shoved her pesky sentiments aside.

"No," she agreed briskly. "You did not."

He took a tentative step towards her. "Why didn't you tell me the truth?" he asked.

"You'd have used it to destroy me," Helena pointed out. "Isn't that precisely why you hired the P.I. to begin with?"

"Well, true," Gilderoy acknowledged, shrugging. "But why do any of it?" he asked, and he reached out, taking her hand. "Why be someone you weren't?"

"To get my quill back," she snapped, and he smiled, a lover's smile, but didn't relent.

"Why?"

She sighed. "So that you would see me," she explained, glancing at her feet. "For once."

"I see you now," he said, lifting her chin. "Fool that I am. I see you now."

"Only because I'm exceedingly clever," she told him, "and have the foresight to play a long game."

"True," he agreed, nodding, his eyes traveling over her face. "But you chose poorly, and if you can't forgive me now, what more can I do?"

"Do you want me to forgive you?" Helena asked, flashing him a look of practiced skepticism. "Seems you'd be better off revealing my identity to the world. Write a book on it," she suggested. "Scandal: The Life and Lies of Rita Skeeter."

"It does have the ring of a bestseller," he agreed, "but truly, you'd do a better job of it. You'd leave the reader with a much more vivid experience with regard to the engorged state of my thirsting manhood - " 
"I really would," she confirmed. "I may not have been a star pupil and Prefect, but I do spin a good yarn."

"You do," he said firmly, sweeping her up in his arms. "And if you want to keep this private, so be it." He brushed his lips against hers, whispering against her mouth. "I'd be happy enough with Helena that Rita can go on destroying me."

"She will," Helena told him, fairly certain that was a promise. "You're an easy target."

"Balls," he murmured, closing his eyes.

"Those are - "

" - out of fashion, I know," he concluded grumpily, wrapping his arms around her waist. "But I concede."

"As well you should," she said indifferently, but when she buried her face in the crook of his neck, she smiled.

It was a smile of satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Thanks again to everyone! In other Amortentia news, there's a Harmony in the works for this week (hopefully, ugh, being sick last week really threw me off), and then I am beginning, by request, what is essentially Bachelorette 2.0 - The Real World: Hogwarts. I will be posting short (probably less than 1,000 word updates) once a day from Dec 1st to 25th.

It will be nuts.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode I

Pairing: None. Ish. None yet.

Universe: Hogwarts, Year 6

Rating: M for language

Summary: Some people (cough, Shayalonnie and oblivionbaby) wanted to watch a reality show of just Hogwarts 24/7 and they roped me into it. If you enjoyed Bachelorette, then you sort of know what we're getting into now, except with even less substance. There will be a short post every day from now until Christmas, a gift from me to you.

Disclaimer: I've never actually seen any of the Real Worlds, or any reality show really except for Bachelor(ette) and Ink Master (which I love, talk Ink Master with me anytime) so this will have close to zero accuracy.

And now . . . have you missed Lee Jordan?

[Camera pans the Headmaster's office and shakes into place unsteadily, slowly zeroing in on where Albus Dumbledore sits expectantly at his desk. He is nursing his right hand and looking intently in front of him when Minerva McGonagall enters.]

Minerva: [sits down, props feet on Albus' desk, and leans back, a listless expression on her face as she reaches into the pocket of her robe and produces a Muggle cigar.] "Fawkes, give me a light, would you?" [The withered phoenix floats over and coughs up a few sparks, and she takes a slow puff, blowing a practiced ring of smoke into the air as Albus watches, vacantly amused.] "Albus." [She glances skeptically around the room.]"What the fuck is this?"

Albus: [smiles slowly, the familiar twinkle appearing in his eye] "Minerva, you do realize you're on camera." [He gestures behind her to where the camera jostles into place, as though the person holding it has finally managed to levitate it properly.]

Minerva: [looks into the camera and purses her lips in matronly disapproval before taking a long, deliberate pull from her cigar.] "Albus, you cocksucking whore - " [she coughs out a puff of smoke] " - what have you done now?"

Albus: [chuckles] "Lee, if you would, please?"

[A loud cough, and then Lee Jordan steps tentatively into camera view.]

Lee: "Er, hello, and welcome to - " [He looks up, gesturing to someone off screen] "We're rolling, right?"

[An incoherent response rumbles from off screen.]
Lee: "Right." [Clears his throat and then glances behind him; Minerva makes a face before transfiguring her still-lit cigar into a small insect, which Fawkes snatches from the air and eats, emitting a warbled crow of triumph.] "Sorry, Professor - "

Minerva: [lazily, flicking a speck of ash from her robe] "Jordan, just get to it, would you?"

Lee: [muttering to himself] "Right." [He straightens and someone passes him a mic from off screen, which he accepts, nudging his tie into place as he opens his monologue.] "This is the true story of the students and teachers who live at Hogwarts, and who have agreed to have their lives taped to find out what happens when people stop being polite … and start getting real."

Minerva: [interrupts, mouth open in disbelief] "What the fuck, Albus - "

Albus: [innocently] "What?"

Lee: [turns to face them; the camera zooms past him to focus on the two professors.] "Uh, guys - "

Minerva: "What has possibly possessed you to think this is a good idea, Albus?"

Albus: "Look, Minnie." [He shifts in his chair] "Here's the thing. There's some shit going down this year, okay, and I can't have you up my arse about everything I do this time - "

Minerva: [shrilly] "This time? Albus, you have literally never listened to me - "

Albus: [trumpeting loudly] "And like I always say, EVERYTHING IS TOTALLY FINE!"

Minerva: "Totally fine?" [She blinks at him in disbelief.] Albus Dumbledore, you unbelievable cockwarbler - "

Lee: [steps towards them carefully] "Again, Professors, just as a reminder - "

Minerva: "Quiet, Jordan, or I'll take ten points - "

Lee: [indignant] "Professor, I graduated last year!"

Albus: [to Minerva] "Minnie, no offense, but surely you've gathered at this point that I am the architect of a much grander scheme that could not possibly register in your teeny tiny mortal mind - "

Minerva: "Oh you son of a cunting - "

Albus: [continuing unfazed] "Look, I said no offense - "

Minerva: "That's not a thing, Albus, you can't just say that - "

Albus: "I don't mean you personally have a teeny tiny mind, just that all people who aren't me have teeny tiny minds - "

Minerva: "HOW VERY DARE YOU, ALBUS - "

Lee: [whispering to himself] "Holy balls - "

Minerva: " - I WILL FIGHT YOU, ALBUS, RIGHT NOW - "

Albus: [mumbling] " - don't understand why you're so sensitive, I feel like this is obvious - " [looks around] "Where's Severus, he'll get it - "
Minerva: [furious] "Oh no you don't!" [She clambers onto the desk and Fawkes screeches encouragingly from his perch, rowdily delighted.] "You tell me what's going on, Albus, or so help me - "

[Minerva reaches across to take Albus by the shoulders, shaking him and muttering "full offense" and "for the actual sake of fuck" as she struggles to throttle him.]

Lee: [steps in front of the camera, shouting] "Let's go meet the rest of the cast, shall we?"

[Camera cuts out; reopens on an interview scene as Harry Potter takes a seat in a chair, looking around.]

Harry: [confused] "Lee, what exactly - "

Lee, off screen: "You're doing great, Harry!"

Harry: "Oh, um, hi." [He looks into the camera and smiles awkwardly, as if he's been instructed to do so.] "I'm Harry."

Interviewer: "Your full name, please."


[Camera cuts to Draco interview.]

Draco: "Did he really forget to say his full name?" [scoffs] "What an idiot." [Looks confidently into the camera] "I'm Draco Malfoy."

Interviewer: "And your house?"

Draco: "Oh, I see, so you're pretending people don't know who I am, then?"

[Camera cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: [brightly] "Hello, I'm Hermione Granger, I'm a Gryffindor Prefect and a sixth year, I'm really quite interested in arithmancy and ancient runes, though I'm also taking potions, astronomy, transfiguration - "

Interviewer: [hurriedly interrupts] "Yes, yes, okay - "

[Camera cuts to Seamus and Dean interview.]

Seamus: "Yeah, we'd really just prefer to do our interviews together."

Dean: "No reason."

Interviewer: "Okay, well, um - "

Seamus: "Listen, here's the thing, I think we all want to know if Potter's gay, right?"

Dean: "And Malfoy."

Interviewer: [hesitantly] "Well, let's not - "

Seamus: "And Weasley. And Corner. And Longbottom. And Goyle - "

Dean: [interrupts] "Do you think everyone is gay?"
Seamus: "Pretty much. Except me, obviously."
Dean: "Well, obviously."
Seamus: "I just feel like it would be more interesting if everyone were gay."
Dean: "Except you."
Seamus: "Right, I said that."
Dean: "Yes, right. Cool."

[Camera cuts to Pansy interview.]
Pansy: "Listen, how many times can I say fuck?"
Interviewer: "We'd prefer none."
Pansy: "Cunt?"
Interviewer: "Please don't."
Pansy: "Pussy. Twat."
Interviewer: "Really, if you could just stop, that'd be - "
Pansy: "I'm just listing by category but I feel I'm an equal opportunity swearer. Like - cock, surely cock's okay, you know, within the rigid confines of the patriarchy? Or dick?"
Interviewer: "Miss Parkinson - "
Pansy: "What about shitpouch?"
Interviewer: "No."
Pansy: "Thundercunt."
Interviewer: "Now you're just mixing words together."
Pansy: "Am I, though?"

[Cuts to Theo interview]
Theo: "So, can I say - "
Lee, off screen: "NO, NOTT, YOU FUCKING CANNOT - "
Theo: [sulking] "Ugh, balls."

[Cuts to Ron interview]
Ron: "Yeah, hi, I'm Ron Weasley - "

[Severus Snape enters the screen to walk through the corridor and does a double-take, pausing before taking a few steps back to scowl imperiously into the camera.]
Severus: "Weasley." [Narrows his eyes skeptically] "What is the meaning of this?"
Ron: [Glances nervously at the camera] "Er, I um - don't really know, sir."

Severus: "Get to class." [Scowls again] "And take five points from Gryffindor."

Ron: [in disbelief] "WHAT - Professor Snape! That's not - "

Severus: "Scamper off, Weasley, or it'll be another five."

Ron: [looks helplessly at the interviewer] "Aren't you going to do something?"

Interviewer: "Nah."

[Cuts to Luna interview.]

Luna: "Is this a documentary about finally revealing the truth about Nargles?"

Interviewer: "No."

Luna: [quietly] "Balls."

[Cuts to Blaise interview.]

Blaise: [Looks up as Draco sits down beside him] "What are you doing here?"

Draco: "Making your interview more interesting."

Blaise: "Debatable."

Draco: "Why, what were you going to say? I'm Blaise Zabini and I'm a Slytherin whose mummy is a husband-murdering, opera-singing tart?"

Blaise: "Kind of."

Draco: "Oh. Carry on, then."

[Cuts to Ginny interview.]

Ginny: "Have you seen Dean?"

Interviewer: "He was with Seamus."

Ginny: "Fuck, I suspected that." [Tilts her head] "Harry's straight, right?"

Interviewer: "I really can't comment."

Ginny: "Eh, we'll circle back later."

[Cuts to Parvati and Lavender interview.]

Lavender: "I heard Ron got in trouble for doing this show. He's so interesting."

Parvati: "Ugh, Lavender, really?"

Lavender: "Like, not Harry Potter interesting, you know, but that's like - too much, you know what I mean?"

Parvati: "Stop."
Lavender: "Like, in terms of actual humor and substance - "
Parvati: "For the love of god, stop."

[Cuts to Draco interview.]

Draco: "Have you seen Granger? No reason. Did she say something about how she's a muggleborn?" [mutters to himself] "Stupid Granger with her stupid brain and hair and face."

Lee, off screen: "For fuck's sake, Malfoy, will you get out - "

[Cuts to Daphne and Pansy interview.]
Pansy: "You should give Daph extra screen time. She's got great tits."
Daphne: "Aw, Pans!" [gives her a playful shove] "You're sweet."
Pansy: "Oh, so I can say tits, then? Excellent."
Theo, off screen: "If she can say tits, then I'm saying tits - "
Lee, off screen: "Nott, I will fucking murder you dead - "

[Cuts to Vincent and Gregory interview.]

Vincent: "I'm Crabbe."
Gregory: "I'm Goyle."
Lee, off screen: "NEXT!"

[Cuts to Harry interview.]

Harry: "Has Malfoy been acting strangely to you?"
Interviewer: "I literally just met him."
Harry: "Yeah, but, there's a vibe there. Like a weird, something's off vibe, you know?"
Interviewer: "Okay - "
Harry: "A deathy, evil kind of vibe."
Interviewer: "I'm really not - "
Harry: "I'm saying I think Malfoy's a Death Eater."

[Cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "Harry said what? [rolls her eyes] "Ridiculous. As if Malfoy would ever - " [she pauses, looking lost in thought.] "Would he?"
Interviewer: "I don't know?"
Hermione: [shaking herself of the thought] "Anyway, as I was saying about S.P.E.W. - "
Lee, off screen: "Who the fuck let Granger back in?!"
Luna: "I think it's going to be a very interesting year." [she smiles and whispers] "We're going to burn this place to the ground."

Interviewer: "What?"

Luna: "What?"

Harry: "He's just like, doing this thing with his wrist, you know? And he was in Knockturn Alley, which - sketchy, right?"

Lee: [enters the screen, stomping over to Harry] "Merlin's ballsack, Harry, please - "

Harry: "Okay, but did I tell you about his weird thing with his wrist though?"

Albus: "What am I planning?" [smiles absently] "Oh, nothing. As I always say, it's the unknown we fear, when we - "

Minerva: [yelling offscreen] "Albus!"

Albus: [turns pale] "Shut it off. Hide. NOW."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Happy December 1st, it's more of this shit every day til Christmas. Joy to the world!
The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode II

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 2.

[Scene opens with an interview with Neville.]  
Neville: [openly nervous] "I really just came down here looking for my - "  
Interviewer: "I'm told Harry Potter was late to the welcome feast this year. Care to comment?"  
Neville: "Er, I mean, it wasn't the first time Harry missed it - "  
Interviewer: [interrupts] "Would you say Harry receives any favoritism from the school administration?"  
Neville: "Well, I don't think that I can - "  
Interviewer: "From Dumbledore, specifically?"  
[There is a long pause.]  
Neville: "Pass."  
Interviewer: "You can't pass."  
Neville: "Well, I'm doing it. Pass."  
Interviewer: "That's essentially a tacit agreement, then."  
Neville: [Thinks, and then nods to himself.] "Trick question. Pass again."

Interviewer: "Listen - "  
Neville: "I SAID PASS."  

[Severus Snape appears in the corridor once more, his nose wrinkling distastefully as he catches sight of Neville.]  
Severus: [Tsking] "Mr. Longbottom, given the state of your performance in my class, I would recommend spending more time studying and less time preening for the camera." [He pauses as Neville looks sheepish.] "5 points from Gryffindor."

Neville: [tentatively] "But Professor, I - "  
Severus: "But nothing, or I'll make it ten."

Neville: "Perhaps Professor Dumbledore didn't explain - " [he turns red, ducking his head and mumbling] " - we're supposed to be doing this for a reality show - I'm supposed to be doing this
Severus: [coldly] "I've never heard such a thing. Fifteen points."

Cuts to Severus interview.

Severus: "I know exactly what's happening. I'm not an idiot. I'm incredibly informed."

Albus: [gently] "Then perhaps you might consider, you know, not taking points away from the students you don't like - "

Severus: [interrupts] "I find that demoralizing others stabilizes my otherwise crippling lack of self-esteem and my generally unbending state of misery with regard to my life and my choices."

Albus: [Pauses in horror, and then laughs awkwardly] "He's - the thing is, he's joking."

Severus: [stone-faced] "I'm not."

Albus: [laughs again] "He is. Trust me. He's hilarious."

Severus: "I'm not."

Albus: [nudges him] "Life of the party, this one - "

Severus: "I'd sooner eat my stockings than attend a party."

Albus: [continues, unfazed] "social butterfly, he is, as you can see - "

Severus: "I was invited to a party once. That person no longer possesses full functionality of his right testicle."

Albus: [frantically] "TRULY UNPARALLELED SENSE OF HUMOR - "

Severus: "I told one joke in March of 1987. The recipient of the punchline died three days later."

Albus: "SELF-DEPRECATION IS SO EN VOGUE THESE DAYS - "

Severus: "I sometimes fantasize about lighting small fires in order to fall asleep."

Camera pans out to reveal that Luna is sitting on Severus' right.

Luna: [whispers] "Burn it down."

Albus: [looks over Severus to see her, startled] "Miss Lovegood, how on earth did you get here?"

Luna: "It's probably best if you never assume I'm not everywhere at any given time, Professor."

Severus: [looking impressed in spite of himself] "That is absolutely terrifying."

Luna: [kindly] "Thank you."

Severus: "You're welcome."

Albus: [sighing] "God, I need to lie down."

Minerva, off screen: "Albus!"
Albus: [leaps up] "Oh, for fuck's sake."

[Cuts to Draco interview with Theo and Blaise.]

Draco: "You know who I hate?"

Theo: "Potter."

Blaise: "Potter."

Draco: " - Potter. He's intolerable. An idiot. And I'm so sick of his - "

Theo: "Hero antics."

Blaise: "Hero antics."

Draco: " - hero antics, you know? Just because he's Dumbledore's favorite - "

Theo: "He thinks he can just strut around - "

Blaise: " - utterly immune to consequences."

Draco: "He thinks he can just strut around, utterly immune to consequences - "

Theo: "We know."

Blaise: "Seriously. We know."

Draco: "You know who else I hate?"

Theo: "Granger."

Blaise: "Granger."

Lee, off screen: "Hermione!"

Draco: "Granger. She's disgusting. Her hair's so big. Her skin's so soft. It's infuriating. I want to murder her with my mouth."

Blaise: "Like, eat her?"

Lee, off screen: "Don't, you signed a waiver!"

Theo: [shaking his head] "You have your emotions confused."

[Cuts to a hidden camera in the library where Ron, Hermione, and Harry are whispering in a corner.]

Hermione: [looking nervous] "I mean, surely he didn't think we'd continue his class in a N.E.W.T. year, of all years!"

Harry: "I'm pretty sure that's exactly what Hagrid thinks."

Ron: [in a slow exhale] "Fuuuuuck thaaaaaat."

Hermione: [biting her lip] "You know, I hate to agree with Ron, but - yes, that."
Harry: [shrugging his disinterest] "Let's talk about something more important. Like what Malfoy's up to."

Hermione: "He's literally right there, Harry. He's studying."

Harry: [sniffs skeptically] "I don't like it. Looks fishy."

Ron: "He's got his textbook open. He's taking notes."

Harry: "Voldemort takes notes."

Hermione: "I'm not sure that's relevant - "

Harry: "You know what else Voldemort does? Murder."

Ron: "I don't know where this is going at all."

Hermione: [glances at him, exasperated] "Do you really not?"

Harry: "I'm saying Malfoy's a Death Eater."

Ron: "Oh, I guess I did know, then."

Hermione: "Are you just trying that out on everyone to see if it sticks?"

Harry: "Is it sticking?"

Ron: "No."

Harry: "Fuck, I feel like I've got a solid argument here - look, remember the wrist thing?"

Ron: "Yes."

Harry: "The wrist thing!"

Ron: "I've got it."

Hermione: "We've definitely got it."

Harry: "Okay but I feel like you're not hearing me."

Ron: "I hear you."

Harry: "But like - hear me out, though - "

Ron: "His wrist."

Harry: " - his wrist - "

Ron: "Knockturn Alley."

Harry: " - and Knockturn Alley!"

[From the left side of the camera view Pansy and Daphne appear from the other side of the bookshelf where the Golden Trio are talking; Daphne wipes smudged lipstick from Pansy's neck and Pansy reaches out to nudge the corner of Daphne's skirt, which is folded up awkwardly, the corner of it caught in her lacy black knickers.]
Hermione: *looking over her class notes* "I feel like we're missing something."

Harry: "About Malfoy?"

Hermione: *sighs* "I can't."

*Cuts to Seamus and Dean interview.*

Seamus: "You know who I think is gay?"

Dean: "Who?"

Seamus: "Snape."

Dean: "Ooh, good one."

Seamus: "And Flitwick."

Dean: "Yep."

Seamus: "And Binns."

Dean: "The ghost?"

Seamus: "Ghosts can be gay."

Dean: "What about Dumbledore?"

Seamus: *pauses* "Nah."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Happy December 2nd! I know some of you said this coincides with your birthdays. Tumblr me/leave a review with the date and I'll include a shoutout in the endnotes.
Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 3. A little late today, but still counts!

[Camera footage opens on Harry, Hermione, and Ron walking through a busy castle corridor.]
Ron: "What are the chances we actually get free time this year?"
Harry: [thinks, then nods decisively] "Real fucking low."
Ron: "But we've got all these free periods, though - "
Hermione: [exasperated] "Those are for studying - "
Harry: "Or for stalking Malfoy."
Ron: "No."
Harry: "Oh, come on."
Ron: "Let me rephrase -"
Harry: "Sure -"
Ron: "No thank you."
Neville, walking by: "PASS!"
Harry: [sighs] "Okay, but hear me out -"
Hermione: [interrupts] "For the hundredth time, those free periods are for studying!"
Ron: "Studying what, though?"
Hermione: [with a grimace] "Honestly, I'm sure something will come up. This all seems too convenient." [She gets distracted, seeing a first year with a Fanged Frisbee.] "Excuse me, these are banned!"
Ron: [gesturing] "Gimme." [under his breath to Hermione and Harry] "Been wanting one of these."
[Nearby, Lavender laughs uproariously. Camera cuts to Lavender interview.]
Lavender: [shrugging] "What? He's funny."
Parvati: [arms crossed] "No. He isn't."
Lavender: "Okay, but -"
Parvati: "Stop."

Lavender: "I really don't think that you're - "

Parvati: "No."

Lavender: "If you would just - "

Parvati: [flips desk] "NO!"

[Cuts to interview with Albus.]

Albus: "Look, so, I know Slughorn's not that great a potions instructor - "

Minerva: [looks startled at this] "What the fuck? Albus, you bollocky cockswallop - "

Albus: [continues, unfazed] " - and I know, technically, that he's at least partially to blame for Voldemort - "

Minerva: "Do you even hear yourself when you talk?"

Albus: [indignantly] "Minnie, am I really supposed to disqualify people simply because they may or may not have contributed to an evil wizard's meteoric rise to power?"

Minerva: [arms crossed and fuming, says nothing.]

Albus: "Who would even be left at that point - "

Minerva: [erupts] "You can't possibly be serious - "

Albus: [interrupts loudly] "But as I was saying, it's a small thing, really, in the grander scheme of forcing Harry to take potions." [clears throat] "For reasons that I have not yet made clear."

[There is a pause.]

Minerva: "Well?" [glares] "Do you plan to make them clear?"

Albus: "Yes."

[Another pause; Minerva waits expectantly.]

Albus: [looking surprised] "Oh, were you wanting to know now?"

Minerva: "That was sort of the idea, you twatwarbler."

Albus: "Well I can't now. I'm busy now. Oh, look, Harry!"

[Albus disappears. Minerva sighs and turns to face an incoming Harry and Ron.]

Minerva: "Potter, you'll have to take Potions."

Harry: [taken aback] "Why?"

Minerva: [bellows] "Don't argue with me, Potter - YOU COME INTO MY HOUSE - "

Harry: [frantically] "Okay, fuck, fine - I'm taking potions."
Hermione: [muttering to herself] "Oh fuck no."

Harry: [earnestly] "WHAT A SURPRISE! FORTUNE HATH SMILED UPON ME AND MY HUMBLE SOUL THIS DAY! MAGICAL MAPS AND CLOAKS OF INVISIBILITY AND BOOKS WITH ALL THE ANSWERS ALMOST NEVER SIMPLY FALL INTO MY LAP, UNBIDDEN - "

Theo: [sighs, rubbing his temple] "Yeah, this seems about right."

[Cuts to interview with Draco.]

Draco: [haughtily] "Oh, big surprise, despite years of absolute fucking incompetence Harry ball-gargling Potter is suddenly some kind of potions ingenue - "

Hermione: [bursts in] "LEE!"

Lee, off screen: "What the fuck now?"

Draco: [brings a hand to his chest in a show of aristocratic, falsely horrified dismay] "Granger, I beg your fucking pardon - "

Hermione: [ignoring him] "Did you see it? Did the camera get it?"

Lee, off screen: "Get what?"

Draco: [aghast] "Granger, do I look like a piece of furniture to you? Here I am, innocently attempting to wax poetic about Potter's failings in peace - "

Hermione: "He's cheating, Lee - that son of a - "

Draco: [interrupts] "GRANGER, MY VIRGIN EARS - "

Hermione: [steps in front of the camera speaking to Lee, who is somewhere behind it] "I just want to see if the world is actually seeing the truth, here - which is that despite the fact that I would literally die for Harry - "

Draco: [peeking out from behind her] "Just curious, where do I fall on the spectrum of people you would die for? No reason." [He pauses, laughing nervously] "Ah, not relevant, carry on - "

Hermione: " - he is cheating, he is abusing the system, he is taking instruction from a book - "

Lee, off screen: "Hermione, what the fuck do you want me to do about it?"

Hermione: [shouting back] "I want justice, Lee!"

Draco: "Do you want me to fight him? I'll do it. Not for you, obviously, seeing as you're a disgusting, perfect, loathsome ivory-skinned monster, but - "

Hermione: "What is the purpose of a show about real life if not to EXPOSE THE TRUTH - "

Lee, off screen: "Hermione, I really don't think you understand what we do here."

Hermione: [shouting back] "I UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING!"
[She storms out; Draco looks sympathetically at the camera.]

Draco: "Ugh, isn't she the absolute worst? Isn't she absolutely the most disgusting, horrible, angel-faced disgrace of a human being you've ever seen?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna sitting on his right.]

Luna: "I don't think you mean that."

Draco: [jumps out of his seat] "How the fuck did you get here?"

Luna: "Hm? Me?"

Draco: [blinks, glances at the camera in confusion, and then looks back at her.] "Yes, you!"

Luna: "Oh, I thought you meant him."

[Camera pans out further to reveal Severus on Draco's left.]

Draco: [looks, then recoils in dismay] "Why?!"

Severus: "Hm?"

Luna: [vacantly] "Oh look, wrackspurts."

[Cuts to Pansy and Daphne interview.]

Daphne: "Marry Potter, fuck Granger, and kill Weasley." [Thinks] "Right?"

Pansy: [shrugs] "I say kill all three of them."

Daphne: [tsks disapprovingly] "Pans. [nudges her] "Come on."

Pansy: "Fine." [sighs in resignation] "Maybe fuck Weasley." [Straightens] I feel like he'd go down on you for like, fucking - hours, you know? Because he'd just be so grateful he'd just set up camp down there with some kind of breathing charm and just, fucking - go to town, you know?"

Daphne: "Ooh. That's true."

Interviewer: [interrupts gently] "Er, just as a reminder, the question was what your response was to Harry Potter's performance in Potions today."

Daphne: "Oh, we know."

Pansy: "We made it better."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Might be a bit late tomorrow as well or very early, depends. Absurdity continues.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode IV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode IV


[Opens with interview with Harry and Hermione.]

Hermione: [tentatively, as though she is apprehensive about being overheard] "Ron's been very nervous about quidditch tryouts."

Harry: "Yes. Obsessively so."

Hermione: [looks imploringly at him] "Well, it's a bit understandable, isn't it?"

Harry: "Hardly. I swear, every time I bring up Malfoy, Ron interrupts to talk about these tryouts."

Hermione: [sighs, then turns back to the camera.] "In any case, we've been having to be especially sensitive and encouraging, which comes more naturally to some of us than others."

[cuts to a clip of several Gryffindors over breakfast.]

Hermione: [coaxingly] "You'll be fine, Ron - "

Ginny: "Yes. All you have to do is not suck."

Seamus: "It's easy. Just be better."

Dean: "I agree with Seamus."

Neville: [earnestly] "Plus, if you don't end up getting on the team, we can always talk about plants."

Ron: [slams his head into the table.] "I want to die."

[cuts back to Harry and Hermione interview.]

Harry: "But the truth is, it's really not that hard for us to motivate Ron."

Hermione: [blushes] "Yeah, we've, um . . . perfected a method over the years."

[cuts to Harry and Hermione talking to Ron.]

Harry: "You just have to use the Force, Ron."

Hermione: "Do or do not, there is no try."

Ron: "What?"

Harry: "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss
Hermione: "Life is also like a box of chocolates. Because you never know what you're going to get."

Ron: [thoughtfully] "That's true."

Harry: "Hakuna matata!"

Hermione: "It means no worries -"

Harry: "- for the rest of your days!"

Ron: [nodding approvingly] "That sounds good. But how does that -"

Harry: "Look in the mirror, Ron, and tell me what you see."

Ron: [looks around, confused] "What mirror?"

Hermione: "I see pride -"

Harry: [interrupts] "I see power!"

Hermione: "I see a bad ass mother -"

Harry: "- who don't take no crap off of nobody!"

Ron: [impressed] "Really? You guys see that?"

Harry: "Ron, I'm just a boy, standing in front of another boy, asking him to believe in himself."

Hermione: "Don't you understand? When you give up on your dream, you die."

Ron: "I guess that's true."

Harry: "Fight and you may die, Ron. Run, and you'll live . . . at least a while."

Ron: [startled] "Wait, what do you mean I'll live? Was there a possibility I'd die?!

Hermione: "And dying in your bed, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days, from this day to that, for one chance -"

Harry: "- just one chance, to come back here and tell our enemies -"

Ron: "Our enemies?" [huffs in irritation] "For fuck's sake, Harry, is this about Malfoy again?"

Hermione: "- that they may take our lives -"

Harry: [erupting dramatically] "- but they'll never take . . . OUR FREEDOM!"

[There is a pause. Harry has clambered onto the table to deliver the final line, and Hermione is breathless, her fist raised.]

Ron: [lets out a low whistle] "Wow." [He smiles cheerfully.] "You guys always know what to say."

[Cuts back to Harry and Hermione interview.]
Harry: "So, um, yeah. There are some benefits to having grown up in the Muggle world."

Hermione: [sheepishly] "We'll tell him someday."

Harry: "No we won't."

Hermione: [sighs] "No, we really won't."

[Cuts to Theo interview.]

Theo: "Yeah, I mean, school's fine."

Interviewer: "Do you have a favorite class?"

Theo: "Um, well. I guess if I had to choose one - "

[Pansy and Daphne come storming into the corridor. Theo sighs in relief.]

Theo: "Oh thank god. I thought I'd have to talk about fucking . . . school for a minute there."

Interviewer: "Personally, I came close to setting a small controlled fire."

Theo: "Ooh, smart."

Pansy: "What the fuck is this?" [She storms over to the interviewer, shoving something in his face.] "Are you responsible for this?"

Lee, off screen: "Oh, for the love of Godric's teeth - "

Interviewer: "I - Miss Parkinson, I can't see it while you're shoving it in my face - "

Daphne: "It had to have been one of you, right? One of your pervy show people?"

Lee, off screen: "PERVY? First of all, how fucking dare you - "

Theo: [peering over Pansy's shoulder] "Pans, what the fuck does it say?"

Pansy: "Something disgusting and unforgivable, that's what!"

Theo: "Is it more of Draco's poetry? His freeform work is improving but the sonnets are still utter fucking garbage as far as I can tell - I mean really, if I hear him ask 'what rhymes with bushy' one more time, I'm just going to - "

[Lee stomps into view, cutting him off.]

Lee: "Alright you twatting harpies, what are you - " [He pauses.] "What the fuck is this?"

Pansy: [shoves the parchment in his face] "Who did this?"

Lee: [draws a hand to his chest in outrage, knocking her hand away] "You had better not be accusing me of something, you horrible brute!"

[Lee grabs the parchment she's waving and reads it; his face contorts into a grimace.]

Theo: [straining to read from afar] "Well? What the fuck does it say?"

Lee: [hesitant to say] "Er, it um - it says - "
Pansy: *reciting the note* "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet - "

Daphne: " - but for Pansy, thy rose shall be called Daphne - "

Theo: *interrupts* "That's not Draco's work. His poems have a certain . . . gravitas." *grimaces* "Also, they're usually about Granger."

Pansy: "It ends with 'I know your dirty little secret - "

Daphne: " - and it's signed, of all things, 'xoxo' - "

Lee: *scoffs* "This is hardly a hugs and kisses occasion."

Theo: *nodding* "Agreed. Inappropriate." *pauses* "Wait, but what does it mean?"

Pansy: "It *means* somebody's been mucking about in our business!"

Lee: "And what does that have to do with *me*?"

Daphne: "Who else is around school following people's every move other than you? And who the hell is 'Gossip Girl'?"

[Albus runs into the corridor, panting and out of breath.]

Lee: *relieved* "Oh good, Professor, perhaps you can help us - "

[Albus shushes them urgently and they fall silent; heeled footsteps echo the halls as someone turns down an alternate corridor.]

Albus: "Excellent, she's gone." *looks up* "What's the problem?"

Lee: "Well, it seems Pansy and Daphne have received - "

Albus: *interrupts* "Just kidding, don't care. Bye!"

[Albus disapparates. Everyone turns to look at the camera.]

Lee: "Um." *He is physically uncomfortable with the situation and looks very much like he would like to leave as well.* Well, I suppose, I, um - "

Theo: *blurs out* "My favorite class is Transfiguration."

[Everyone turns to look at him.]

Theo: "I don't know, I panicked!"

[Cuts to Seamus and Dean.]

Seamus: "Hagrid. Gay."

Dean: "Oh, come on."

Seamus: "One hundred percent. I'd stake my life on it."

Dean: "I wouldn't advise it."
Seamus: "Also gay? Salazar Slytherin."

Dean: "How do you figure?"

Seamus: "The whole snake thing. Dodgy."

Dean: "So snakes are gay, but not lions?"

Seamus: [Thinks] "No, lions too."

Dean: "So Gryffindor and Slytherin - "

Seamus: "Gay."

Dean: [muttering to himself] "The only possible way this is acceptable is if he turns out to be gay, right? I mean, is this incredibly insensitive material to include in any sort of publicized footage?"

Seamus: "What did you say?"

Dean: [loudly] "I said I agree. Totally gay."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Additional layer of plot to what is already a nearly unbearable level of antics. Imaginary Olivie Points if you can identify the movie quotes.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode V

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 5.

[Scene opens on several professors and Lee having a discussion in the Headmaster's office.]

Minerva: "Mr Jordan, what exactly is the problem here?"

Lee: "Er, well, it seems someone has sent Miss Parkinson and Miss Greengrass of Slytherin a, um, mildly threatening note."

Filius: [skeptically] "Mildly threatening?"

Pomona: "Is there such a thing as a 'mild threat,' Mr Jordan?"

Albus: [buoyantly] "Sure there is. A man with the soul of an evil megalomaniac hidden in his turban, for example."

Minerva: [turns her head sharply, glaring] "Did you just reference Quirinius Quirrell as a mild threat?"

Albus: [obnoxiously] "Would you have preferred I use the werewolf as an example? Or the good-looking unqualified one who tried to abandon two children to their inevitable demise?"

Minerva: "Under the circumstances, yes!"

Albus: "Hush, Minnie, don't be rude. Lee is talking."

[He looks expectantly at Lee, who swallows comically.]

Lee: "Er, well, I say mildly in that no actual threats were made, really - "

Filius: "No blackmail?"

Pomona: "No inclusion of bodily harm?"

Lee: "No. There was an ill-timed expression of hugs and kisses, but - "

Severus: [shudders] "Revolting."

Lee: " - other than that, nothing."

Albus: [cheerily] "Well then - no harm, no foul!"

Minerva: [glaring] "Albus, you cunting baboon - "

Albus: "Look, it's a rule. If there's no impending murder, then we're fine."
Filius: [alarmed] "Dear god, is that really the only rule?"

Albus: "Look, this is just like that time we had that Death Eater here dressed up as someone we all
knew and loved for many years and nobody noticed was actually a member of a villainous mob of
murder enthusiasts." [He shrugs] "Totally fine."

Minerva: "Albus, you buffet of blithering cockmongery, someone died that year!"

Albus: "Did they?" [cocks his head, thinking] "Ah, I always forget that one." [Pauses dejectedly,
then brightens.] "Ah, well, as I always say, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great
advent."

Minerva: "I'm going to kill him. I'm going to do it this time. Severus, hold me back!"

Severus: [inspecting his fingernails] "No. Shan't."

[A ruckus erupts as Minerva lunges for Albus; Pomona and Filius both attempt to hold her back
but fail, each one grabbing onto an ankle as she drags them, one foot at a time, towards Albus, who
sits indignantly at his desk.]

Albus: "Minnie, really - I think you're overreacting a bit, it's only a bit of casual murder between
friends, isn't it?"

Minerva: "ALBUS, COME HERE AND LET ME PUNCH YOU - "

[Lee has now grabbed on to Minerva and the camera is jostled, indicating that at least one of the
camera crew members has joined in.]

Lee: "THIS - IS - UNSEEMLY - "

Albus: "Honestly, Minnie, one mistake and it's like I'm a social piranha - "

Severus: [takes a seat in a large, clawed armchair and peruses a copy of the Daily Prophet,
licking a finger as he turns a page.] "It's pariah."

Albus: [pauses thoughtfully] "I always thought the fish reference was off; but then I thought - who
likes fish?"

[Minerva is finally dragged down as Aurora Sinistra takes a flying leap, tackling her from afar.
Horace Slughorn enters as the other teachers collapse with a groan.]

Horace: "What did I miss?"

Severus: [still reading the newspaper] "Not much."

Albus: [thinking] "Something something, blackmail, mild peril, something else - then Minerva
tried to fight me."

Horace: [spiritedly] "Right-ho then, gents, carry on. Ah, and Albus, I'm using the same lesson
plans from fifteen years ago."

Albus: "What else would you do? Teach something new?"

[Both laugh uproariously. Camera cuts to Draco interview.]

Draco: "Yes, I've heard about the note Pansy and Daphne got."
Interviewer: "Any idea who sent it?"

Draco: "I hope it was Potter, but really, he's far too oblivious. And it's a girl, isn't it? 'Gossip Girl'? So not him anyway." [He perks up] "Maybe it's Granger!"

Interviewer: "Is that a good thing?"

Draco: "I really don't know. Please don't ask me about her."

Interviewer: "I feel like I should."

Draco: "I don't know what you want me to say. She's got brown hair that glints in the light, with these rays of sun that catch in her soft curls whenever she turns her head."

Interviewer: "Oh boy."

Draco: "And brown eyes like the way the forest looks when the sun goes down, all warm and comforting but also mysterious and deep, like they contain the very secrets of life within them."

Interviewer: "Mhmm."

Draco: "She's the perfect height for me to rest my chin on top of her head - "

Interviewer: "Have you tried?"

Draco: "I've estimated."

Interviewer: "Okay."


Interviewer: "Nothing weird?"

Draco: "That's what I said, isn't it?"

Interviewer: "Right. So, anyway. Tell me more about the Room of Requirement."

Draco: "Ah, right. So really, I got the idea from horrible, disgusting Granger - "

Interviewer: [rubs temples] "For fuck's sake - "

Draco: " - whose cheeks are as perfectly tinted as the first bloom of spring - "

Interviewer: [interrupts] "So how does it work?"

Draco: "Summoning charm, basically, within the sentient castle. It requires some subtlety." [Pauses, thinking.] "It's like a woman, sort of."

Interviewer: "How so?"

Draco: "You have to ask it for what you want, you know? And preen for it a bit. You can't just bang on the door and shout for it to let you in."

[Scene cuts to Harry standing outside the Room of Requirement, maniacally pounding his fists against the wall.]

Harry: "SHOW ME WHAT MALFOY IS HIDING!"
Harry: "In my experience women are confusing."

Ron: "Yes, so, I think Harry and Hermione might have mentioned how I'm a bit nervous about quidditch tryouts."

Interviewer: "They did. Care to comment?"

Ron: "I'm nervous."

Interviewer: "I'd gathered."

Ron: "It's not like I'm not good at quidditch, obviously - "

Interviewer: "I wouldn't have guessed that, but keep going."

Ron: " - it's just that - it'll be so bloody disappointing if I don't make it."

Luna: "Is it because everyone always forgets about you?"

Ron: [jumps out of his seat] "Fucking - Godric's balls, Luna!"

Luna: "I wouldn't worry about it."

Ron: "You wouldn't worry about what?!!"

Luna: "Oh, a variety of things. Nargles, Snorkacks, Plimpies, Squirtles, Charmanders, Bulbasours - "

Ron: [staring at her] "You've got to be making these things up."

Luna: "Oddly, no. [whispers] "Gotta catch them all."

Ron: "What?"

Luna: "What?"

Interviewer: "What?!"

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Imaginary Olivie Points to Gaeleria, Redbeardswoman, and bonkaiqueen!
The Real World: Hogwarts

Episode VI


[Scene opens on the Slytherin common room.]

Blaise: "Marry McGonagall, fuck Pomfrey, kill Hooch."

Daphne: "I'd fuck McGonagall over Pomfrey for sure. Have you lost your mind?"

Blaise: "Have you?!"

Draco: [sitting at a table behind them] "Guys, what rhymes with 'lioness'?"

Theo: [shouting back to him] "Wine list."

Draco: "Not really the vibe I'm going for."

Theo: "Then be more specific!"

Daphne: [ignoring them] "I just think McGonagall's got to be one of those, like, secret freaks, you know?"

Pansy: "I'm with Daph. Definitely. McGonagall's a closeted perv, for sure."

Blaise: "You know who's probably dirty as hell? Snape."

Daphne: "Oooh, yes."

Draco: "What would you call the precise brown that looks a bit golden? You know, with a bit of a sheen to it? Like, if it were crystalline in some way, but then also opalescent?"

Theo: "Fucking hell, Draco - what the fuck?"

Draco: "You said to be more specific."

Blaise: [to Theo] "He's not wrong."

Theo: [sighs, then yells back] "Topaz?"

Draco: [sniffs disapprovingly] "I don't know. Seems pretentious."

Theo: "Amber, then."

Draco: "Huh. [Thinks, then scribbles something down.] "Not bad."

Daphne: "Alright, new round - the secret freaks. McGonagall, Snape, and - "


Pansy: "Granger."

Draco: [perks up] "What?"

Daphne: "Granger, a secret freak? You think?"

Pansy: [emphatically] "For sure. She's so tightly wound."

Blaise: "I agree."

Draco: [loudly] "What's that about Granger? That she's a horrible monster? I agree."

Daphne: "Okay, fine, so - "

Pansy: "Marry McGonagall, fuck Snape, kill Granger."

Theo: "So basically you just added her to the list so that you could kill her in your weird, disturbing hypothetical?"

Pansy: "Pretty much, yeah."

Daphne: [shrugging] "I'd fuck Granger."

Theo: "Same. Easily."

Draco: [peering over at them from across the room] "Wait, who is fucking Granger?"

Blaise: "I think I'd marry Granger in that scenario. I might actually consider fucking Snape - I'm that curious."

Draco: [still shouting] "Fucking Granger as in 'I hate that fucking Granger'? Because, yeah, me too. Totally."

Theo: "No, Draco - fucking Granger as in intercourse."

Luna: "Yes, or congress. Specifically, sexual congress."

Theo: [nods] "Right, that's what I - " [jumps back] "Fucking hell, how did you get here?"

Luna: "Your passwords are really unimaginative."

Blaise: "She's not wrong."

Theo: [aghast] "Still - "

Draco: [poring over his parchment] "What rhymes with 'unbearably curly hair'?"

Luna: [effortlessly] "Unbeatable savoir faire."

Draco: "Oooh, that's a good - " [looks up] "How the fuck did you get in here?"

Luna: "Same as you, I imagine." [Turns to the others.] "I'd marry Snape, I think. He seems like he'll age well."

Daphne: [tilts her head thoughtfully] "An interesting additional layer of consideration to the game - longevity."
Blaise: [agreeably] "She's not wrong."

Luna: "And I think I'd fuck Hermione."


Pansy: "You'd pass on McGonagall? But what if she's, you know, really into - "

Luna: "She's not. I've seen."

Theo: "Exactly how much have you seen?"

Luna: [shrugs] "Enough."

Pansy: "You're terrifying."

Luna: "Oh, thank you."

Pansy: "You're welcome. [pauses] And in a bizarre twist, I mean that."

Luna: "You're sweet."

Theo: [dumbfounded] "What the fuuuuuuu-"

[Cuts to interview with Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, the Grey Lady, the Fat Friar, the Bloody Baron, and Peeves.]

Nick: "Look, we ghosts take serious issue with our lack of inclusion in the show."

Grey Lady: "We are residents here too, you know. Isn't that right, Peeves?"

[Peeves, emboldened by her attention, instantly tries to steal the camera, grabbing onto the lens and cackling; the Bloody Baron stares at him and he slowly puts it back, blowing a quiet raspberry to express his disappointment.]

Peeves: [mumbles] "What she said."

Nick: "I'm already not invited to the Headless Hunt - " [mutters to himself] "Forty-five times with a blunt axe and these cocksucking motherfuckers can't even - "

Grey Lady: [interrupting] "What Nick is trying to say is that it's very difficult to not be included in the activities of the living simply because we are, you know - dead."

Interviewer: "Isn't that . . . sort of the idea, though?"

Fat Friar: "How dare!"

Nick: "All lives matter!"

Grey Lady: [nodding her agreement] "Even dead ones."

Peeves: "Especially dead ones!" [He produces a large stack of books and drops it, releasing a cloud of dust into the room as he swoops around, whooping loudly.]

Nick: [coughing] "Why was Peeves included in this?"
Grey Lady: "So the Friar wouldn't be the dumbest ghost in the room."

Fat Friar: "Again, HOW DARE!"

Nick: [grumbling to himself] "I wouldn't even have to participate in any of your ridiculous schemes if I didn't have a measly half an inch of skin on my - "

Grey Lady: "Nicholas, you wart, I'll tell you what you've got a measly half-inch of if you don't shove it back down your improperly decapitated throat!"

Nick: "LISTEN HERE, YOU WOMAN - "

Peeves: [at the top of his lungs] "FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!"

[Argus Filch runs into the corridor, followed by Pomona Sprout.]

Argus: "STUDENTS IN THE CORRIDOR - STUDENTS OUT OF BED - "

Pomona: "Filch, you bollocking wastebasket, it's noon!" [she looks around, seeking out Peeves.] "Peeves, have you made off with the textbooks I had piled in the back greenhouse?"

Peeves: [holding a book titled 'Flesh-Eating Trees of the World'] "No."

Pomona: [sternly] "Peeves."

Peeves: "No."

Pomona: "Peeves!"

Peeves: "No."

Pomona: "PEEVES!"

Peeves: "Only a little."

Pomona: [growls in frustration] "Minerva!"

[Minerva apparates in, smoking a cigar. She looks around, nodding amicably to the Bloody Baron, who nods back, approvingly smug. She settles down beside him, leaning back in her chair as she blows out an expertly crafted smoke ring.]

Minerva: "What's up?"

Pomona: [sulkily] "Peeves stole my textbooks again."

Minerva: [takes a long drag, considering her before turning her attention to Peeves] "Peeves. Peevesy. Peevesmeister."

Peeves: [loudly, in obvious denial] "WHAT?"

Minerva: "I can't. Do you understand me?" [She lets out a long exhale of smoke.] "I simply cannot."

Peeves: [muttering] "Fine, take your books." [He looks up, a devilish flicker appearing in his eye.] "Because I'VE GOT YOUR - "

Minerva: [sharply] "Do not grab Professor Sprout's nose, Peeves."
Minerva: "Better get that, Filch."

Argus groans, muttering something that sounds suspiciously like 'fuck my fucking life' before turning to leave, as Pomona gathers the books and levitates them out. Minerva stands, giving the Bloody Baron another nod before striding out past them, the cigar still lit between her fingers.

Lee, off screen: "What the fuck was that?"

Nick: [loudly, addressing the camera] "So, you'll include the ghosts?"

Interviewer: [uncomfortably] "Uh -"

Lee, off screen: "Fuck no!"

Interviewer: " - sure."

Nick: [pumping a translucent fist] "Victory!"

[There is a pause.]

Lee, off screen: "You absolute trash pile of scrotums."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Curiouser and curioser. Nocturnes to update tomorrow, Ride or Die shortly after.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode VII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode VII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 7.

[Scene opens as Ron and Harry head to the quidditch pitch.]

Harry: "Look, it's going to be fine. It's not as if Malfoy being a Death Eater is going to affect your quidditch performance."

Ron: "Harry, again, that's really not the issue."

Harry: "I mean, understandably you're worried about the copious amounts of evil Malfoy is probably attempting at any given moment, this one included -"

Ron: "No, that's really not it."

Harry: "Heck, you might even be worried about whether Malfoy is targeting you as his first mission, which could make for a very stressful tryout."

Ron: "I'm not, actually, because as it turns out, it's the quidditch bit I'm finding stressful."

Harry: "Oh." [pauses, confused] "Is it because Malfoy plays quidditch, and then he ended up a Death Eater?"

Ron: "Harry, I'm starting to worry you're not hearing yourself when you talk."

Harry: "Why, you think Malfoy did something to me?"

Ron: [sighs loudly] "I really, really don't."

[Nearby, Lavender giggles shrilly; Parvati backhands her shoulder and she stops, but not before Ron looks up, catching her eye. Scene cuts to Ron interview.]

Ron: "I think something's wrong with Lavender. Whenever she sees me, she laughs at my jokes. And she's sort of always looking at me in a vaguely predatory way."

Interviewer: "What do you think is wrong?"

Ron: "I don't know. Maybe she's sick?"

Interviewer: "You think she's laughing at you because she's sick?"

Ron: "That's a thing girls do, right?"

Interviewer: "Isn't one of your best friends a girl?"

Ron: "Who? Hermione?"
Interviewer: "Yes."

Ron: "Is she?"

Interviewer: "A girl?"

Ron: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Yes?"

Ron: "Do you think she knows if Lavender is sick?"

[Hermione and Harry interview.]

Hermione: [arms and legs crossed, bouncing one ankle irritably] "Oh, Lavender's sick, alright. You know who else is sick? Me. As in they, Ron and Lavender collectively, are making me sick."

Harry: [thoughtfully] "You seem upset."

Hermione: [mockingly] "Oh, do I?"

Harry: "Yes."

Hermione: "Well, I am." [She looks up, spotting someone across the pitch.] "Ugh, and it gets worse, of course."

(Camera zeroes in on Romilda Vane from afar, who is waving manically at Harry.)

Harry: "Is she waving at me?"

Hermione: "Yes."

Harry: "Do you think Malfoy told her to?"

Hermione: "No."

Harry: "So she probably has whatever Lavender has, then."

Hermione: "Yes - idiocy." [She looks directly into the camera, pursing her lips.] "It's contagious."

Harry: "Huh. Cool."

[Cormac McLaggen interview.]

Cormac: "Am I going to be on the Gryffindor team? Yes. Am I going to make sure we take the cup this year? Yes. Am I going to snog Granger's crazy hair straight? Definitely. Am I going to perfect my recipe for breakfast protein shakes? Without a doubt. Is the term 'quidbitch' finally going to catch on? Fucking hell yeah. Am I going to get a modeling contract from this show and end up famous?"

[There is a pause.]

Cormac: "No, really, I'm asking."

Interviewer: "Oh, I was confused, because I literally was just sitting here until you showed up asking rhetorical questions."
Cormac: "Well, is it a yes or no?"

Interviewer: [calling off screen] "Lee?"

Lee, off screen: "Hell to the no, fuckbiscuit!"

Interviewer: "He says no."

Cormac: "Bummer."

Interviewer: "Word."

Cormac: "Well, in any event, I've torn the sleeves off my practice jersey."

Interviewer: "Why would you - "

Cormac: [throws his broom down like a mic drop] "Quidbitch, son!"

[cuts back to quidditch pitch.]

Ron: "What's Cormac's deal?"

Cormac: [after saving a goal] "Quidbitch, son!"

Harry: "I think there's a word for him that hasn't been invented yet."

[Camera cuts to Hermione.]

Hermione: "The word is fuckboy."

[Camera cuts back to quidditch pitch.]

Harry: "Alright, Ron, I'm pretty sure Malfoy's otherwise occupied, so you should be fine."

Ron: "Thanks, I guess."

[Cormac saves four goals out of five. Ron saves all five. Camera cuts to Hermione's interview.]

Interviewer: "What did you think of Ron's tryout?"

Hermione: "I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING. I AM INNOCENT OF ALL THINGS."

Interviewer: "Okay - "

Hermione: "I HAVE NEVER LOCKED A HUMAN BEING IN A JAR - "

Interviewer: "Wh- wait, come again?"

Hermione: " - I HAVE NEVER INTERVENED IN ANY ORGANIZED SPORTING EVENTS - "

[Draco wanders into the corridor and pauses, frowning at her.]

Draco: "Granger, why on earth are you yelling?"

Hermione: " - I HAVE NEVER SLAPPED ANOTHER STUDENT - "

Draco: "Well that is just a boldfaced lie, Granger, how dare you - "
Hermione: "You didn't let me finish. I've never slapped another student who didn't fully deserve it."

Draco: *[indignantly]* "You're horrible."

Hermione: "*You're* horrible!"

Draco: "Why don't you come over here and say that to my face!"

Hermione: "*I am* saying it to your face!"

Draco: "Say it closer in my face!"

Hermione: "How close to your face do you want me?!"

Draco: "JUST LAY IT ON MY MOUTH, GRANGER!"

Lee, off screen: "Excuse me, what the fuck is this?"

Hermione: *[backing away hurriedly]* "Like I said, I definitely didn't use the *Confundus* charm on Cormac McLaggen."

Draco: "Wait, what didn't you do?!"

*[Harry appears, skidding around the corner.]*

Harry: "It's Malfoy! He's there!"

Hermione: *[sighs]* "I see him, Harry - we all see him."

Harry: "SHOW ME WHAT YOU'RE HIDING!"

Draco: *[sniffing impatiently]* "Ugh, this room is full of detestable human rubbish bins. And Granger."

*[He leaves.]*

Harry: "He's gone! Malfoy's gone!"

Hermione: "I know, Harry, we saw - "

Harry: *[somberly]* "Listen, I think Malfoy's a Death Eater."

Hermione: *[burying her face in her hands]* "This can't be my real life."

*[Cuts to Lavender interview.]*

Lavender: *[sneezes]* "Excuse me."

Ron, walking by: "I knew she was sick!"

*[Lavender giggles; Parvati slams her head into the desk.]*

Interviewer: "Is she okay?"

Lavender: "She's fine. She does this sometimes."
Interviewer: "Oh. You were saying you got a note?"

Lavender: "Oh, right. Yes. [She pulls a slip of parchment out of her pocket.] "It says 'Roses are red, violets are blue, I know you like Ron Weasley, and secrets don't make friends' - which is odd, because then it's signed 'xoxo' and if secrets don't make friends - "

Interviewer: [interrupts] "Is it signed Gossip Girl?"

Lavender: "Yes! Isn't that bizarre? At first I thought it was Parvati playing a little joke on me - "

Parvati: [her voice muffled into the desk] "Only it wasn't, because her obsession with Weasley makes me want to die."

Lavender: " - but she insists it wasn't her, so I really have no idea."

Interviewer: "Any guesses?"

Lavender: [shrugs] "I don't know - Granger, maybe? She seems nosy and bad with rhymes."

[Draco walks by.]

Draco: "What's that about Granger? That she's bad at rhymes and a revolting rosy-cheeked blossom of filth?"

Lavender: "What?"

Draco: [continues walking] "Nothing!"

[Cuts to Slug Club meeting.]

Blaise: "Guys, it's a really easy game."

Cormac: "I'll go first."

Blaise: "Sure."

Cormac: "Fuck me, marry me, murder everyone else."

Blaise: "No. [shakes head] "Not even close."

Ginny: "Who were the three again?"

Blaise: "Patil twins, Weasley twins, Creevey brothers."

Neville: "Pass."

Blaise: "Fine. Belby?"

Marcus Belby: "Fuck the Weasleys, marry the Patils, kill the Creeveys."

Blaise: "Belby's got it! Longbottom, you pick."

Neville: "Er - Venomous Tantacula, Devil's Snare, and Fanged Geranium."

[There is a pause.]

Blaise: "Oh fuck no."
Ginny: [*horrified*] "No!"

Blaise: "*So* much no."

Marcus: "How would that even - "

Neville: "I SAID PASS!"

Chapter End Notes

*a/n*: Paused to post this and then will be posting Nocturnes shortly. Happy birthday MereWhispers! This one's for you.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode VIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode VIII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 8.

[Scene opens with Draco, Blaise, and Theo interview.]

Interviewer: "So, what is the issue here?"

Blaise: "Not an issue, per se."

Theo: "It's a joke, really."

Draco: [arms crossed] "It is not a joke."

Theo: "Well, it's funny."

Blaise and Draco: [in unison] "It is not funny!"

Theo: [shrugs] "I mean, I laugh about it."

Blaise: [mutters] "You would."

Lee, off screen: "SOMEBODY EXPLAIN OR I WILL MURDER YOUR FAMILIES."

[Theo glances at the other two; they shrug, and he sighs.]

Theo: "Zabini and Malfoy here take issue with - " [he stops.] "I can't. It's too ridiculous."

Draco: "It is ridiculous! Finally, we agree!"

Lee, off screen: "SPIT IT OUT, YOU CUNTSNARFING DICKWHISTLES!"

Blaise: "Theo does a . . . thing with our mums."

Interviewer: [curiously] "What?"

Theo: [innocently] "What?"

Lee, off screen: [screechingly] "WHAT?"

Interviewer: "What sort of thing?"

Draco: [shuddering] "A terrible thing."

[Cuts to film of Draco and Theo at Malfoy Manor.]

Draco: "Mother, Theo's here."
Narcissa: "Oh, hi Theo."

Theo: "Narcissa."

[They stare at each other.]

Narcissa: [clears her throat] "I suppose you two should be going, then."

Theo: "I don't suppose you'd like to come."

Draco: "What? We're going flying, why in Salazar's name would my aristocratic mother want to go flying with her teenage son and his - "

Narcissa: [cheeks flushed] "You want me to come?"

Draco: "What? No, he doesn't - "

Theo: [smirking] "Oh, I want you to come."

Draco: "No you don't, that's - "

Narcissa: "With you?"

Draco: "Again, I really don't think - "

Theo: "With me. On me. I'm not choosy."

Draco: "OH FUCK NO."

[Cuts back to interview.]

Draco: "My mother sent him an owl today. I don't like it. I like it even less than I like Granger's horrible stupid angelface."

Theo: "I feel you're getting all worked up for nothing."

Blaise: "That's not even the half of it."

[Cuts to footage from Blaise's summer home.]

Blaise: "Mother, you remember Theo."

Esmeranda Zabini: "Oh yes, hello. Your father is a widower, is he not?"

Theo: "He is."

Esmeranda: "And wealthy?"

Theo: "Yes."

Esmeranda: "And old?"

Theo: "Quite."

Esmeranda: "Hm."

Blaise: "Oh for fuck's sake, Mother, could you not? Nothing would be worse than having Theo as a
"stepbrother."

Theo: "On the contrary."

Blaise: "Uh, what's that now?"

Theo: [to Esmeranda] "Why buy the Nimbus 2000 when there's a Firebolt to be had with twice its power?"

Blaise: "Wait."

Theo: "By which I mean, why not buy the newer model?"

Esmeranda: [thoughtfully] "How old are you again?"

Blaise: "WAIT."

Theo: "Old enough."

Esmeranda: [tilting her head, considering him as she bites her lip.] "Hmm."

Blaise: "WAIT, WAIT, WAIT - "

[Cuts back to interview.]

Blaise: "My only consolation is the knowledge that she'll eventually murder him."

Theo: "See? All in good fun."

[Cuts to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.]

Severus: "There will be both foolish wand-waving and silly incantations in this class."

Ron: "That's . . . good?"

Severus: "None of you managed to learn how to bottle fame or brew glory, and to my unrelenting disappointment, there's yet to be a fucking stopper put in death by any one of you deplorable miscreants, so now we're going to do something else entirely."

Ron: "Lovely."

Harry: "Cheery."

Ron: "Quite."

Severus: "Let us begin with non-verbal spells. Who can tell me what the advantage to a non-verbal spell is?"

[Hermione raises her hand.]

Severus: "Nobody?"

[Hermione waves her hand around, fidgeting in her seat.]

Severus: "What a fucking surprise, nobody knows the answer to the world's most straightforward question."
"Color me fucking astonished that after six years, you all remain hopeless, directionless toadstools."

Severus: "I thought this year would be different. I said to myself, go ahead. Take a chance."

Severus: "I had hope. My God. I live on it."

Anyway, you all ended up disappointing me more than, um - more than any of the other silly idiots I've ever taught."

You have no idea how many legends have walked these halls. And what's worse, you don't care. Because this place, where so many people would die to study, you only deign to study.

You want to know why I don't kiss you on the forehead and give you a gold star on your homework at the end of the day. Wake up, sweetheart!

Well, class dismissed.

"All the kids are doing it, Minnie. It's fun."

"No."
Albus: "Minnie, this is why the kids don't like you."

Minerva: "Wh- " [She cuts off, enraged.] "Do you think they like you?"

Albus: "They love me. How could they not? I always swoop in at the last second and make sure they win the house cup."

Minerva: "There are three other houses, Albus!"

Albus: "Oh, pish, Minnie, now you're just making things up."

Minerva: "You're joking. You absolute cunt-bungling piss waffle."

Albus: [ignoring her] "It's such an easy game, Minnie - here, I'll think of three - "

Minerva: "NO! Albus - "

Albus: "Armando Dippet, Phineas Nigellus Black, and Brutus Scrimgeour."

Armando, from his portrait on the wall: "Ooh, yes, good lineup."

Minerva: "Marry all of them and team up to take you down as a group and kill you with knives."

Albus: [sniffing indignantly] "This is why the kids don't like you."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Imaginary Olivie Points if you can name the movies implicated in this episode.
"Ride or Die" is currently being edited and will be posted shortly!
Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 9. Sally decided to troll me on Tumblr today with a series of MFK requests, and since I'm a bit tired and trying to finish up a chapter of *Nobility*, some of you will have read those already - but there are a few new things in the mix.

**Hermione, Pansy, Lavender**

Draco: *clears throat* "Okay, well, here's the thing - "

Theo: *sighs* "Oh no."

Blaise: "Here we go - "

Draco: "If you choose *marry*, then that would mean *unlimited* fucking, right?"

Blaise: "Assume for the purposes of the game it's a sexless marriage."

Draco: "Huh. Hypothetically, though, that still means for whoever I pick to marry I'd be able to spend every day of my life with her and her horrible, ghastly, oppressively beautiful hair that smells like gardenias and sunshine and everything I hold dear, right?"

Theo: "Uh. Yes?"

Blaise: "I think so? I sort of got lost in that - "

Draco: *interrupting* "But, on the other hand, whoever I chose to fuck, I could actually be *naked* with her revolting, wonderful, Gryffindor-flavored - "

Blaise: "Please don't finish that sentence."

Draco: *continuing loudly* "And obviously, I'd *have* to kill Granger because ew, yuck, disgusting, am I right?"

Blaise: "What are you saying?"

Draco: "I'm certainly *not* saying that I have any interest in Granger - "

Blaise: "I didn't ask what you're *not* saying - "

Draco: " - and I *certainly* didn't say that I secretly pine for her, because I don't, and my poem series *Ode to a Lioness* is about someone else completely - "

Theo: "Whatever. I'm getting cheese fries."

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*Draco, Theo, Blaise*
Hermione: "This is ridiculous! I'm not playing this game."

Harry: "I'd say marry Theo, fuck Draco, and kill Draco."

Ron: "Mate, I think there was someone in there twice."

Harry: "Was there?"

Ron: "Yes."

Hermione: *[muttering to herself]* "As if I'd be expected to have sex with any of those miscreants, honestly."

Harry: "Um, marry Draco, fuck Draco, kill Draco."

Ron: "You did it again. Only worse."

Harry: "Why, what am I saying?"

Hermione: "Honestly, this game is ridiculous, I can't believe you would even ask me something this unbelievably imbecilic - "

Harry: *[interrupting]* "Is it because I said I'd kill Draco?"

Ron: "No mate." *[He sighs.]* "That's not it."

Hermione: "FINE! I WOULD FUCK DRACO, OKAY? YOU'VE DRAGGED IT OUT OF ME WITH YOUR INCESSANT QUESTIONING!"

*[Draco pokes his head in.]*

Draco: "What the fuck are you yelling about, Granger? I can hear your disgusting heavenly siren-like voice from across the corridor!"

Ron: *[mumbling to himself]* "Fine, I'd fuck him too."

Draco: "What?"

Ron: "What?"

Luna: *[whispering]* "I knew it."

---

**Hermione, Ron, Harry**

Seamus: "Easy. Fuck Harry, marry Ron, kill Hermione."

Dean: "Just to clarify, you're still maintaining that you're not gay, right?"

Seamus: "Right. But, you know, bros before hoes."

Dean: "Yep. That applies here. Totally."

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**Flitwick, Sprout, Pomfrey**

Pansy: "Marry Sprout, fuck Pomfrey, kill Flitwick."
Daphne: "Aw, but Flitwick's so smol and cute!"

Pansy: "Don't care. He's too small. I would lose him."

Blaise: "Personally, I think I'd fuck Sprout. Maybe smoke some weird plant shit with her first."

Daphne: "But if you get hurt while fucking Pomfrey, she'll fix you!"

Blaise: [startled] "Why the fuck would I get hurt?"

Pansy: "We don't know your life, Blaise."

Blaise: [perturbed] "Do you think you'd get hurt?"

[Pansy and Daphne share a knowing glance.]

Daphne: "Lovemaking is a very passionate thing, Blaise. Sometimes there are casualties."

Luna: [whispers] "Love is murder."

---

**Narcissa, Esmeranda, Lady Greengrass**

Theo: "Yes to all of the above."

Draco: [slamming his head against the desk] "No. No. No."

Blaise: "Fucking hell, no - "

Pansy: [indignantly] "Why is my mum not included in this list?"

Theo: "Fine, add her in."

Blaise: "Narcissa, Esmeranda, and Dahlia, then."

Theo: "Fuck Esmeranda - you know, so I don't die - "

Draco: [stonily] "I will kill you."

Theo: "Marry Narcissa - "

Blaise: "HA! Draco, new stepdad!"

Draco: "I will kill you with fire."

Luna: "Fire!"

Pansy: [interrupting] "I see where this is going and I DON'T LIKE IT."

Theo: "... I'll stop there."

Pansy: [smugly] "Wise."

---

**Neville, Peeves, Flitwick**

Pansy: "I can't decide whether I should marry or fuck Peeves."
Daphne: [shocked] "Pans! Why wouldn't you kill him?"

Pansy: "What good would that do? He's already dead!"

Daphne: "That doesn't mean you should fuck him!"

Pansy: [shrugs] "Well, in any case, I'm killing Neville."

Daphne: [groaning] "And what, pray tell, is your opposition to Neville?"

Pansy: "He loses his things. How could he possibly find my clitoris?"

---

**Ode to a Lioness**

*Definitely not by Draco Malfoy*

*Definitely not about Granger*

**Free Verse #119:**

You know what's funny
I don't even like blood
It's gross
Isn't that hilarious
My life
It's in fucking ruins

**Limerick #16:**

There once was a beautiful lioness
Whose silky soft skin was the finest
She acts like a swot
It's all kinds of hot
And Theo said this rhymed with wine list.

**Free Verse #122**

If you think about it
I'm not really that bad
No really
Hear me out
I haven't killed anyone
Yet

**Haiku #10**

Hermione Granger
Why don't you fucking like me
Testes, dicks, and balls

**Sonnet #27:**

Though circumstance has forced a rift,
Between the ties that bind we;
I find myself alone, adrift,
And calling for you, shyly.
For though your hair is frizzy,
And your voice a bossy shrill,
I dreamed a dream you'd miss me,
If an Albus I should kill.
At night, I seek out solace,
Thinking of the way your shoulders stoop,
For you are oddly flawless,
Despite your books, and stupid group.
And though I live in pain and ache over your loyalty to Potter;
It sucks, I die some more each day, your Patronus is an otter.

Haiku #13:

I just want to kiss
Your stupid, stupid face mouth
Why is that a crime

Free Verse #128:

Unbearably curly hair
Unbeatable savoir faire
I want to touch you
I want to touch you
I really want to fucking touch you
I hate you
Please love me until we both die
Which regrettably for me might be quite soon
Don't dawdle

Free Verse #133:

For the actual sake of fuck
I'm at least better than Weasley
Come on
Hello
Are you looking
Do you need glasses
Granger
I'm right here

Chapter End Notes

a/n: I am so sorry. I don't know what came over me/Draco. Thanks to merewishers, goldensnitch18, and drsallysparrow for the MFK suggestions.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode X

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode X

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 10.

[Scene opens with Ron, Harry, and Hermione in the library.]

Hermione: "Look, Harry, all I'm saying is that the last time you spent too much time with a book, things did not go all that smoothly."

Ron: "You spend all your time with books!"

Hermione: [irritatedly] "Yes, Ronald, and tell me - what about my life do you think is going smoothly?"

Ron: "Fair."

Harry: "It's different this time, Hermione. I'm not talking to the book, I'm just relying on it unquestionably without any regard for the safety of myself or others."

Hermione: [sighs] "I just think that at this point we should really start catching on to things that have already happened to us. I mean, this could be Voldemort all over again - "

Harry: "He's a lord, not a prince. He can't be both, that's just absurd."

Ron: "Maybe he tried to be a prince first, but it didn't stick?"

Harry: "What does that mean?"

Ron: "Like, maybe he was like 'hey guys, call me Prince Voldemort from now on' and everyone else was like 'prince is a bit much, you should really take it down a peg' and he said 'alright, fine, how about lord, then' and everyone was like 'yes, much better, we can work with lord' - "

Hermione: [interrupting] "Have you considered that perhaps this Prince person might be a woman?"

Harry: "No."

Ron: "That literally never crossed my mind."

Hermione: [indignantly] "Women can just as easily be brilliant. And uncommonly good at potions!"

Harry: [smugly] "Not you, though."

Ron: "OH, DO YOU WANT SOME ICE, HERMIONE?"

Hermione: [is furious] "You're only doing better than me because you're cheating - "
Ron: "DO YOU NEED TO GO SEE MADAME POMFREY?"

Hermione: " - you know perfectly well that without it - "

Ron: "HERMIONE, I'M JUST WONDERING, DO YOU NEED TO GO TO THE INFIRMARY?"

Hermione: " - I would be ahead of you without question - "

Ron: "DO YOU KNOW WHY I'M ASKING, HERMIONE? DO YOU? DO YOU KNOW WHY I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT NEED A HEALER?"

Hermione: " - so the fact that you would even say that is just totally and completely - "

Ron: "IT'S BECAUSE YOU GOT BURNED."

Hermione: [looks at the camera, sighs] " - stupid."

[Camera cuts to Ginny interview.]

Ginny: "Yeah, I've heard about Harry's potions book."

Interviewer: "You have?"

Ginny: "Yeah. I mean, I'm sort of the 'cool girl' around here, so people tell me things."

Interviewer: "And? Any thoughts?"

Ginny: "Well, it's not really the same as what happened to me." [She pauses, thinking.] "Plus, Tom Riddle's diary wasn't a total waste."

Interviewer: "How so?"

Ginny: "I learned a lot, actually. Like, for example, he showed me a variation on my bat-bogey hex that makes the bats glow in the dark. And he taught me how to cut a sopophorous bean, and helped me with levitation." [She pauses, brightening as though she has remembered something.] Oh, and I know how to make a horcrux."

Interviewer: "A what?"

Ginny: "Horcrux. It's when you split your soul after murdering someone, and then you hide it in an object so that you can never die."

Interviewer: [startled] "What?"

Ginny: "Oh I mean just to be clear I haven't actually done it. I probably won't."

Interviewer: "Did you say you 'probably' won't?"

Ginny: "I'm pretty sure I won't."

Interviewer: "Pretty sure?"

Ginny: "Fairly sure."

Interviewer: "Fairly sure?"

Ginny: "Like 75% sure."
Interviewer: "75%?"

Ginny: "Eh, 51%.

Interviewer: "I really feel like it should be higher than that."

Ginny: [shrugs] "I'll let you know what I decide."

[Camera cuts to follow Harry as he walks down the corridor.]

Harry: "Yeah, I'm meeting with Dumbledore tonight. Not really sure why, yet, but - " [he stops short, seeing Sybil Trelawney approach.] "Hide!"

[The camera jostles as Harry hides behind a statue. From the other side, Sybil is doing a card reading for herself.]

Sybil: "Seven of spades: an ill omen. Ten of spades: violence. Knave of spades: a dark young man, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner and is mostly straight although casually questions sexuality approximately twice a day, right before breakfast and again in the shower but it's normal, it happens to everyone - one who is using mysterious potions book to cheat in advanced potions class and will drop out of school eventually, deeply obsessed with Draco Malfoy, who is definitely a Death Eater - "[She stops.] "Well, that can't be right."

[She shuffles her cards and walks away. Meanwhile, Harry comically wipes sweat off his brow and gestures for the camera to follow as he gives the password ("Acid Pops") and enters Albus' office.]

Harry: "Good evening, sir."

Albus: "Ah, Harry! I bet you're wondering what these 'lessons' are about, eh?"

Harry: [with tentative eagerness] "Yes, sir."

Albus: "Well, I've decided to finally tell you the truth about what happened that prompted Lord Voldemort to try to kill you fifteen years ago."

Harry: [excitedly] "You have?"

Albus: "I have!"

Harry: [squealing] "Really?"

Albus: "Really!"

Harry: "You really mean it?"

Albus: "Yes!"

[They clasp hands and dance around the office, unable to contain their shared joy. When they finally sit down, spent and out of breath from sheer jubilation, Harry is grinning.]

Harry: "So, tell me everything!"

Albus: "What?" [He blinks.] "Oh, no, sorry, I lied before."

Harry: [shocked] "What?"
Albus: "Yeah, no, I don't actually tell anyone anything. Are you new here?"

Harry: [sulkily] "Balls."

Albus: "Really, though, can you imagine? If I just told people the truth about things and didn't frame an innocent man for my murder? God, how primitive."

Harry: "Wait, what?"

Albus: "Nothing, nothing - listen, the evidence clearly shows that Sirius Black obliterated Peter Pettigrew until nothing was left of him but a finger, and while I know perfectly well that he had no reasonable motivation to do so whatsoever, I really don't think we need to dwell on it. Azkaban it is."

Harry: "Wait, what?"

Albus: "Oh, sorry, no - that was another thing I did." [Stops, thinking.] "Which one is this, again?"

Harry: "Er -" [He pauses.] "I think you were preparing to mislead me about the circumstances of my death?"

Albus: [tapping his nose] "Ah, right, silly me! Forget I said anything."

Harry: [dreamily] "I'm doing to name my son after you."

[Cuts to interview with Luna.]

Luna: "What's my favorite class? Probably Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Interviewer: "Are you just saying that because he's sitting right there?"

[Camera zooms out to reveal Severus on her right.]

Luna: [shrugs] "Oh, he's not listening."

Severus: [licks his finger and then turns the page of the Daily Prophet.] "I'm really not."

Interviewer: "Er, okay. Why, then?"

Luna: "I think it's funny. All the made up stuff. Hilarious."

[Severus puts the paper down slowly and looks up.]

Severus: "What made up stuff?"

Luna: "Dark magic. Evil. That stuff."

Severus: "You think that's made up?"

Luna: [nods] "Frankly, it seems pretty far-fetched."

Severus: [blinking] "How so?"

Luna: "Well, you tell me what sounds more real: a mischievous thieving creature that infests mistletoe - which is a notably unsanitary plant - or mysterious hooded soul-suckers whose only job is to suck souls?"
Severus: [tilts head, thinking.] "Premise accepted."

Luna: [primly] "Postulation?"

Severus: "Pending."

[They wait.]

Luna: "Conclusion?"

Severus: [lifts a finger] "Hold, please."

[They wait again. Three minutes pass.]

Severus: [firmly] "Conclusion accepted."

Luna: [victoriously] "I knew it."

Lee, off screen: "Ugh, get the two dummies out here, would you?"

[Camera cuts to Seamus and Dean interview.]

Dean: "I'm just saying, I don't see why we don't have quidditch cheerleaders."

Seamus: "What are cheerleaders?"

Dean: "Girls who wear short skirts and dance enthusiastically for the benefit of the crowd."

Seamus: [making a face] "Who would want that?"

Lee, off screen: "Ah, yes. Much better."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Forgot to mention that the movies in Episode VIII were The Devil Wears Prada and Now You See Me. I don't think anyone got both, oddly! I'll have to check again.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XI

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode XI

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 11. (Being posted late)

[Scene opens on the camera in the Headmaster's office as Minerva bursts in, catching Harry and Albus standing around the desk with their faces inside the pensieve. They are both bent awkwardly at the waist and reminiscent of ostriches with their heads buried in the sand. Upon seeing her, Fawkes squawks his entertainment and gestures with a wing, as if to say 'and to think these are your world's heroes, you puny, rotten mortals.']

Minerva: [groaning] "What the fuck is this?"

Phineas, from his portrait on the wall: [sniffing] "You couldn't possibly understand the complexities involved in this, you woman."

Minerva: "He's showing Potter memories from Tom Riddle's past, is he?"

Phineas: [pauses, and then lifts his chin.] "I don't know. Maybe."

Minerva: "I have to assume he is going to show the memories one by one and not explain anything at all, isn't he?"

Phineas: "Nobody asked you!"

Minerva: "I was there too, you know. Sort of. Tom Riddle was Head Boy the year before I started at Hogwarts so I heard all about him, and I was there when Albus fussed over him coming back."

Phineas: "So? This is boring. You bore me."

Minerva: "Is it so out of the realm of possibility that I might have made this connection?"

Phineas: [jolts upright] " - what? Sorry, I fell asleep - "

Minerva: "He basically looked the same, you know. Riddle. The whole noseless thing was a more recent development."

Phineas: "Is this a night terror? It must be, because you obviously lulled me to sleep and now you're so VICIOUSLY DULL - "

Minerva: "I mean, he expects Potter to understand, right? And Potter is only a child. I'm an adult." [She straightens, indignant.] "Quite an accomplished one, too!"

Phineas: "Have I died again? Is this death? Is this what it feels like to die of boredom?"

Minerva: "It hardly seems fair that he wouldn't just explain what he needs done, you know. I'd have helped - I'm not completely useless - "
Phineas: "I MUST BE A GHOST, THEN - "
Minerva: [looks up at him witheringly] "Oh, for all of the fucks - "
Phineas: [swooning] " - FAREWELL, SWEET WORLD - "
Minerva: " - I hardly think it's necessary to - "
Phineas: [wailing loudly] " - RIP ME - "

[Scene cuts to Ron and Hermione interview.]
Ron: " . . . so, anyway, I guess I'm just asking because some people were saying that maybe you tampered with my quidditch tryout."

Hermione: [nervously sweating] "That's ridiculous. Don't be absurd."
Ron: "Okay, but if you could just say, directly - that you had nothing to do with it, I mean - I would really sleep better at night."

Hermione: [conjures a towel and wipes her forehead, babbling] "I've already said it, Ron, I don't know how I could be more direct - "
Ron: "I feel like you haven't, though, if I'm being honest."

Hermione: [wrings out towel onto the floor, tucks it beneath her armpits] " - really, it's like you don't trust me at all, almost like you're accusing me of something - "
Ron: "I am accusing you, see? And the thing is, you're supposed to deny it - "

Hermione: [wringing out her sopping wet hair] "Me? In denial? Never, I'm never in denial - "
Draco, walking by: "Granger, fucking bollocks, what on earth has Weasley done to your disgusting sun-kissed skin? You look like you're drowning in a lake of your own putrid, heaven-sent perspiration - "
Hermione: [jolts upright] "GO AWAY MALFOY, I HATE YOU!"
Draco: "PROVE IT, WHY DON'T YOU!"
Ron: "How the bloody hell is she supposed to prove it?"
Draco: "I don't know, I haven't thought it through."

Hermione: [stalking towards him] "GET OUT OF HERE YOU TWITCHY FERRET, I AM BUSY - "
Draco: [gritting his teeth, indignant] "OH, YOU HAVE CROSSED A LINE - "
Hermione: "PROVE IT, MALFOY, YOU NASTY LITTLE - "
Ron: [scoffing skeptically] "Well that's just silly, Hermione, I mean really, how is he supposed to prove that?"

[Both parties ignore him.]
Draco: "SCARED, GRANGER?"
Hermione: "YOU WISH, MALFOY!"

[Ron's furrowed brow suddenly relaxes, as though he has realized something.]
Ron: "Oh. This is a sex thing, isn't it?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna on his other side.]
Luna: "Yes, I think so."
Ron: "Should I intervene?"
Luna: "No, let's let it play out." [She hands him popcorn.] "Want some?"
Ron: "Sure, thanks." [He takes a handful, gesturing to Hermione and Draco.] "Stupid, isn't it?"

[They observe as the argument continues.]
Draco: "- GRANGER, IF I'VE TOLD YOU ONCE, I'VE TOLD YOU A THOUSAND TIMES -"
Hermione: "- I CAN'T HEAR YOU, MALFOY, OVER THE FOGHORN OF FUCKERY THAT IS YOUR HORRIBLE, FILTHY MOUTH -"
Draco: "WHAT ARE YOU SAYING ABOUT MY MOUTH? ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT IT?"
Hermione: [startled] "Why, are you?"
Draco: [equally startled] "I, um - I don't know -"
Hermione: "WELL, SCAMPER THE FUCK OFF, THEN!"
Draco: "HOW FUCKING DARE YOU -"

[Luna watches, fascinated, as Ron reaches for more popcorn.]
Luna: "I wonder what it would be like to be written as having sexual chemistry with someone."
Ron: [tosses popcorn into his mouth, shrugging] "Same."

[Camera cuts to Theo interview.]
Theo: "Yeah, so, I got one of those Gossip Girl notes today."
Interviewer: "You did? What did it say?"
Theo: "It said 'I know about your correspondence with a certain Lady Malfoy - or should I call her Mrs. Robinson? Here's to you, then, Theo Nott,' and then -"
Interviewer: "Inappropriately timed hugs and kisses?"
Theo: "Yes." [He shifts uncomfortably.] "And it's odd, isn't it? Her name isn't Mrs. Robinson and Gossip Girl obviously knows that, since she said her name -"
Interviewer: "Does it worry you?"
Theo: *flatly* "Well, it doesn't thrill me."

Interviewer: "So, who do you think it is?"

Theo: *shrugs* "I don't know. Maybe it's Granger." *He pauses, thinking.* "Has anyone outside of Slytherin gotten a note?"

Interviewer: "Yes. A Gryffindor."

Theo: "Hmm. Maybe it's not, then." *He tilts his head.* "Maybe it's not even a girl."

Interviewer: "I suppose that's possible."

*There is a pause, then Theo brightens.*

Theo: "God, I hope it's Potter."

Interviewer: "Why?"

Theo: "Are you kidding?" *He laughs.* "What would be more entertaining than seeing Potter confirm for Draco that I'm fucking his mother?"

Interviewer: *shocked* "Wait, are you?"

Theo: *shrugs, then smiles.* "I'm not telling." *He sits back in his chair, smiling.* "XOXO."

*Camera cuts to a meeting of the Slug Club.*

Cormac: *upon entering the room* "Okay, so who is going to be the first to mention how good I look?"

Ginny: *rolling her eyes* "Come on, man - "

Cormac: "Me, guys, it's me. I'll say it. I look good."

Blaise: *shrugging* "I mean . . . he's not wrong."

Horace: *chuckling* "I have great taste." *He takes a sip of whisky.* "I mean really, Tom Riddle and now these guys? Horace, you beautiful bastard, you've done it again."

Ginny: "I'm surprised you're not going to take issue with him, Blaise. Aren't you sort of the 'look how good I look' type?"

Blaise: *eyes her closely* "Why, are you looking?"

Ginny: *takes a sip of pumpkin juice, swallows, and then smiles, licking her lips.* "Maybe."

Cormac: "I'm looking. I don't see anything special."

Blaise: *stands up* "You busy, Weaslette?"

Ginny: *also stands* "Not particularly."

Cormac: "Yes she is, she was just telling me how good I look." *He rolls his eyes.* "God, it's like nobody's even paying attention."

*Blaise and Ginny slip into the potions storage closet. Shortly thereafter, there is a series of loud*
noises, as though things are being tossed around and broken.]

Cormac: "I wonder where they've gone."

Marcus: "Do you, though?"

[There is an audible bang against the wall, as though someone has been shoved against it.]

Cormac: "Yeah, I mean, normally people are really interested in talking to me."

Marcus: "Are they?"

[The banging grows louder and more suspiciously rhythmic.]

Cormac: [thoughtfully] "He's probably helping her find the words to describe her attraction to me."

Marcus: "He's definitely helping her find something."

[A feminine sounding whimper is heard.]

Marcus: "I think he found it."

Cormac: "Why? I don't hear any sonnets."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Sorry this one is late, I fell asleep early last night - daily postings are sort of a bitch, aren't they? Anyway, today's episode is coming later tonight. To life!
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 12.

[Scene opens with Hermione and Harry interview.]

Harry: [to Hermione] "Listen, you're going to have to get over this whole potions thing."

Hermione: "It's not just the class, or the cheating! It's the entire concept of the book. Didn't you use one of the spells from it on Ron?"

Harry: "Yes. And as you know, he's fine."

Lavender, walking by: "Yeah he is!" [She giggles.]

Parvati, also walking by: "No. No. Bad Lavender."

[She uses her wand to spritz Lavender with water. Lavender shrieks and runs away, pawing at her face and Parvati sighs, looking pleased with herself.]

Harry: "What was that?"

Parvati: "It's called aversion therapy."

Hermione: "No it's not. It's how Muggles train dogs."

Parvati: [shrugs] "Whatever. Same thing."

[She walks away. Hermione sighs, turning back to Harry.]

Hermione: "Why would you even use the spell if you didn't know what it did?"

Harry: "To find out what it did, obviously!"

Hermione: [insistently] "What if it had been dangerous?"

Harry: "Hermione - " [he groans] "it's like you're not even hearing me. I told you, it wasn't dangerous. Ron's fine."

Hermione: "Well why did you use it on him?"

Harry: "I wasn't going to use it on myself, can you imagine? 'Chosen One murdered by unknown spell from unnamed deviant's potions textbook' - "

Hermione: "AHA!" [triumphantly] "So you admit it was a ridiculous thing to do!"

Harry: "I ADMIT NOTHING."
Ron: [smugly] "Yeah, it's sort of understood around here that the athletes get treated a little better by the professors, so I'm looking forward to seeing how that plays out."

Ginny: "I think you mean the good athletes get treated better."

Minerva: "Alright, let's see what you've done, Miss Granger?"

Hermione: "My assignment was to practice human transfiguration by using Crinus Muto to turn my eyebrows purple."

Minerva: "Well done, Miss Granger - a bit unsteady at first go, but overall, quite remarkable! Take 10 points for Gryffindor. [She gestures to Ron.] "Mr Weasley?"

Ron: "My assignment was to also use Crinus Moto to turn my hair chartreuse - which, by the way, was a color I had to look up."

Hermione: "By that you mean you asked me."

Ron: "Well I looked up, didn't I?"

Minerva: "Well?"

Minerva: "Ah - not quite, Mr Weasley, although the mustache is at least the right color. [She sniffs] "Though, I must say, not an advisable look for you. Two points to Gryffindor for a solid effort." [She looks around.] "Ah, Mr Potter - all set with the quidditch tryouts, are we?"

Harry: "Yes, Professor."

Minerva: "The team in good shape, is it?"

Harry: "Definitely, Professor."

Minerva: "You're able to balance your schoolwork with the team's practice schedule?"

Harry: "Yes."

Minerva: "Excellent. [She gestures for him to begin.] "What have you got for us, Mr Potter?"

Harry: "My assignment was to transfigure your hopes and dreams for another house cup into an inevitable reality."
Minerva: [prompting him] "By doing what?"

Harry: "By winning every game."

Hermione: [startled] "Wait, what?"

Minerva: [ignoring her] "Please be specific with regard to the assignment, Mr Potter; as you well know, vagueness will not be tolerated in this class."

Harry: [sighs] "By ungluing my head from my sphincter, abandoning all efforts at twattery, and winning every single motherfucking game, so help me, Potter, or I will use every means at my disposal to feast breathlessly upon your entrails - "

Minerva: [cutting him off] "That's enough. And?"

Ron: [interrupting] "Wait, are you fucking serious? That's his assignment? I gave myself a bloody mustache for you, Professor - "

Seamus: "I did too, Ron, and nearly blew off my nose in the process, too - "

Ron: "You didn't do that as part of the assignment! You're not even in this class!"

Seamus: [laughs] "I know, right?" [He strokes his mustache] "Doesn't change the fact that I look rather fetching."

Ron: "Oh for fuck's - " [He looks around, furious.] "Where's Dean?"

[Dean runs in, panting.]

Dean: "Sorry, sorry, so sorry - he got loose again - "

[Dean grabs Seamus' arm and drags him out of the classroom. Minerva, who has ignored this entire exchange, addresses Harry.]

Minerva: "Well, Potter? How is your assignment going?"

Hermione: [looking disgusted and appalled] "Professor, you can't honestly mean that - "

Minerva: "Hush, Miss Granger, I'm waiting for an answer from Potter." [She looks at him expectantly.] "Well?"

Harry: [shrugs] "It's going well so far."

Minerva: "Excellent. One hundred points to Gryffindor for outstanding dedication."

Harry: [nodding] "I deserve that."

Minerva: "I know this, and I love you."

Hermione: "Professor!"

Minerva: "Miss Granger, unless you're going to catch a snitch right now and win me a house cup today, I suggest you sit down!"

Harry: [whispering gleefully] "The Chosen One strikes again."

Hermione: "What?"
Minerva: "What?"

Harry: "I mean - ouch, my scar!" [collapses]

[R cuts back to Ron and Ginny interview.]

Ron: "Fine, so maybe Harry's whole deal doesn't apply to me."

Interviewer: "Do you think all the teachers have favorites?"

[R Ron and Ginny exchange a look.]

Ginny: "Some do."

[Scene cuts to Defense Against the Dark Arts.]

Severus: "Potter, what is an Inferius?"

Harry: "Er - "

Severus: "WRONG, A THOUSAND POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR."

Harry: "But - "

Severus: "Weasley, what is a Dementor's purpose in life?"

Ron: "What the fuck?"

Severus: "TWO THOUSAND POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR!"

Hermione: "Professor Snape, I really don't think this is - "

Severus: "Granger, what is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?"

Hermione: "Er - it's lilac, but sir - "

Severus: "TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND POINTS - "

Hermione: [frantically distressed] "But I got it right!"

Severus: "Yes. And you deserve to be punished for reserving any space in your brain for that worthless, peacocking twat cannon."

Hermione: [hangs her head] "You're right. I accept that."

Severus: "Malfoy!"

Draco: "Yes, sir?"

[The class leans in, waiting, as Severus considers the question.]

Severus: "Are you comfortable?"

Draco: [shrugs] "It's a little drafty, if I'm being honest."

Severus: [waves his wand to adjust the temperature] "How about now?"
Draco: "Better."

Severus: "How are you doing? Everything okay?"

Draco: "I mean, it's fine."

Hermione: [raising a hand] "Um, excuse me - "

Severus: "Hush, Miss Granger, I'm teaching."

Harry: [huffily shocked] "Wait, this is supposed to be you teaching?"

Severus: "POTTER, YOU TRASHBAG - " [He calms down, then faces Draco.] "Fine. Mr Malfoy - " [he pauses, thinking of a question.] "Veela, dementor, mermaid."

Ron: "Oh my god."

Harry: "This - no." [He shakes his head.] This isn't happening."

Draco: "Marry the mermaid, fuck the veela, kill the dementor."

Hermione: [looking furious as she mutters to herself] " - don't know why he'd want to marry a mermaid anyway, it would only lure him to his death - the stupid, pointy blond monstrosity - "

Severus: "ONE MILLION POINTS TO SLYTHERIN, class dismissed."

[Camera cuts back to Ron and Ginny.]

Ron: "What were we saying?"

Ginny: "I don't know but this school is fucked."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Back on track. If you consider this to have any sort of track. Which you shouldn't.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XIII


[Scene opens with Dean and Seamus.]

Dean: "Well, so, a thing happened today."

Interviewer: "What thing?"

[Camera is jostled as Harry places his face directly in front of the lens, his glasses askew and his eyes wild.]

Harry: "MALFOY IS A DEATH EATER!"

[Seamus peeks his head out from behind Harry, pointing to him.]

Seamus: "This is part of the thing."

Dean: "A major part."

[Hermione and Ron appear, both out of breath as though they have been chasing Harry around the castle.]

Hermione: "Harry -" [She stops, holding a finger for pause as she catches her breath, and then gulps.] "McGonagall already told you -"

Harry: "WHY HAS NOBODY CALLED AZKABAN? WE HAVE PROOF!"

Ron: "Mate, McGonagall already said he was in detention -"

Harry: "PROOF! UNDENIABLE PROOF!"

Hermione: "Harry, for heaven's sake, be reasonable -"

Harry: "THE WRIST THING!"

Ron: "Yes, and Knockt-"

Harry: "KNOCKTURN ALLEY!"

Hermione: "Oh, for the love of -" [She reaches out, taking Harry's arm.] "Ronald, grab his other side, would you?"

[Together they muscle Harry out of the shot with great difficulty. He is heard to be yelling "the wrist thing, though" as they drag him away.]

Dean: "Well, that was fun."
Seamus: [nods] "It was, actually. I always like seeing Potter come unhinged."

Interviewer: "Does that happen often?"

Seamus: [shrugs] "More than you'd think."

[Refs to old footage.]

Harry: "I AM BEING FOLLOWED BY THE GRIM!"

Hermione: "Harry, there's no such thing as -"

Harry: "I'VE BEEN MARKED FOR DEATH!"

Ron: "I really don't think you should -"

Harry: "SCARY BLACK DOG IN MY TEA -"

Hermione: "This all seems a little far-fetched -"

Harry: "- GOODBYE SWEET WORLD -"

[Refs to more old footage.]

Harry: "SNAPE IS TRYING TO STEAL THE STONE!"

Hermione: "He's a teacher, Harry, I don't think he's -"

Harry: "HIS LEG! ALL CHEWED UP! THE TROLL!"

Ron: "I mean, I guess you could -"

Harry: "PROOF! UNDENIABLE PROOF!"

[Refs to more old footage.]

Harry: "VOLDEMORT IS BACK! HE'S ALIVE!"

Hermione: "Okay, this one is real."

Harry: "FUCK YEAH!"

[Refs back to Seamus and Dean interview.]

Seamus: "It's been known to happen every now and then."

Interviewer: "Interesting. So what happened today?"

Dean: "Er, I guess someone gave Katie Bell a cursed necklace to give to Professor Dumbledore."

[Harry's voice is heard echoing through the corridor: "SOMEONE NAMED DRACO MALFOY,” followed by Hermione shushing him.]

Interviewer: "Any idea who it was?"

[Ron is heard to bellow "DON'T - YOU - SAY - IT" just before there is a loud, muffled clanging sound, as though someone has been tackled.]
Seamus: "No. But maybe Gossip Girl does, since she seems to bloody know everything." [He huffs angrily, crossing his arms irritably over his chest.]

Interviewer: "Oh, have you two heard from Gossip Girl as well?"

Dean: "Yes. Seamus has."

Interviewer: "What did she say?"

Seamus: [sulkily] "Something stupid."

Dean: [gently, placing a hand on his shoulder] "Look, you're going to need to - "

Seamus: "I said it's stupid, okay? End of discussion."

Dean: "I just think you'll feel better if you - "

Seamus: "If I what? Let the rest of the world in on my depraved little secret?"

Dean: "It's not depraved, Seamus, come on - "

Seamus: "Yes, it is. It's disgusting."

Dean: "Oh, come on."

Seamus: "You come on."

Dean: "Just say it. It's really not that bad."

Seamus: "It's fucking abhorrent."

Dean: "It's part of who you are, Seamus. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Interviewer: [interrupts kindly] "For what it's worth, Seamus, I agree with Dean."

Seamus: [irritatedly] "Well you would, wouldn't you? You have no idea what it's like to have to hide something like this."

Interviewer: "True, I can only imagine - "

Seamus: "I mean, I'm bloody Irish. Can you imagine if people found out I was secretly a Bulgaria fan?"

[There is a pause.]

Interviewer: "Oh."

Dean: "Yeah, I know - "

Lee, off screen: [loudly] "I really thought this was going somewhere different and now I'M UPSET."

Dean: " - it's really devastating stuff."

Seamus: [indignantly] "It is devastating! The note just said "I know what you're into" and then it just had a picture of Krum - "
Lee, off screen: "Oh, wait -"

Seamus: [continuing] "- and how could Gossip Girl have known that was the team I secretly pine for?"

Lee, off screen: "- yep, I feel better. GOOD."

Seamus: "I mean, I hide it so well."

Interviewer: "Yes. So, so well."

Dean: [to Seamus] "I'm just wondering, did you ever consider that maybe the note might have been referring to something other than your quidditch preferences?"

[Seamus pauses, thinking. Dean and the interviewer both lean forward, waiting.]

Seamus: "Are you trying to say that . . ."

[They wait.]

Seamus: "... Viktor Krum is gay?"

Lee, off screen: "Oh my god, this horrible twatbroiler."

[Scene cuts to the professors who are gathered in the Headmaster's office.]

Minerva: "As many of you have no doubt heard, an attempt has been made on Albus' life today."

Albus: [sniffs] "A weak attempt."

Minerva: "Miss Katie Bell was trying to deliver a cursed necklace -"

Albus: "Which was fug, by the way. Even if it hadn't been cursed I wouldn't have touched it. I would have been made a total laughingstock. [He glances at Filius.] "No offense."

Filius: "Wait, what? Why would I -"

Albus: "Well you always wear that horrible necklace, Filius, so I didn't want you to be insulted."

Filius: [confused] "This is a bow tie."

Albus: "Look, I said no offense, can you just drop it?"

Minerva: [loudly] "Anyway, Albus, now that we know that your life is in danger -"

Albus: "Is not. I'm invincible."

Minerva: [ignoring him] "- perhaps we should discuss some extra security, or maybe Potter is right, I should look into Mr Malfoy, seeing as it's quite unusual that he hasn't turned in two assignments in a row and he is starting to look a bit like he is melting -"

Albus: "No, he's fine."

Minerva: "But Albus, he's -"

Albus: "He's fine."
Minerva: "But I still think we should -"

Albus: "HE'S FINE."

Severus: "He's not fine and neither am I, if anyone's keeping score."

Albus: "OH MY GOD SEVERUS CAN YOU STOP WITH YOUR HILARIOUS JOKES? THANKS."

Minerva: "Albus, I really think we should -"

Albus: [interrupts] "Whoa do you guys feel that?"

Minerva: "Feel what?"

Albus: [shivers] "It's so cold in here."

Minerva: "What? Albus, I'm fine -"

Albus: [chatters teeth dramatically] "It's freezing. It's chilling."

Severus: "Oh, I see where this is going."

Minerva: [raising a hand to her temple] "Fuck me, so do I."

Albus: "God, why is it so fucking cold in here? Is it because -"

Severus: "Because she's a dementor?"

Minerva: [sighs resignedly] "It's definitely because I'm a dementor."

Albus: " - BECAUSE YOU'RE SUCKING THE SOUL OUT OF ME -"

Severus: "Ooh, embellishment."

Albus: " - BECAUSE YOU'RE A SOUL-SUCKING DEMENTOR, MINNIE!"

Minerva: "I swear to Godric, this cuntackular piece of -"

Albus: [bellowing] "Pomfrey! WHERE'S POMFREY? Because -"

Severus: "Because she needs a healer for that burn?"

Albus: [gleefully] "BECAUSE YA BURNT, BITCH!"

Minerva: "Let's just let him die."

Severus: "Please try to remember that you said that."

Minerva: "What?"

Severus: "What?"

Albus: "DUMBLES OUT."

[He disapparates. Horace applauds, and Minerva glares at him.]
Horace: "What? The man's got style."

Minerva: [frustrated] "I am going to burn this place to the ground."

Luna: [whispering] "Do it."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: HAPPY BIRTHDAY UNICORNSHENANIGANS! My goddess among shenanigans, haiku poet extraordinaire, blessed light of humor and wisdom upon my countenance. Tomorrow's Ride or Die is yours as well. HEARTS ABOUND!

And happy belated to AnnaOxford! *throws flowers*
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XIV

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode XIV


[Scene opens with Pansy and Daphne interview.]

Interviewer: "Isn't there a quidditch game today?"

Pansy: "Ugh, yes." [She rolls her eyes.] "Whatever."

Daphne: "We're not really into quidditch."

Pansy: "It's just a bunch of boys running around trying to prove their broomstick is bigger." [She glances up, smirking.] "In case it was unclear, that's a euphemism for their - "

Interviewer: "I've got it, I think - "

Daphne: "Their dicks. She means their dicks."

Interviewer: "Yeah . . . again, I got it."

Daphne: [sniffs] "Well, I'm nothing if not thorough."

Pansy: "She really is." [She luxuriates in a purposeful pause.] "And that's innuendo."

Interviewer: [irritably] "Please don't do this."

Pansy: "Fine. Continue, then."

Interviewer: "Thank y- "

Daphne: [interrupts] "But you should know I'm very good."

Pansy: "She is."

Interviewer: [sighs, changing the subject] "What's your logic about the girls who play quidditch, then?"

Daphne: [shrugs] "Dunno. Maybe they just like having something between their legs."

Pansy: "Yeah - which is fine, of course. We don't judge."

Interviewer: "You definitely do judge, actually - "

Pansy: [aggressively] "Listen, shitbag - "

Daphne: "Pans. Be nice."
Pansy: "Whatever."

Interviewer: *stiffly* "Okay. So you're not into sports."

Pansy: "No, we're not. We *are*, however, super into watching Potter drug Weasley - "

Daphne: "Which is totally a thing that happened today."

Interviewer: *startled* "He drugged him?"

Pansy: "Not really. I mean, *probably* not. It's not allowed. I know the rules are different when you're the Chosen One - "

Daphne: "Or so history indicates."

Pansy: "And so Draco *consistently* reminds us - "

Daphne: "As if we need reminding or whatever. Like we haven't also gone to this school with him for the last six years."

Pansy: "Like, I was here too, Draco. I remember losing the house cup *too* - "

Daphne: "Yeah, and I remember that it was utter fucking bullshit, okay?*" [She pauses, growling to herself.] "They weren't even close - "

Pansy: "Let's not get into this again."

Daphne: *sympathetically* "Aw, maybe a little better than *that*."

Pansy: "A monkey on stilts, then."

Daphne: "Maybe no stilts."

Pansy: "Just a monkey?"

Daphne: "They're actually *very* coordinated, from what I'm given to understand."

Pansy: "So what do you suggest, then?"

Daphne: "Hm. *She pauses.* "A lightly concussed owl."

Pansy: "Fuck, you're poetic."

Interviewer: *clears throat* "Anyway . . ."

Daphne: "Yeah, so, Weasley was nervous - "

Pansy: "And Potter won the Felix Felicis - you know, big surprise there - "

Daphne: "So he either made a show of using it, or made a show of *pretending* to use it - "
Pansy: "Either way, Weasley is a fucking fool -"

Daphne: "Or so we assume, anyway, since the game is about to start and he looked quite pleased with himself."

Pansy: "About as pleased as a monkey on stilts."

Daphne: [thoughtfully] "You know, in that context, it really works."

Interviewer: "Why aren't you guys there? Do you really dislike quidditch that much?"

Daphne: "Yes."

Pansy: "But you know what we do like?"

Interviewer: "I'm afraid to ask."

Pansy: [smugly] "Good. You should be."

[Camera cuts to Gryffindor team interview.]

Ginny: "Really, we're all very excited, especially since it's been a rather lucky start to the day."

Harry: "LUCKY? OR FISHY?"

Ginny: "Firstly, Malfoy's not playing - he's out sick or something, which is great news for us -"

Harry: "OR IS HE JUST A DEATH EATER?"

Ginny: "And Harry's done something to Ron -"

[Hermione barges in, fuming.]

Hermione: "I tell you what, Harry Potter, you have gone way off the rails - dosing Ron with Felix Felicis just to win at a stupid game -"

Ginny: "Er, Hermione, I'm kind of -"

Hermione: [shouting at Harry] "IT'S CHEATING, HARRY! IT'S UNCONSCIONABLE!"

Harry: [shouting back] "MALFOY IS A DEATH EATER!"

Hermione: "I FEEL LIKE WE KEEP HAVING THE SAME CONVERSATION OVER AND OVER AGAIN!"

[She storms out.]

Ginny: [tentatively] "Okay, and, uh - the weather's good, I guess."

Harry: "IT WOULD BE A BEAUTIFUL DAY TO STALK MALFOY IF NOT FOR THESE SILLY, CHILDISH GAMES -"

[Minerva storms in.]

Minerva: "Potter, what the fuck did I just hear you say about this game?"

Harry: [sheepishly] "Er, sorry Professor, I just -"
Minerva: "Do you understand how shitty my life is, Potter? How little I have to live for?"

Harry: "I, um - "

Minerva: "Do you think this was my dream, Potter? To babysit a cryptic, bearded lunatic in a state of oppressive spinsterhood?"

Harry: "No?"

Minerva: "I don't get laid, Potter! I don't get fucked at all, unless you count Albus and his horrible schemes - "

Harry: "Whoa, Professor, I was just - "

Minerva: "You think I don't miss the feel of a swollen, turgid cock between my thighs, Potter? You think I don't need to feel a man's hot breath ghosting across the aching flesh of my - "

Luna: "Core? Juncture of your thighs? Inner lips? Honeypot?"

Severus: "Cunt." [He licks a finger, turning the page of his Daily Prophet.] "The word she's looking for is cunt."

Ginny: "Oh my god - when did you two even get here?"

Minerva: "Thank you, Severus."

Severus: "Welcome."

Minerva: [refocusing] "Anyway, Potter - "

Harry: "Oh no."

Minerva: "Seeing as I haven't had an orgasm since well before you waltzed into this godforsaken school - "

Harry: [cringing apologetically] "I'm sorry? I don't know. I just - " [He flails momentarily.] "I really don't know."

Minerva: [trumpeting conclusively] " - you can at least win me a motherfucking House Cup!"

Harry: [resignedly] "Okay."

[Camera cuts to the footage of the first floor girls' lavatory.]

Draco: "I just - I can't play quidditch right now, I'm - I'm very upset."

Myrtle: [crooning] "But why?"

Draco: "Because I almost killed someone, that's fucking why!" [He looks up, fiddling with his quill.] "But anyway, ignore that - how does this sound? I've seen her eyes a thousand times, and still I see perfection; her hair is like nest for owls, and yet, behold, my erecti- "

[Hermione storms in, talking to herself and pacing.]

Hermione: "How dare he? It's like he has absolutely no regard for the rules at all, and what an absolute rubbish reason to waste such a rare potion on such a ridiculous, unimportant - "
Draco: [stands up] "Granger, is that your horrible screeching angel-voice I hear?"

Hermione: "Malfoy? [She is furious.] "Can't I get one fucking moment of peace around here?"

Draco: [outraged] "Fucking excuse me you delicate, sugar-spun atrocity but I was here first, it's my moment of peace that you're so rudely interrupting - "

Myrtle: "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Hermione: "YOU ARE THE LAST PERSON I WANT TO TALK TO RIGHT NOW!"

Draco: "I FEEL THE SAME WAY, ONLY HARDER! AND - AND MORE!"

Myrtle: "FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!"

Hermione: "God, you disgust me - "

Draco: "You disgust me more, you absolutely transcendent little troll - "

Hermione: "I HOPE YOU FALL OFF A CLIFF, MALFOY!"

Draco: "I HOPE YOU CATCH ME, GRANGER!"

Hermione: "What?"

Draco: "I mean - I HOPE YOU FALL OUT OF THE ASTRONOMY TOWER!"

Hermione: "I HOPE YOU PUSH ME!"

Draco: "What?"

Myrtle: [whispering] "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!"

[Hermione looks up, first at Myrtle, and then into the camera.]

Hermione: [commenting offhandedly] "There are cameras in here."

[Draco looks up, directly into the lens of the camera and then glances back down at her.]

Draco: "You'd better get lost, then, Granger."

[They pause.]

Hermione: "I THINK I WILL, MALFOY!"

Draco: "Fucking - GOOD, THEN!"

Hermione: "GOODBYE!"

Draco: "GOODBYE HARDER!"

Myrtle: [distraught] "Oh my god, no - kisssssssss, pleaaaaase - "

[Hermione leaves, storming out in a huff. Draco runs a hand through his hair, appearing to slowly count to ten, and then follows. Myrtle floats back over to her toilet and sighs, looking saddened.]

Myrtle: "I wish I could get laid."
Minerva, from the next stall: "Me too, girl."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: New Ride or Die posted today, and Nobility on the books for tomorrow. Besos!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode XV

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 15.

[Camera opens with Luna interview out at the quidditch pitch.]
Interviewer: "I see you've taken a side even though Ravenclaw isn't playing."
Luna: "Hm?"

[The lion hat on her head roars loudly.]
Luna: "Oh, this."

Interviewer: "Yes. That."
Luna: "Yes, well, Harry's my friend, you know."

Interviewer: "You don't have friends on the Slytherin team?"
Luna: "I wouldn't call them friends."

Interviewer: "What would you call them?"
Luna: [whispers] "Victims."

Interviewer: "What?"
Luna: "What?"

Interviewer: "Did you just - "
Luna: "Shh, I'm watching the game."

[Zacharias Smith is heard to say "Weasley saves it - well, he's bound to get lucky sometimes, I suppose - " which prompts a smirk from Luna.]
Luna: "What's lucky is that Ron is so susceptible to suggestion."

Interviewer: "So you don't think Harry actually dosed him with Felix Felicis?"
Luna: "No, but I'm also not surprised that Hermione thinks he did."

Interviewer: "Why not?"
Luna: "Well, when she decides to do something illegal, she usually commits."

[Camera footage shows Hermione setting Severus' robes on fire.]
Luna: "I appreciate her arsonist tendencies." *[She tilts her head.]* "I wonder if Malfoy does, too."

Interviewer: "Draco?" *[Confused]* "Why him?"

Luna: "Hold on, I have to do something."

*[Camera cuts to Justin Finch-Fletchley interview.]*

Justin: "Yeah, I got a note from Gossip Girl, too. It was rather lengthy, honestly. Probably because I, um - have committed several indiscretions."

Interviewer: "Like what?"

Lee, off screen: "Ugh, *boring* - "

Justin: "Well, first, I guess she must have found the hallucinogenic mushrooms I was growing in the back greenhouse - "

Lee, off screen: "*Oh please, NOBODY CARES* - "

Justin: "And then I guess she also figured out that Sprout was letting me do that, you know, because I'm - " *[he turns red]* "Well, I'm - "

Lee, off screen: "Are you one of the ghosts? WHO EVEN ARE YOU?"

Justin: *[blurts out]* "- I'm fucking Pomona."

Lee, off screen: "*Oh my god, SNOOZEFEST* - "

Justin: "*We're in love!*"

Lee, off screen: "GET OUT."

*[Camera cuts to Blaise and Theo interview.]*

Blaise: "It's sort of confusing because I have this horrible, queasy stomach pain now whenever Ginny Weasley is around - "

Theo: "Is it heartburn?"

Blaise: "I mean, it definitely burns."

Theo: "In my experience, that's a bad sign."

Blaise: *[looks furiously at him]* "If you knowing that has *anything* to do with my mother - "

Theo: "It doesn't."

Blaise: "Okay, good, because I - "

Theo: "She keeps things very clean."

Blaise: "No. NO."

Theo: "Just kidding."

Blaise: *[sighs with relief]* "Thank fucking Salazar."
Theo: *mouthing to the camera* "Not kidding."

Blaise: "Anyway, I know Weaslette is dating Dean -"

Theo: "That seems unlikely."

Blaise: "Why?"

Theo: "Because Dean's gay."

[Seamus, who is walking by, stops abruptly.]

Seamus: [*startled*] "What did you just say?"

Theo: "Dean's gay." [*He shrugs.*] "I thought you knew that."

Seamus: [*distressed*] "I did not."

Theo: "I feel like you should have seen the signs."

Seamus: "What signs?!"

Theo: "Well, he's in love with you, for one thing."

Seamus: "That's not a sign!"

Theo: "It really kind of is."

Blaise: [*nodding*] "I'm with Theo on this one."

Seamus: [*huffily*] "Well then maybe YOU TWO are gay!"

Theo: [*shrugs*] "We tried it."

Blaise: "We thought it would be easier."

Theo: "But we didn't really care for it."

Blaise: "Two dicks is just like . . . too much."

Theo: "Overwhelming, really."

Blaise: "Plus, you see a dick, and it's just like -"

Theo: "Stop staring at me."

Blaise: [*nodding*] "Yes, exactly. Whereas a pussy is like -"

Theo: "It's very welcoming."

Blaise: "Yeah. Like it's got a lovely decorative mat that says 'welcome home' in front of it."

Theo: "Funny you should say that, seeing as your mum's says -"

Blaise: [*brusquely*] "Come on, mate, please. We're doing a thing."

Theo: "Sorry. It slipped out."
Blaise: "Don't."

Theo: "Just like my cock in your mum's - "

Blaise: "DON'T!"

Seamus: [irritably] "Hello, I'm still here."

Theo: "I feel like we've probably said enough."

Blaise: "Yes. I mean, do you agree with our overarching thesis?"

Seamus: "That you don't like dicks?"

Theo: "We didn't say we didn't like them. We specifically never said that."

Blaise: [nodding] "Sometimes you want to see a dick on the menu."

Theo: "Yeah. Sometimes you're like 'I want cocoa,' right - and then you taste it - "

Blaise: "And it's jager."

Theo: "Right. And you're just like, okay, whoa, not what I was expecting - "

Blaise: "And sometimes it's like 'actually, this jager tastes pretty good' - "

Theo: "Or 'this jager gives pretty good head' - "

Blaise: "And other times you're like, I fucking wanted cocoa."

Theo: "You know?"

[There is a pause.]

Seamus: "What the fuck did you just - "

Luna runs in, out of breath.

Luna: "Did I miss it? Balls, the one time - "

Theo: "We told Seamus that we think Dean's gay."

Luna: "Oh." [She straightens.] "Did he believe it?"

Seamus: "No."

Luna: [nods, relieved] "Ah, good. I'll get you next time, then."

Seamus: "What?"

Luna: "What?"

Seamus: "I don't think that I - "

Luna: "Hold that thought, would you? I have to do a thing."

[Camera cuts to castle corridor feed. Parvati and Lavender pass through.]
Lavender: "Okay, so, I feel like now that Ron's a quidditch success - "
Parvati: "Come on. Don't do this to me."
Lavender: " - it's totally okay, right? I mean, everyone likes a winner - "
Parvati: [muttering to herself] "I wonder what else Muggles use on dogs."
Lavender: " - so you can hardly blame me for my attraction, I mean - "
Parvati: "Shock collars are a thing, aren't they?"
Lavender: " - if I kissed him, I could always say I was caught up in the moment - "
Parvati: "Also, I feel like I'm starting to understand murder."
Lavender: " - so it would be so easy, really - "
Parvati: "In a very abstract sense, of course, but still - "
Lavender and Parvati, in unison: "I think I'm going to do it."

[They exit. Shortly after, Hermione walks into the corridor, checking over her shoulder to see if anyone is watching; her hair is a mess and she nervously smooths a hand through it, curling a lock around her finger as she smiles absentmindedly. She adjusts her skirt - the bottom of which is folded up slightly - and then teases her shoulders back, heading towards the quidditch pitch.

A moment after she has disappeared, Draco struts into the corridor from the same direction, buttoning his shirt and tucking it back into his trousers. He charms his Prefect pin into a mirror, checking for something on his neck, and then readjusts it on his lapel before striding back towards the castle.

Shortly after he disappears, Luna runs in.]

Luna: "Oh no, did I miss it?"
Severus: "Yes, you did."
Luna: [sighs] "Damn."
Severus: [licks a finger, turning the page of the Daily Prophet.] "There, there."
Luna: "Thank you. That helps."
Severus: [impassively] "Welcome."
Luna: "What are you reading?"
Severus: "Current events."
Luna: "Sounds sad."
Severus: "It is."
[She sits down.]
Luna: "Popcorn?"
Severus: "Please."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: I'm trash, the end.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XVI

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 16.

[Scene opens with Lavender and Ron interview.]

Lavender: "I did it! I kissed him."

Ron: "She did."

Lavender: "He's mine now."

Ron: "I am?"

Lavender: [chirply] "You are."

Ron: "Huh." [He shrugs.] "That seems reasonable."

Interviewer: "Well, how was it?"

Ron: "The kiss? Wet."

Lavender: "Magical!"

Ron: "There's a lot more tongue involved than I expected."

Lavender: "Life changing!"

Ron: "And that's just the mouth stuff."

Lavender: "A BLESSING IN EVERY WAY!"

Ron: "I tell you what, mate, nobody ever spends a lot of time discussing how wet it all is."

Lavender: "To think that someday we'll be able to tell our children!"

Ron: "It's all exceedingly messy."

Lavender: "I could literally feel my dreams coming true - "

Ron: "You hear all the love songs and read all the poems, you know? And yet nobody's ever commented on just how damp the whole situation is."

Lavender: "Speaking of poetry, I really feel like I could write some."

Ron: "And yes, there are some benefits to it, but guess what? Those are wet, too."

Lavender: "Weasleys are red, Lavenders are blue - "

See the end of the chapter for notes.
[Draco, who is walking by, stops abruptly.]

Draco: "I'm sorry, what offensive thing did you just begin to recite?"

Lavender: [indignantly] "It's poetry. It's not offensive."

Draco: "I'm offended. My ears are offended. My sensibilities are offended - "

Ron: [rolling his eyes] "Bloody hell."

Draco: "- my very being is offended - "

Lavender: [angrily] "Well, I'd like to see you do any better!"

Draco: "Fine, I will." [He clears his throat.] "That I would gaze upon a face as lovely as a flower; that I would live a thousand days and barely feel an hour; for in your arms, a breath evolves, powerless and fleeting; I'd trade it in, my soul for yours, in wonderment repeating."

[There is a breathless pause.]

Ron: "Holy shit, Malfoy."

Lavender: "That was actually . . . incredibly stirring."

Draco: [shrugs] "It's not about anyone in particular. Certainly not any disgusting, frizzy-headed, porcelain-skinned demigoddess that any of us know."

Ron: "Who on earth - "

Draco: "LEAVE IT ALONE, WEASEL!"

[He leaves.]

Ron: "Well, that was - "

[Draco returns, gesturing to the two of them.]

Draco: "Just be sure to keep this going, would you? Thanks."

[He leaves again.]

Ron: "Well, that was - "

[Draco returns.]

Draco: "Feel free to turn it up a notch, even."

Ron: "What, the relationship?"

Draco: "Yes. Like, be more annoying, if possible. More obnoxious. Just very upsettingly present, in general."

Ron: "Why?"

Draco: "No reason."

[He leaves.]
Ron: "Well -" [He waits expectantly.] "That was -"

[Harry appears.]

Harry: "Did you just see Malfoy?"

Ron: "Yes."

Harry: [excitedly] "Did he admit to being a Death Eater?"

Ron: "I didn't ask."

Harry: "Damn." [He shakes his head, looking disappointed with himself.] "I should've had you ask."

Lavender: "I really feel like he wouldn't tell you, you know, even if he were -"

Harry: [interrupts] "Listen, missy, just because you're practically wearing Ron like this season's latest sequin jumper doesn't mean you get to tell me what to do -"

Ron: "Hold on. Explain the sequins."

Harry: [shrugs] "You're a flashy bloke, mate."

Ron: [pauses, preening] "I am, aren't I?"

Lavender: [sighs] "Listen, I'm not telling you what to do -"

Harry: "You're not?"

Lavender: "No."

Ron: "Are you going to tell me what to do?"

Lavender: "Probably not?"

Ron: [looking concerned] "I may need you to. I'm fairly directionless as a person."

Lavender: [pauses, and then says firmly] "I'll worry about that later."

Ron: "That's probably wise."

Lavender: "At this stage, I'm just glad that this has happened. It makes the whole Gossip Girl thing feel much less humiliating."

Ron: "Gossip Girl?"

Lavender: "Yes." [Curiously] "Did you get a note from her too? About how you liked me, maybe?"

Ron: "I mean, I got a note, but all it said was 'your hair looks stupid' and then -"

Lavender: "Wait, let me see it."

[He takes it out of his pocket and gives it to her. She skims it.]

Lavender: "No." [She sighs.] "This is just a note from Pansy."
Ron: "Oh." [He nods.] "That makes sense."

[Camera cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "Have I heard from Gossip Girl? No."
Interviewer: "Do you have any idea why not?"
Hermione: "Probably because I've never done anything wrong ever."
Interviewer: "I don't think that's true."
Hermione: [impassively] "Apparently Gossip Girl does."
Interviewer: "Perhaps she's just biding her time."
Hermione: "You sound like you want me to get caught doing something."
Interviewer: "You know, I kind of do."
Hermione: "Is it because I'm an unbearably prissy swot?"
Interviewer: "A little."
Hermione: [shrugging] "Yeah. I get that a lot."
Interviewer: "Well, anyway. You're sure there's nothing she could use against you?"
Hermione: "I guess we'll find out, won't we? [She looks down, checking her watch.] "Oh, sorry, I have to run."

[She leaves. Scene cuts to Slytherin common room.]

Pansy: "Did you hear about Brown and Weasley? What a disaster."
Daphne: "Truly."
Blaise: "I heard it was Weasel's first kiss, too."
Pansy: "Ugh. That doesn't surprise me."
Theo: "It surprises me! This is boarding school. What has he even been doing since he discovered his dick?"
Daphne: "How do you know he hasn't just discovered it now?"
Theo: [pauses, thinking] "Fair."
Blaise: "Though, you'd think he and Granger would have -"
Draco: [looks up] "Excuse me?"
Blaise: "What?"
Draco: "What are you saying?"
Blaise: "Just that Weasley and Granger might have -"
Draco: [firmly] "No."

Theo: "Or he and Potter, even."

Draco: [nods] "Better. Disgusting, but better."

Daphne: "You really think Weasley swings that way?"

[Camera cuts to Seamus.]


[Camera cuts back to Slytherins.]

Theo: "He doesn't have to swing any particular direction. I'm just saying he might have tried it."

Blaise: "Yeah. I mean, I'm not gay, but my first kiss was Draco."

Theo: "Same."

Pansy: "Same."

Daphne: [slowly] "... same, and I'm now finding this worrisome."

Draco: "You all liked it." [He throws a bag over his shoulder.] "Bye, by the way."

Theo: "Where are you going?"

Draco: "To do a thing."

Theo: "What kind of thing?"

Draco: [snottily] "A private thing."

[He leaves, and Theo looks slowly around the room.]

Theo: "Just out of curiosity, how far has everyone gone with Draco?"

Pansy: "Pretty far."

Daphne: "Considerably far."

Blaise: "Too far."

[At this, Theo shakes his head, sighing.]

Theo: "I shouldn't have done this. I feel worse."

[Cuts to film of Harry wandering the corridors.]

Harry: "We're following Malfoy. Look, there he is."

[He points ahead. Draco looks over his shoulder before taking a sharp left.]

Harry: "Hm, odd, I thought he would be going to the Room of Requirement. You know, doing some Death Eater thing - "
[He follows in the direction Draco has disappeared. There is nobody to be seen.]

Harry: "Huh, weird." [He shouts down the corridor] "If you're a Death Eater, clap once!"

[He waits. Nothing happens until Hermione suddenly appears from an alcove, stumbling out as though she has been shoved. Harry catches up to her.]

Harry: "Hermione, what are you doing? I'm trying to follow Malfoy."

Hermione: "Nothing, Harry, nothing." [She glares into the alcove she was just in, adjusting her skirt.] "I was just - "

Harry: [interrupts] "I don't care. I just want to see what Malfoy's getting into."

Hermione: "Into?"

Harry: "Yeah. I want to see what he's got his dirty Death Eater fingerprints all over."

Hermione: [guiltily] "Hm."

Harry: "I mean, if he's penetrating something in the castle - "

Hermione: [making a face] "Oof, Harry. Word choice."

Harry: "If he's inside something, I want to be in it too."

Hermione: "You want to be inside it?"

Harry: "Yes. Just - entirely inside it. Engulfed."

Hermione: "Engulfed. Really."

Harry: "Yep. Just shoved right up in there."

Hermione: "Shoved?"

Harry: "Just - absolutely buried to the hilt in whatever Malfoy's into."

Hermione: [murmuring to herself] "Can this get any worse?"

Harry: [loudly] "Balls deep, really."

Hermione: "Oh good, it can."

Harry: "I'm willing to get a little dirty to do it, too."

Hermione: "What's that, now?"

Harry: "I'm just saying - if there's a back way in, I'll take it."

Hermione: "I'm really not there yet."

Harry: [startled] "What?"

Hermione: [innocently] "What?"

[Cuts to Luna and Severus interview.]
Luna: *tosses popcorn in her mouth* "I think we're friends now."

Severus: "I don't have any friends."

Luna: "You have me. I'm your friend."

Severus: "I don't think I ever agreed to that."

Luna: "There isn't a contract or anything."

Severus: "Then how do you know if someone is your friend?"

*Luna pauses, thinking.*

Luna: "Would you help me move my furniture?"

Severus: "No."

Luna: "Would you have brunch with me?"

Severus: "No."

Luna: "Do you have any interest in my personal life?"

Severus: "No."

Luna: "What about my hopes and dreams?"

Severus: "Absolutely not."

Luna: "Huh. *She pauses.* "I guess we aren't friends, then."

Severus: "Good."

*They sit quietly for a moment.*

Luna: "Popcorn?"

Severus: "Please."

*She offers it to him. They chew quietly.*

Luna: "We're the best."

Severus: "I know."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: I'm v tired I hope it's funny but if not there is always tomorrow. and several days after that . . .
The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode XVII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 17.

[Scene opens with the professors gathered in the Headmaster's office.]

Minerva: "Listen, Albus, I really think we need to talk about this Gossip Girl situation. Some really serious accusations have come to light -"

Albus: "I know, right? Did you hear the one about that flammable Irish kid liking Bulgaria? Classic."

Minerva: "Albus, you pea-brained cuntwarbler - " [She stops, muttering to herself.] "I told myself I wouldn't lose my temper -"

Filius: [stepping forward] "Sir, if I may, I think Minerva's right. Perhaps we should investigate who is propagating this so-called Gossip Girl's claims."

Albus: [impatiently] "She's not Lord Voldemort, Filius, you can call her by her name."

Filius: [blinking] "We don't know her name, sir -"

Albus: "Well then what the fuck is it that you all do all day?"

Minerva: [furiously] "We teach! What do you do all day?!!"

[Albus and Fawkes exchange glances.]

Albus: "Uh. Paperwork."

[Camera cuts to Headmaster's office hidden camera.]

Albus: [singing] "Well I guess it would be nice, if I could touch your body, I know not everybody, has got a body like you - hit it, Fawkes!"

Fawkes: [Screeches loudly, flaps wings]

Albus: "CAUSE I GOTTA HAVE FAITH -"

Minerva, yelling: "Albus, are you in there?"

[He thrusts out a hand, motioning for Fawkes to be quiet.]

Albus: "I'm very busy, Minnie - very, very busy - " [he hunts around his desk] "Where did I put those notes - ah, yes - " [he produces a scrap of paper, reading it out loud.] "Horcrux thing - something something, trick Horace into working here - okay, done, check, did that - what else, what else . . . ah, do not try on cursed horcrux ring - " [He sighs.] "Damn. I knew I forgot
something."

[Camera cuts back to meeting.]

Minerva: [skeptically] "Paperwork?"

Albus: "I'M VERY BUSY AND IMPORTANT, MINNIE, GO AWAY."

[Cuts to Hermione and Cormac interview.]

Hermione: "Er, yes, so - tonight is Slughorn's Christmas party - "

Cormac: "Yes. I've been on a very carefully calculated artificial dehydration regimen so as to properly emphasize the contours of my biceps."

Hermione: "Yes. Which is, of course, important."

Cormac: [glancing sulkily at her] "Well, it would have been, except you insisted on charming the sleeves back onto my dress robes."

Hermione: [looking into the camera] "Yes. I guess I should have warned you that I can be monstrously insensitive."

Cormac: [emphatically] "You certainly should have!"

Hermione: [sighs] "Well, you have to know you weren't my first choice, Cormac."

Interviewer: "Who was, out of curiosity?"

Hermione: "Oh, er - " [she turns red.] "Well, um - Ron, of course."

Cormac: "Weasley?" [He scoffs.] "Please. Does he even lift?"

Hermione: "Lift what?"

Cormac: "Lift, Granger."

Hermione: "Lift what?"

Cormac: [impatiently] "Listen. This isn't going to work out between us if you don't have at least a mild interest in the things that are important to me. Did you even bother to remember that today was leg day?"

Hermione: "Does that matter?"

Cormac: "IT'S A VERY STRESSFUL DAY FOR ME, GRANGER."

Hermione: "Why would it be - "

Cormac: [emotionally] "I HAVE SLENDER, FEMININE CALVES, OKAY?"

Hermione: "I guess I just didn't realize that - "

Cormac: [jolts upright, wiping furiously at his eyes] "And to think, I finally thought I found someone who appreciated me for more than my exquisitely cultivated body - "

Hermione: [interrupts tentatively] "Will it make you feel better if I tell you I have no interest
whatever in your body?"

Cormac: [straightens coldly] "Well that's just a lie, Granger."

[He leaves.]

Hermione: [looking impressed with herself] "Huh. That actually worked out nicely."

Interviewer: "I have to say, you don't actually seem all that upset about the Ron thing."

Hermione: [grimacing] "Look, don't mention that to Harry, okay? I'm really trying to make sure he doesn't catch on to the, er, extracurricular things I've gotten into - "

Interviewer: "Which are?"

[Draco appears in the distance, shouting.]

Draco: "GRANGER!"

[Hermione turns over her shoulder, shouting back.]

Hermione: "WHAT DO YOU WANT, MALFOY?"

Draco: "I WANT YOU TO FALL INTO A BOTTOMLESS PIT, YOU DISGUSTINGLY BREATHTAKING MARVEL!"

Hermione: "OH SHOVE IT, MALFOY, YOU BRUTISHLY HANDSOME DEVIANT!"

Draco: "I LOATHE YOU!"

Hermione: "I LOATHE YOU MORE!"

[He leaves. She turns back to the camera, smiling.]

Hermione: "Sorry, what was I saying?" [She stops, thinking.] "Oh, yes, well, I'm just so very devastated about Ron that I've had to go with Cormac instead."

Interviewer: [dubiously] "Oh really."

[There is a pregnant pause.]

Hermione: [sighs loudly] "Look, just don't tell Harry, okay?"

[Camera cuts to Ginny and Dean interview.]

Ginny: "Yeah, so this is pretty much a sham, right?"

Dean: "Yeah." [He stands.] "Bye."

Ginny: "Have fun, Dean. Don't tell Harry, okay?"

Dean: "Yep." [He leaves.]

Interviewer: "Why not tell Harry?"

Ginny: "Oh, I'm quite certain Harry and I belong together eventually, but he's not really ready yet."
Interviewer: "No?"

Ginny: **[shaking her head]** "No. And in the meantime, best he thinks I'm dating Dean - you know, let that take root, rather than letting him know the truth."

Interviewer: "Which is what?"

Ginny: **[she shrugs]** "That I'm young and I'm hot and I'll take my kicks where I can get them." **[She looks up, seeing something.]** "Ah, gotta go. There's Blaise."

Interviewer: "Blaise?"

Ginny: "Yeah. He's helping me out with something."

Lee, off screen: "IS IT AN ORGASM?"

Ginny: "Spoiler, it's an orgasm."

Lee, off screen: "I KNEW IT."

**[Cuts to Luna and Harry interview.]**

Harry: "Yeah, so, since Hermione was encouraging me to take a date to this thing rather than get myself dosed with a love potion/wizarding date rape drug, I thought I'd take someone I actually like."

Luna: **[cheerfully]** "Yes, it's so wonderful to go to a party with someone as a friend!"

**[Luna gestures to follow her as she nudges off to the side; Harry hums distractedly, staring at the ceiling, as Luna whispers to the camera.]**

Luna: "Harry's a bit in love with me, you see, but I think it's best not to tell him." **[She glances back at him, smiling fondly.]** "He means well, really, and I think I love him too, in a way, but I think it's best if he's with someone like Ginny - partially because I'm just a bit too voracious for him." **[She pauses.]** "Sexually, I mean. I require a certain, um - departure from the conventional, shall we say, which I suspect would upset his sensibilities." **[She smiles vacantly.]** "Anyway, back to the matter at hand - "

**[She slides back, rejoining Harry, who smiles contentedly at seeing her.]**

Harry: "Nargles?"

Luna: **[indulgently]** "Oh, sure. And Wrackspurts!"

**[Harry nods knowingly, as if to say "I knew it," and Luna shakes her head at the camera, as if to say "he is literally without one single iota of a clue."]**

Harry: "Anyway, I'd rather not be at this party. I'd prefer to be following Malfoy around." **[He stops, suddenly serious.]** "I don't know if you know this, but I'm sort of a brilliant detective around here."

Interviewer: "Is that so."

Harry: "Yes. I mean, I am the one who tends to put two and two together."

**[Hermione ducks around a corner, darting out of sight. Draco follows shortly after.]**
Harry: "I think it just takes a lot of insight into the human condition, you know? Which I have."

[Albus comes around the corner, singing to himself.]

Albus: "What I want, you've got, and it might be hard to handle, but like the flame that burns the candle, the candle feeds the flame - "

[He stops abruptly, catching sight of Harry.]

Albus: [loudly] "Er, I mean - we must all face the choice between what is right, and what is easy!"

Harry: [perks up] "That was so wise, sir!"

Albus: "I know. I should write it down." [He pulls out a small piece of parchment, scribbling.] " - something something, between what is right and what is easy - " [He pauses, looking up.] "Oh, right, there's something I should tell him about the significance of his death, I think - something about needing to die at the right time - " [He cuts off, shaking his head.] "Nevermind, that's crazy."

[He leaves.]

Harry: "Anyway, I've just got a really good understanding of what makes people tick, you know?"

[Dean walks by with Ginny; Harry's gaze follows them.]

Harry: "Ugh, those two." [He shakes his head.] "I'd be upset about them, except they're so obviously made for each other." [He pauses.] "Anyway, what was I saying?"

Luna: [blinks owlishly] "I think you covered it all, Harry."

Harry: "Thanks, Luna. You're the best."

Luna: [sighing] "Unfortunately, coming from you, that's probably an ill-founded hunch."

Harry: "What?"

Luna: "I said you betcha, Harry."

[Camera cuts to the party inside. Cormac has removed his sleeves. His biceps do look nice. His calves, unfortunately, are covered.]

Marcus: "Look, man, it's easy."

Blaise: "Yeah. Just pick three human people, okay?"

Neville: [nervously] "Okay."

Marcus: "Okay. Are you ready?"

Neville: [shaking out his shoulders] "Hold on - "

[There is a brief training montage set to "Eye of the Tiger." The first few scenes show Neville furiously taking notes as Blaise shouts instructions, most of which seem to just be names of random people who come to mind. Then Neville is seen to be drawing extremely graphic pornography as Cormac looks over his shoulder, nodding his approval. Lastly, he is shown reading a book about rare tropical herbs and fungi, which Marcus rips from his hands and throws into the lake.]
Neville: *running back in* "Okay, I've got it. Let's do it."

Blaise: "Okay. Remember. All you have to do - "

Marcus: " - is pick three people who are *humans* - "

Cormac: " - *not plants.*"

Blaise: "Got it?"

Neville: *nodding* "I've got it."

Cormac: "Okay. Go."

*Neville licks his lips apprehensively.*

Neville: "Okay. Cornelius Fudge - "


Neville: " - Lucius Malfoy - "

Marcus: "Oh. I mean, a little disturbing, but overall not too terrible - "

Neville: " - and Dobby the house elf."

*Blaise throws his hands in the air.*

Blaise: "I'm out, man."

Marcus: "Look, Longbottom, we specifically said *human* - "

Cormac: *loudly* "Yeah, and I'm leaving also, for reasons of principle, and morality - "

*He pretends to follow Blaise and Marcus, but then doubles back, muttering to Neville.*

Cormac: "Marry Dobby, fuck Lucius, kill Cornelius."

Neville: *snaps fingers* "Nailed it."

Cormac: *smugly* "Knew it."

**Chapter End Notes**

*a/n:* You guys are the sweetest. I love you. Points for song titles!
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XVIII

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode XVIII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent, day 18.

[Scene opens with Severus and Albus interview.]

Albus: [triumphantly] "I've figured out who Gossip Girl is."

Severus: [reading the Daily Prophet] "Have you?"

Albus: "Yes." [He teases his shoulders back, looking smug.] "Obviously it's someone quiet and unpopular, right?"

Severus: "If you say so."

Albus: "Someone a little bit dodgy, you know?"

Severus: "Mmhmm."

Albus: "Maybe someone with hair full of secrets."

Severus: [licks finger, turns page] "Quite."

Albus: "So, in thinking back to which of my students gives me the creeps - "

Severus: "Naturally."

Albus: " - I totally figured it out."

Severus: [dryly] "And?"

Albus: " . . . it's Peter Pettigrew."

[There is a pause. Albus looks triumphant; Severus looks weary.]

Severus: [sighs] "Albus - "

Albus: [hurriedly] "No, hear me out. He's super shifty, right?"

Severus: "Yes, but - "

Albus: "Friends with powerful people, you know - "

Severus: "Is it possible that perhaps you have forgotten that - "

Albus: " - plus he's so very small and doughy, so perhaps 'girl' is fitting - "

Severus: [sharply] "Albus."
Albus: \textit{testily} "What?"

Severus: "First of all, Peter Pettigrew graduated from Hogwarts in 1978."

Albus: "What year is it now?"

Severus: [\textit{ignoring him}] "Secondly, he is now an associate of the Dark Lord."

Albus: "Aha!" [\textit{He looks pleased.}] "So I was right!"

[\textit{There is a brief pause.}]

Severus: "It's deeply important to me that you understand the many ways in which you are not, in fact, right."

Albus: [\textit{shrugs}] "Well, I said he was shifty."

Severus: [\textit{with consummate unhappiness, as though he is picturing his life and simply cannot begin to fathom how it has come to this}] "Yes. You did."

Albus: "Never trusted him." [\textit{adamantly}] "Not for a second."

Severus: "Well." [\textit{He agonizes for a moment, as though he is excruciatingly aware that argument is futile but remains powerless to his compulsion for correctness.}] "Except for the time that you did."

Albus: "Did I?" [\textit{He thinks.}] "Huh. I can never keep track."

Severus: [\textit{closing his eyes, as though all achievable hope has fled from his bodily constitution}] "So it would seem."

[\textit{Albus thinks of something amusing and begins to chuckle quietly to himself, which evolves into a hearty laugh.}]

Albus: "Oh my god, Severus - " [\textit{he reaches out, gripping Severus' shoulder as he laughs}] "Severus, do you remember that time - oh man, Severus - do you remember the time that I let a werewolf live here with like - " [\textit{he wheezes}] "almost no precautions for the other students - "

Severus: [\textit{flatly}] "Yes. And then you brought him back as a professor."

Albus: [\textit{doubles over}] "Oh my god, I totally did!"

Severus: "Yes." [\textit{He looks into the camera.}] "I remember."

Albus: "Severus, Severus - " [\textit{nudges him, still laughing.}] "Oh my god, Severus, I'm dead - do you remember the shack I had built for him? And how I was like 'here, have this shack'?!"

Severus: [\textit{begins angrily twisting the copy of the Daily Prophet}] "It sounds familiar."

Albus: "Oh Merlin, and his friends! Do you - " [\textit{he wipes a steady stream of laughing tears from his face}] "Do you remember James Potter? That terrible little twatbucket?"

Severus: [\textit{The newspaper is now shredded to pieces}] "The name rings a bell."

Albus: "Did I tell you about how I - " [\textit{he pauses, shaking with laughter}] "How I totally made him Head Boy without - " [\textit{he gasps, clutching his chest for air}] "without even making him a Prefect?"
Severus: *[sullenly]* "No, Albus, you didn't."

Albus: "Oh my god, Severus, it was *hilarious*, you should have been there."

Severus: *[murderously]* "If only."

*[Albus gradually composes himself, patting Severus' shoulder and chuckling quietly.]*

Albus: "Ah, it's so important to have fun, Severus.* [He wipes his eyes, sighing wistfully.] *"Then you never work a day in your life."

Severus: *[dispassionately]* "I literally cannot wait to kill you."

*[Cuts to Blaise, Pansy, and Theo interview.]*

Interviewer: "What are you all doing for Christmas?"

Blaise: *[shrugs]* "Family."

Theo: "Yes, family.* [smugly]* "Specifically, Draco's."

Blaise: *[exasperatedly]* "Are you trying to say you'll be 'doing Narcissa'?"

Theo: "Yes."

Blaise: *[sarcastically]* "My goodness. Careful with that wit."

Pansy: "Yes. So sharp."

Blaise: "Don't run with it."

Pansy: "Might cut yourself."

Theo: *[rolling his eyes]* "Hilarious."

Pansy: "Personally, I'm going to Daphne's."

Blaise: "For Christmas?"

Pansy: "For sex."

Theo: *[delighted]* "I like how good we are at answering questions."

*[Cuts to Parvati interview.]*

Parvati: "Yeah, so, since Lavender is always attached to Weasley's face - "

Interviewer: "I've noticed."

*[Cuts to Ron and Lavender interview. They are aggressively snogging.]*

Ron: "You thhhee?* [He gestures to the interviewer and then points to Lavender's head.] *"It'th aw - vewwy wet."

Interviewer: "Are you trying to say it's very wet?"

Ron: "Yeeeth."
[Cuts back to Parvati.]

Parvati: "So, yeah, I've taken up some new hobbies. Needlepoint - " [she gestures to her current project, which isn't totally devoid of craftsmanship] "and knitting, and crocheting - "

Interviewer: "Okay - "

Parvati: "Also, knife throwing, darts, archery - "

Interviewer: "Whoa."

Parvati: "Fencing, jousting - "

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna sitting on her right.]

Luna: "You know, that's a lot of stabby things you just listed."

Parvati: [startled] "How did you - "

Luna: "Don't worry about it. Let's talk about you."

Parvati: [uncertainly] "Okay - "

Luna: "That was a lot of penetrative activity."

Parvati: [echoing, confused] "Penetrat-"

Luna: [interrupting] "Have you considered that maybe you should be seeking out congress?"

Parvati: "Congress?"

Luna: "Congress."

Parvati: "Meaning?"

Luna: "Oh, sorry. Sexual congress."

Parvati: [vacantly] "What?"

[Camera pans out further to reveal Severus on Parvati's left.]

Severus: "Cock. [He licks a finger, turning the page of the Daily Prophet.] "The word she's looking for is cock."

Parvati: "Oh. [Brightens, as though she is having a revelation.] "Oh!"

[She darts away. Luna waves to Severus.]

Luna: "You're so good with people."

Severus: "I know."

Chapter End Notes
a/n: *blows kisses* *throws flowers* You guys are great. Sorry if my WIP updates are a little scattered - busy time of year, as well you know. The next update will be Nocturnes.

Oh, and to Gnoloo, hilarious you would ask if it was Princess Diaries 2, because it was actually a reference to Clean, and I recently watched that scene and was like wait a minute…
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XIX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode XIX

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent, day 19.

[Scene opens with Parvati and Cormac interview.]
Cormac: "So, you're sure you don't just like me for my body?"
Parvati: [brightly] "Of course not. That wasn't even a factor."
Cormac: "So you think I'm like, deep and stuff?"
Parvati: [emphatically] "Absolutely!"
Cormac: "What else?"
Parvati: "Um. [blinks] "I guess I think you're very . . . smart."
Cormac: [looking pleased] "Smart?"
Parvati: "Yes. You have a huge . . . " [she trails off, looking distracted] "Er, intellect."
Cormac: [preening] "You think my intellect is huge?"
Parvati: "So huge." [She smirks.] "So satisfying."
Cormac: "Satisfying?"
Parvati: [nods] "The perfect size."
Cormac: "Perfect size for what?"
Parvati: "For everything."
Cormac: "Everything?"
Parvati: [shrugs] "Everything I've tried, anyway."
Cormac: "Do you want to try other things?"
Parvati: [surprised] "Did you have something in mind?"
Cormac: [coyly] "I could think of a thing or two that might . . . stimulate your interests."
Parvati: "Oh?"
Cormac: "Yeah."
Parvati: [eagerly] "Well? Like what?"

Cormac: "Well." [He leans in conspiratorially.] "Do you play wizard chess?"

Parvati: [taken aback] "Excuse me?"

Cormac: "Wizard chess." [He sighs wistfully.] "People almost never want to play with me. I assume it's because they find my intellect intimidating."

Parvati: [vacantly] "Your intellect?"

Cormac: "Yeah. My perfectly sized intellect, remember?"

Parvati: "Oh. Right. Because I'm in this for your brain."

Cormac: "Yes."

Parvati: [morosely] "Right."

Cormac: "Do you want to play now?"

Parvati: [she pauses, thinking.] "Will you take your shirt off while we play?"

Cormac: [he considers her request.] "I could."

Parvati: [murmuring triumphantly to herself] "Check."

Cormac: "What?"

Parvati: [innocently] "Nothing."

[Cuts to Parvati interview.]

Parvati: "If you're wondering, I did eventually say checkmate."

Luna: [delightedly] "Congress!"

Parvati: "He really does have a huge intellect."

Luna: [whispers happily] "Cock!"

[Cuts to Draco interview.]

Interviewer: "I'm surprised you didn't go home for Christmas."

Draco: [shrugs] "The Manor is a little, um - cramped." [He flinches.] "My parents have a . . . houseguest."

Interviewer: "Houseguest?"

Draco: "Let's call him a cousin."

Interviewer: "You don't like your cousin?"

Draco: "Ehhhh, let's say my cousin doesn't really like it when I admit things like that, and also that my cousin could be listening at any given time."
Interviewer: "Okay - "

Draco: [interrupting] "Let's also say that my cousin is a tad murdery."

[There is a pause.]

Interviewer: "I have some questions about your cousin."

Draco: [shrugs] "I can't answer them. Because of the murder thing."

Interviewer: "Right."

Draco: [vehemently] "Also, my cousin is like, eating all the food. Last time I was home I definitely had saved some hummus for lunch and it was gone and he was all 'I don't know, what even is hummus' which is insane, I mean, do I look like an idiot? Everyone knows what hummus is - "

Interviewer: "Oh, okay. That's a normal problem - "

Draco: "And half the time, he's just feeding it to his snake."

Interviewer: "Okay. Less normal."

Draco: "I should mention that the snake is murdery too."

Interviewer: "Naturally."

Draco: "And he's so weird about money! Like, he's this homicidal overlord, right? So you'd think he could pitch in for groceries every now and then - "

Interviewer: [agreeably] "It would be polite."

Draco: "And he just doesn't. And whenever we bring it up - super politely, by the way, sort of like 'hey, we love you, but Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, you know, can't just conjure food from nothing' and then 'yes, we know you defeated death but still, you could at least try - "

Interviewer: "Reasonable."

Draco: " - like, we wouldn't actually accept, of course, but it's the principle of the thing, really - I mean, the offer would be nice - "

Interviewer: "Right."

Draco: " - but then he just ends up turning it around on us! Like it's our fault we're rich!"

Interviewer: [tsking] "Such poor taste."

Draco: [sighs] "Plus, whenever I'm home my cousin tries to read my thoughts and stuff and I just really don't really care for it."

Interviewer: "Fair."

Draco: "Oh. And my cousin really wants me to kill someone."

Interviewer: "Huh. Unfortunate."

Draco: "That's my take on it too."
Interviewer: "Well, how badly does he want it?"

Draco: [shrugs] "He pretty much only has one mode when it comes to murder."

Interviewer: "Which is?"

Draco: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Yes?"

Draco: "Yes to murder."

[Another pause.]

Interviewer: "I really think you should tell someone about your cousin."

Draco: "Everybody knows about my cousin! And they've been exceedingly unhelpful about him, too."

[Cuts to Slytherin common room.]

Blaise: "So, we get that you're upset."

Draco: [protesting weakly] "I'm not ups-"

Pansy: "Yes. We see that you are having a difficult time."

Daphne: "If you need something, hit this pillow."

Draco: [frowning] "Why the fuck would I -"

Blaise: "This can be very frustrating. Let's figure this out together."

Pansy: "Try counting to ten?"

Daphne: "Take a deep breath!"

Draco: [muttering] "For fuck's sake -"

Blaise: "We see that you are mad. How does that feel in your body?"

Draco: "Fucking - what did you say?"

[Cuts to Blaise, Pansy, and Daphne interview.]

Blaise: "Well, we noticed Draco's been having a difficult time, so we read a book about how to deal with adverse emotions."

Pansy: [nodding] "Yes. Though, to clarify, it had pictures, so it was probably a children's book."

Daphne: [worriedly] "Yeah, now that I'm thinking about it, I'm fairly certain those phrases were really only intended to help a child."

Pansy: "Or for sex."

Daphne: [brightens] "That's an idea!"
Draco: "Anyway, it wouldn't be so bad, except there's really only one person who makes me feel better, and since it's Christmas nobody's stayed behind to - "

[A charmed paper airplane appears from off screen and flies directly into Draco's forehead, jabbing him in the temple.]

Draco: [furiously] "What the - "

[He unfolds the airplane. A slow smile crosses his face as he reads the note.]

Draco: "Have to run. Wait - hold on." [He sits still, battling a wide grin until he has regained his composure.] "Okay." [He clears his throat and then stands, walking off screen.] "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE NOW, YOU HORRIBLE DISGUSTING MOONBEAM - "

[His voice trails off as he disappears. Scene cuts to Seamus and Dean interview.]

Seamus: "Heard Weasley got a gift from Brown. Some sort of gaudy neck garbage."

Dean: [rolls his eyes] "Figures."

Seamus: "Ridiculous, isn't it?"

Dean: "Horrible."

Seamus: "Some people have no taste."

Dean: "None at all."

Interviewer: "Did you get each other gifts?"

Seamus: "Us? No. We're just friends."

Interviewer: "I didn't ask if you were - "

Dean: "We did, however, get matching tattoos." [He lifts his arm, revealing Seamus' face on his inner bicep.] "Which is a super normal thing to do."

Seamus: "Very normal."

Interviewer: [skeptically] "Right." [gestures to Seamus] "So where's yours?"

Seamus: "I can't show you."

Interviewer: "That's probably best."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Thanks to tenderheartinablender for inspiration!
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode XX

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent, day 20.

[Scene opens with Harry and Hermione interview.]
Harry: "How was your Christmas?"

[Cuts to Draco interview.]
Draco: "What rhymes with 'secret Christmas sex'?"
Myrtle: "Fragrant penis hex!"
Draco: "Really not the vibe I'm looking for."
Myrtle: [sniffs] "Then you should have been more specific."

[Cuts back to Harry and Hermione.]
Hermione: [apprehensively] "I mean, there was certainly nothing out of character."

[Cuts to Draco.]
Draco: "How does this sound: 'I found myself in the swell of your lips; undone and devolved by the sway of your hips; in your breathy sweet sigh, when I came on your - "
Myrtle: [interrupting] "Does it really have to rhyme? Personally, I prefer your free verse."
Draco: [stubbornly] "Sometimes I want to surrender myself to the jauntiness of rhyme! When did that become some kind of punishable offense?"
Myrtle: "You mean crime?"
Draco: [sighs] "You're a terrible muse." [He pauses.] "But yes."

[Cuts back to Harry and Hermione.]
Hermione: "How was yours?"
Harry: "Oh, fine." [tentatively] "Ron, um - says hi."
Hermione: [impatiently] "No he doesn't. He hasn't unglued himself from Lavender's face long enough to say anything at all, much less spare me any greeting."
Harry: [firmly] "Well, he thought it, then."
Hermione: [skeptically] "Oh, and you know this because you're an accomplished Legilimens now?"

Harry: "Listen, we have a connection, okay?"

[Seamus and Neville overhear as they pass by.]

Seamus: "You think Potter's gay, right?"

Neville: "PASS."

[They disappear.]

Harry: "Listen, Hermione, I just need you to cut Ron some slack."

Hermione: [disgruntled] "Why should I?"

Harry: "Because it's very hard for me to facilitate my Malfoy obsession while I'm trying to have two separate friends. It's very time consuming." [He shudders.] "A logistical nightmare, really."

Hermione: [nonchalantly] "How's your Malfoy stalking going, by the way?"

[She dons sunglasses and a leather jacket before leaning back in her chair, draping an arm over the side and slouching.]

Harry: "What are you doing?"

Hermione: [attempting to roll a cigarette] "Being cool while asking about Malfoy. You know." [She gestures awkwardly to herself, promptly dropping the cigarette.] "Calm and unsuspicious."

Harry: "Oh." [He shrugs.] "Well, now that the Fenrir Greyback reference has come back around, I'm thinking Malfoy's a Death Eater."

Hermione: [blinking] "How, exactly?"

Harry: "Because Greyback's a werewolf, right? And a Malfoy family friend? So obviously he's a Death Eater."

Hermione: [nodding] "Ohhh. Good, I thought you were just going to bring up - "

Harry: "Besides, there's always the wrist thing - "

Hermione: [sighs] "Yes, I know about the wrist thing, and I already know about Knockt- "

Harry: "KNOCKTURN ALLEY!"

[Cuts to Severus and Horace interview.]

Horace: "No offense, but I'm a better Potions instructor than you."

Severus: [licks a finger, turning the page of his Quibbler] "Excuse me?"

Horace: "For one thing, Harry Potter is like, a goddamn all star when I'm teaching him."

Severus: [he lowers the newspaper] "I highly doubt that."

Horace: "No, he totally is. So I gave this class assignment, right?"
Severus: *[with quiet applause]* "Amazing. Bravo."

Horace: *[huffily]* "No, I'm not done - "

Severus: "Oh." *[He shrugs.]* "Well I liked that ending."

Horace: "Anyway, I asked them to make an antidote to a poison of my choosing, and Harry - " *[he leans over, laughing]* "So, Harry does nothing, right? Like nothing at all. Granger's hard at work - she cut out a lock of her own hair, god, how embarrassing - and even Weasley's sort of putting on a show, and Harry's just - " *[He cracks up, waving his hand vacantly]* "Absolutely nothing - "

Severus: *[drily]* "Yes, I can see why you think this will entertain me."

Horace: *[doubled over]* " - just flipping pages in his book, totally directionless - "

Severus: *[looks over]* "At least the characterization in this story is true to canon."

Horace: " - and then at the end of class, he just hands me a bezoar!" *[He crows with laughter.]* "Cheeky, right?"

Severus: "Well, I suppose I've heard worse stories."

Horace: *[jubilantly]* "I gave him an extra ten points, in fact!"

Severus: *[muttering to himself]* "And at least nobody died."

Horace: "What was that?"

Severus: "What?"

Horace: "Oh, I thought you said - "

Severus: "I didn't."

Horace: "Oh."

Severus: "So, indulge me - how does this prove your superiority as a Potions instructor?"

Horace: *[indignantly]* "God, Severus, I said no offense."

Chapter End Notes

*a/n:* Short today because I need to get back to my half finished draft of Nocturnes. Best case, I can post it tonight, but more likely tomorrow; also slated for tomorrow is Ride or Die, followed by Nobility on Thursday.

In personal news, Little Chmura and I collaborated on a graphic novel called Alpha, (the story being mine and the art being hers, thankfully not the opposite), which you can find on my tumblr or website. A delightfully grim dystopian world with absolutely breathtaking art.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XXI

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent, day 21.

[Scene opens with Daphne and Pansy interview.]

Daphne: "So, something terrible happened today - "

Pansy: [interrupting] "Daph, Weasley and Brown have been dating for months. Yes, it's been terrible for everyone, but it's hardly new - "

Daphne: "I didn't mean that."

Pansy: "Oh. What were you talking about?"

Daphne: "Didn't you hear how Weasley almost died?"

Pansy: [remembering] "Oh god, yeah. Fucking tragedy."

Interviewer: "Tragedy?"

Pansy: "Yeah." [She smirks.] "Tragically, he's still alive."

Daphne: [sadly] "Aw, Pans - "

Pansy: "Listen, I am what I am."

Daphne: "I know. But still - "

Pansy: "If you want me to make the effort to be nice, I'll be too exhausted to put in the work for other things."

Daphne: [thinking] "Well, don't do that."

Pansy: [smugly] "That's what I thought."

Interviewer: "So, um - what happened?"

Daphne: "She was talking about sex, by the way."

Interviewer: "I know."

Pansy: "We're just being clear."

Interviewer: "Unnecessarily clear."

Daphne: [shrugs] "You say unnecessary, we say polite."
Interviewer: "You say polite?"

Pansy: "Honestly, we're making the show more interesting."

Lee, yelling off screen: "That's actually true."

Interviewer: "Fine. So? What happened?"

Daphne: "Apparently Weasley got dosed with Amortentia - "

Pansy: " - that was meant for Potter, if you can believe that."

Daphne: [rolling her eyes] "Which is ridiculous, since it couldn't be more obvious how to get Potter's attention."

Pansy: "Yes. All you have to do is look like his dead mom."

Daphne: "Yes. Red wig? Done."

Pansy: "This is true of all boys with dead moms."

Daphne: "And girls with dead dads!"

Pansy: "It's science."

Lee, off screen: "Science!"

Interviewer: "I feel we've gotten off track."

Pansy: "Well, best to go with what you feel."

Daphne: "Yes. Feelings are so important."

Lee, off screen: "Feelings!"

Interviewer: "Okay. Seriously - "

Pansy: [continuing] "So, Weasley got drugged - "

Daphne: "And Potter decides to take him to Slughorn's, I guess. Though personally I'd have gone to the infirmary - "

Pansy: [curiously] "Why did he go to Slughorn's?"

Daphne: [shrugs] "Might have something to do with Slughorn offering him some 'fine oak-measured mead,' I'd guess - "

Pansy: [horrified] "Oh my god. You don't think - "

Lee, off screen: "I DO! I THINK!"

Pansy: "Could Potter be - "

Seamus, walking by: "GAY, TOTALLY GAY!"

Pansy: " - trying to sweeten Slughorn up with - "
Luna: [delightedly] "Cock!"

Pansy: " - expensive, private - "

Severus: [turning the page of the Quibbler] "Cock still applies."

Pansy: [sighs exhaustedly] "You know what, nevermind."

Interviewer: [gently] "That's probably best."

[Cuts to Harry and Hermione interview.]

Harry: "IT WAS MALFOY."

Hermione: [nervously] "Harry, don't be ridiculous - "

[Cuts to Hermione alone.]

Hermione: "It was totally goddamn Malfoy."

[Cuts back to Harry and Hermione.]

Harry: "I AM NOW MORE SURE THAN EVER - "

Hermione: [nervously] "Oh Harry, you're completely unhinged!"

[Cuts back to Hermione alone.]

Hermione: "Let's just say this whole Ron poisoning thing is making me feel a tad, um - "

Interviewer: "Sad?"

Hermione: "More like . . . putrifyingly guilty."

Interviewer: "Oh. Okay then."

[Cuts to Severus and Horace.]

Horace: " . . . so, anyway, I am such a better professor than you that Harry actually saved Weasley's life! With a bezoar! Like I taught him!"

[Severus pauses.]

Severus: "Just to clarify: you are a teacher."

Horace: "Indeed, my good man!"

Severus: "And you specialize in Potions."

Horace: "Jolly ho, quite!"

Severus: "So, a student almost died from being poisoned - "

Horace: [quietly] "What ho."

Severus: " - and you didn't help him, because you were - "
Horace: [protestingly] "Having a drink!"

Severus: "With?"

Horace: "Two students!"

Severus: "In?"

Horace: "Private!"

Severus: [looking at the camera] "I see."

[There is a pause. The camera zooms out, revealing Luna on Severus' left.]

Luna: [firmly] "That shit is fucked."

Horace: [affronted] "I beg your - "

Severus: "Oh good, you're here."

[She beams at him.]

Horace: [squinting at her] "Is that the little blonde weirdo?"

Severus: "Yes."

Luna: "Aw!"

Severus: [looking back down at his newspaper] "You're welcome."

[Cuts to Parvati and Lavender interview.]

Lavender: [sobbing] "They're not letting me see him - "

Parvati: [absentmindedly patting her shoulder] "Oh, devastating - "

Lavender: " - it's almost like he told them not to let me in - "

Parvati: [mid-yawn] "Horrible injustice, truly - "

[The sound of yelling comes from behind them; familiar voices are audible.]

Male voice: "I didn't know it was going to be him - "

Female voice: "Who did you think it was going to be?!"

Lavender: [sniffing] "And the worst of it is that - "

Lee, off screen: "SHUT YOUR CUNTWARBLER, WE'RE TRYING TO LISTEN!"

[Lavender, startled, drops her handkerchief, emitting a muted squeak.]

Male voice: "You think if I wanted to kill Weasley I'd do it via this insanity? I could never have predicted any of this!"

Female voice: "Don't you realize it's the intent to kill that's upsetting me?"
Male voice: [frustrated] "I'm being supremely influenced by my . . . my hummus-stealing cousin!"

Female voice: "What kind of hell on earth excuse is that?"

Male voice: "Hell on earth is precisely what it is, you dastardly enchantress - "

Female voice: [shrilly] "Don't! Don't you dare do that!"

Male voice: "You have to believe me, I didn't want this to happen - "

Female voice: [tearfully] "It doesn't matter if I believe you or not! It's just - I can't - "

Male voice: "Wait! WAIT!"

[Footsteps echo through the hall as they retreat.]

Lavender: "So, can we go back to my thing?"

Lee, off screen: "NO!"

[Cuts to Slug Club meeting.]

Cormac: "I expect you've all heard that I'm taking Weasley's place for the big game."

Blaise: [to Ginny] "That's our cue, right?"

Ginny: "I think technically we said it was anytime he talked about drinking - "

Cormac: [continuing loudly] "So naturally I've been bulking up with a highly sophisticated mix of high intensity workouts and - "

Blaise: [hopefully] "Protein shakes?"

Cormac: [nodding] "Oh, my dude, of course."

Ginny: "There it is."

Blaise: [gesturing to the Potions storage room] "After you, m'lady?"

Ginny: [waltzing in] "Thank you, kind sir."

[Hermione enters, looking as though she's been crying.]

Hermione: [miserably] "Sorry I'm late."

[Loud noises begin to come from inside the storage closet.]

Cormac: [haughtily] "Yes, it's very rude, you've missed my announcement."

Hermione: [defensively] "Well, it's been a very challenging day, what with Ron - " [She stops, raising her voice as the noises grow louder.] "What with Ron being poisoned and all that - "

Cormac: "Oh my god, Granger, would you stop with all the poison and the Chambers of Secrets and the Goblets of Fires - "

Hermione: "What?!"
[The noises continue. Loose dust from overhead starts to sprinkle into Hermione's hair.]

Cormac: "It's just exhausting, okay? You're so dramatic. Nobody can have this much drama."

Hermione: "I'm dramatic?"

[The noises continue at a faster pace.]

Cormac: [adamantly] "Yes! We've got things too, you know! Did you know Gossip Girl thinks I'm secretly stupid?"

Hermione: [skeptically] "Secretly?"

Cormac: "THE WAY YOU SAY THAT STRIKES ME AS OFFENSIVE."

Hermione: "HONESTLY, I'M RELIEVED THAT YOU HEAR IT!" [She looks around angrily.] "Where the hell is Ginny?"

[There is a brief cessation of noise, and then a slight whimper from the closet.]

Ginny: [calling weakly from out of sight] "Um . . . coming."

---

**Free Verse #247**

Look  
I get why you're mad  
I didn't mean to poison him  
Even though he was asking for it  
Just by virtue of his face

Despite this  
Despite his face  
I have diligently refrained from murdering him in the past  
And I will continue  
Since it obviously upsets you  
So can we call this a one-off

Well  
Unfortunately  
Spoiler, there will be another thing  
But why count your chickens  
Or whatever it is you say  
Frankly, I've never counted a chicken  
And I don't intend to start now

**Haiku #46**

Are you really mad  
Or can we just get past this  
Asking for a friend

---

Chapter End Notes
a/n: What do you mean it is day 21 what the hell
a/n: Apologies for the delay. I was traveling over the last couple of days, so the next three updates will appear throughout the day today. Holidays, am I right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episodes XXII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent, day 22.

[Opens with Blaise and Theo interview.]

Theo: "Well, it feels like it's been breakup central over here."

Blaise: "Yep. Thomas and Weaslette -"

Theo: [mid-yawn] "WHAT A SURPRISE."

Blaise: "- plus Weasley and Brown."

Theo: [shaking his head] "The Gryffindors are in chaos."

Blaise: "Absolutely."

Theo: "Tissues everywhere."

Blaise: "Tears for days."

Theo: "Emotional devastation."

Blaise: "Which has been wonderful to watch."

Theo: "Truly entertaining."

Blaise: "Pansy in particular has been at the top of her game."

[cuts to Ron interview.]

Ron: "Pansy sent me a note saying she wished we had dated so that she could have had the 'breathtaking opportunity to dump me on my arsing horseface,' so it's not exactly magical on this side of the breakup fence, either.

[cuts to Pansy interview.]

Pansy: "Is that really what he said? Okay, then I'm furious, because he is totally underselling the note I sent him."
Luna: [nodding] "That's true. I read it. It was both extremely harsh and incredibly poignant."

Pansy: "It was basically a play in one act." [She groans, frustrated.] "I put a lot of effort into describing how I would slowly crush his spirit over time!"

Luna: "It was very detailed."

Pansy: "It was!"

Luna: "There were some amazing visuals."

Pansy: "Right?"

Luna: "You really have a gift."

Pansy: "I know, don't I?"

Luna: "At one point, you actually moved me to tears. There was something about - hold on. It was so lovely I wrote it down." [She digs a piece of parchment out of her pocket, reading aloud.] "A barren wasteland, so bereft of hope, that each individual fleck of rubble, each grain of sand, would whisper quietly through the wind, too restless to settle against the earth, and yet too withered of spirit to float to the heavens."

Pansy: [nodding smugly] "That was a description of my vagina's reaction to looking at him."

Luna: [continuing to read aloud] "A room, windowless. Frames on the wall - without pictures. Empty footsteps echoing, quaking, but there is a stillness; a foreign pulselessness. A sense that everything could shatter, with only one uneven breath."

Pansy: "That was a visual for my heart. Specifically the chamber containing my feelings for him."

Luna: [still reading] "And where there had been life - lush, floral, abundant; a sodden whirl of fascination - there now lay only waste, a feral dryness - "

Pansy: [gleefully] "My vagina again."

[Cuts back to Blaise and Theo interview.]

Blaise: "You know, I didn't read it - "

Theo: "I did. It really was moving."

Blaise: "Was it?"

Theo: "Well, that, and deeply emasculating."

Blaise: "Naturally."

Theo: "Overall though, some very solid writing."

Blaise: [shrugs] "The girl really knows her voice."

Theo: "Unlikely some people."

Blaise: [sighs knowingly] "It's just a really poetic time in the Slytherin dorms, I guess."

[Cuts to Slytherin common room.]
Draco: "What rhymes with 'soul crushing absence'?"

Theo: "Ill-fating madness."

Draco: "What about 'paralyzing solitude'?"

Theo: "Parrot rising, douche-canoed."

[There is a pause as Draco slowly looks up from his manic scribbling.]

Draco: "Seriously?"

Theo: "Listen, if you don't set parameters - "

Draco: "Pretend I didn't ask."

[Cuts back to Theo and Blaise.]

Theo: "He's been moping a bit."

Blaise: "We have to assume it's his cousin."

Theo: "I mean honestly, who eats another man's hummus?"

Blaise: [shakes head] "A soulless monster, I'll tell you that much."

[Cuts to Lavender and Parvati interview.]

Lavender: "Well, I was emotional for a bit there - "

Parvati: "A bit."

Lavender: "But I've pulled it together. We're doing a thing now - "

Parvati: "Yes. We."

Lavender: " - where we don't define ourselves by men - "

Parvati: "Again, I am involved in this."

Lavender: " - or their stupid dicks - "

Parvati: [eyes fingernails] "I am an active participant in this."

Lavender: " - because we are independent, and better off without them - "

Parvati: [nodding vacantly] "Things I also stand by."

Lavender: " - and who cares if I don't have a boyfriend? I'm awesome. I have way better hair than Granger - "

[Cormac ducks his head into the corridor.]

Cormac: "Yo, Parvati, you down to - "

Parvati: [lazily] "Five minutes, I'm doing a thing."
[He nods and leaves. Lavender looks accusingly at Parvati.]

Lavender: "What was that?"
Parvati: "He's helping me find something."
Lavender: "Couldn't I help?"
Parvati: "You could, but he'd be faster."
Lavender: "You're a witch, what can't you find on your own?"
Parvati: "Oh, I could definitely find it myself, but it's better when he does it."
Lavender: [thinks, and eventually sighs.] "Fine. Whatever."
Parvati: "Are we done?"
Lavender: [deflatedly] "Yeah, I guess - "
Parvati: "Good. Off to go find it, then."
Lee, off screen: [whisper-shouting] "It's her clitoris."

[Cuts to Dean and Seamus.]

Dean: "Who do I think Gossip Girl is? It'd have to be a Muggleborn, right?"
Seamus: "Why?"
Dean: "The Shakespeare reference."
Seamus: "Who?"
Dean: "Exactly."
Seamus: "Well if it's not you - "
Dean: "And it's not."
Seamus: "Maybe it's Granger?"
Dean: [thoughtfully] "Could be."
Seamus: "She hasn't gotten one. And neither have any of her friends."
Dean: "Seems sort of pass-agg for Granger, but I guess it makes sense."

[Cuts to Pansy and Daphne.]
Pansy: "Of course it's Granger."
Daphne: "You don't know that!"
Pansy: "Listen, if a thing sucks, it was Granger."
Daphne: "Oh excuse me, I didn't realize there was a rule - "
Pansy: "You know I have three rules. One, no metaphorical high horses - "

Daphne: "A stupid rule."

Pansy: " - two, endeavor to persevere - "

Daphne: "Well-intentioned, but equally stupid."

Pansy: " - and finally, three, if a thing sucks, it was Granger."

Daphne: "Well pardon me for permitting it to have slipped my attention in my efforts to obey rules one and two."

Pansy: [tsking] "Careful."

Daphne: "What?"

Pansy: "Don't endeavor to persevere too hard or you'll break the high horse rule."

Daphne: [throwing her hands up] "This is needlessly complex."

[Cuts to Harry, Hermione, and Ron from a hidden camera.]

Ron: "So you got the memory, then?"

Harry: "Yes, I've got it - "

Hermione: [muttering to herself] "After about a million fucking years."

Ron: "Hermione!"

Hermione: [sighs] "Sorry. I'm not getting laid as much and my temperament is beginning to suffer."

Harry: "What?"

Hermione: "What? Nothing." [She waves a hand carelessly.] "Carry on."

Ron: "Well? Now what?"

Harry: "Now we're going to go find a horcrux!"

[Cuts to Albus and Minerva.]

Albus: "Cancel all my plans, Minnie, I'm going out."

Minerva: "What? Albus, I don't - "

Albus: "Read me my schedule, would you?"

Minerva: [furiously] "Albus, I'm not your bloody secretary - "

Albus: "Ugh, Minnie, this again." [He sits at his desk, pulling out a day planner.] "Fine, I'll check it myself - "

Minerva: "Albus, where on earth are you planning to go? Shouldn't you be taking care of things here, seeing as Katie Bell's finally out of the hospital - "
Albus: [*reading aloud*] "4:30, stare into the abyss. 5:00, solve world hunger, tell no one - "

Minerva: " - and it's fully possible she's still in danger, seeing as we haven't caught whoever is behind these senseless attacks - "

Albus: " - 5:30, jazzercise. 6:30, dinner with me - I can't cancel that again - "

Minerva: " - not to mention Mr Malfoy looks as though his limbs will collapse beneath him at any given moment - "

Albus: " - 7:00, wrestle with my self loathing - of course, if I bump the loathing to 9, I can probably destroy a horcrux in time to stare at the ceiling and slip slowly into madness - "

Minerva: "What?!"

Albus: [irritably] "Minnie, if you're not going to be helpful, you can at least not be nosy."

*[Cuts back to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.]*

Harry: "Which is great, really, as now that I have the memory, I can focus on the important things."

Ron: "The quidditch game? For the team you're the captain of?"

Hermione: [sighs irritably] "What is this, your first day?"

Harry: "I meant Malfoy! Maybe if I take the time to make more Felix Felicis - "

Hermione: [interrupting] "That would take you six months and an inconceivable amount of theft."

Harry: "IT WOULD BE WORTH IT!"

Ron: "I don't know. Sounds lame, mate."

Harry: "IMAGINE THE LOOK ON HIS SMARMY FACE - "

Hermione: [sighs wistfully] "I can picture it."

Harry: " - WHEN I BURST INTO THE ROOM OF REQUIREMENT, CATCHING HIM IN THE ACT - "

Ron: "The act of what, exactly - "

Harry: "DEATH EATER-ING - "

Hermione: "Not a thing."

Harry: " - PROBABLY SHIRTLESS - "

Ron: "What?"

Hermione: "What?"

Blaise, walking by: "He's not wrong."

Chapter End Notes
a/n: Did you catch the movie quote? Stay tuned for 23 in a bit, and 24 tonight. Nobility also in the works, though depending on how long it takes to make the ornate dessert my mother requested, it may take a couple more days.

Also, Alpha is now available! Check out my tumblr or Little Chmura's for more info.

Lastly, if you were a lover of Epistles, Sally and I have posted an audio recording of it, as read between the two of us. You can find it on AO3 and Tumblr.
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XXIII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent, day 23.

(Scene opens with Seamus and Dean interview.)

Dean: "Hmm, how to put this delicately - "

Seamus: "Potter cursed the testicles off Malfoy in the bathroom."

Dean: [frustratedly] "That's not even close to delicate. It's not even accurate."

Seamus: "How is it not? I correctly named all the parties involved - "

Dean: [groaning] "His testicles, though - "

Seamus: [snottily] "Well, can you say with certainty that they're still there?"

Dean: "By that logic, I can't say with certainty that they were ever there!"

Seamus: [smugly] "What I'm hearing you say is that I'm right."

Dean: [sighs] "That doesn't surprise me."

Seamus: [ignoring him] "What I want to know is what the bollocking fuck they were doing alone in the bathroom."

Dean: "Uh, maybe they were using the bathroom?"

Seamus: [scoffing] "Are you really that naive?"

Dean: "Apparently I am."

Seamus: [insistently] "Have you seen how obsessed they are with each other?"

Dean: "Well, if we're going to judge people by their obsessions - "

Seamus: "Plus, I feel like there's chemistry there."

Dean: [echoes skeptically] "Chemistry."

Seamus: "Yes."

Dean: "Just out of curiosity, what do you think of our relationship?"

Seamus: "It's the best."

Dean: "Right. And in terms of chemistry - "
Seamus: "A bromance for the ages."

Dean: "Okay, but what if instead of a bromance - "

Seamus: "A brolationship?"

Dean: " - yes, or - "

Seamus: "Brotp."

Dean: "Okay, try this: say, for example, we remove 'bro' from the equation."

[There is a pause.]

Seamus: "I don't understand."


Seamus: "An otp?"

Dean: [*shrugs*] "Sure, whatever that is."

Seamus: "Wait, are you gay?"

Dean: "If the question is would I suck a dick, yes. If it were yours."

Seamus: "You would?"

Dean: "Yes."

Seamus: [*frantically*] "Wait - do you think I'm gay?"

Dean: "Yes."

Seamus: "Where are you getting that from?"

Dean: "You."

Seamus: "Me?"

Dean: "Yes. You."

Seamus: [*blankly*] "I don't understand."

Dean: "Seamus, you're gay."

Seamus: "Okay, but - "

Dean: "You like me. You think I'm attractive."

Seamus: [*irritated, as though this is obvious*] "Well, I have eyes."

Dean: "You would enjoy a relationship with me."

Seamus: [*thinking*] "A brolation- "

Dean: "No. A relationship."
Seamus: "I hate relationships."
Dean: "Because . . . ?"
Seamus: "Women are terrible."
Dean: "Exactly."
Seamus: "Wait, do I not like women?"
Dean: "No."
Seamus: "Do I like men?"
Dean: "You like me."
Seamus: [thoughtfully] "I do, don't I?"
Dean: "Yes. And I like you."
Seamus: "Oh my god, are we gay?!"
Dean: "There is a mild possibility, yes."
Seamus: "I feel . . . " [he trails off.]
Dean: "Yes?"
Seamus: " . . . okay, I think." [Nods decisively.] "Yes, I think I'm okay with that."
Dean: "Good."
Seamus: "Does this mean I have to dress differently?"
Dean: "No."
Seamus: "Okay, but do I have to - "
Dean: "Whatever it is, no."
Seamus: "So, I guess now we" [he gestures between them] "are - "
Dean: [cuts in abruptly] "Yes."
Seamus: "Oh." [Pauses, beaming.] "Okay."
[The camera zooms out to reveal Luna and Severus watching from the corner.]
Luna: [whispering] "It's so beautiful!"
Severus: [licks a finger, turning the page of his Quibbler.] "I suppose."
Luna: [looking at him hopefully] "Will you hold me?"
Severus: [not looking up] "No."
Luna: "But I just feel the moment calls for something more than existential closeness, you know?"
Severus: "No."

Luna: [gently] "Are you just in a bad mood because you're upset about Harry?"

[Cuts to Severus and Harry.]

Severus: [skeptically, looking at Harry's Potions book] "This is the copy of Advanced Potion-Making that you purchased from Flourish and Blotts?"

Harry: [firmly] "Yes."

Severus: "Then why does it have the name 'Roonil Wazlib' written inside the front cover?"

Harry: [hesitantly] "That's, uh - my nickname, sir."

Severus: "Your nickname."

Harry: "Yeah . . . it's what my friends call me."

Severus: [impatiently] "I understand what a nickname is." [He looks up at the camera.] "Truly, this exchange could not get more absurd by any stretches of the imagination."

Harry: [earnestly] "Perhaps I could try to use occlumency, even though I never learned it at all? And then also proceed to learn nothing from this encounter?"

Severus: "Yes." [He nods.] "That would certainly make this worse."

[Cuts back to Luna and Severus.]

Severus: [sourly] "Potter nearly killed Draco."

Luna: "Aw, I know, but he didn't mean to."

Severus: [looking down his nose at her] "Are you trying to make the argument that it's the thought that counts?"

Luna: [uncertainly] "Yes?"

Severus: "That, Miss Lovegood, is an excuse only to be used when one has presented an underwhelming holiday gift."

Luna: [as though she is offended to her very essence] "I would never underwhelm you with a gift!"

Severus: [thoughtfully] "That's probably true."

[In front of them, Seamus and Dean are attempting to work out the mechanics of hand-holding. They struggle.]

Luna: [wistfully] "They really are sweet." [She looks hopefully at him.]

Severus: [sighs loudly] "Fine. Come here."

[He lazily holds out an arm and Luna quickly ducks under it, delighted. Severus awkwardly pats the top of her head with the flat of his hand.]

Severus: "There, there."
Luna: *whispering* "This is really soothing my need to destroy things."

Severus: *reading the Quibbler with his free hand.* "What?"

Luna: *louder* "I said this is really soothing my need to destroy things."

Severus: *pats her head again* "That's nice."

[Scene cuts to Harry, Ron, and Hermione interview.]

Harry: "Well, it's been an interesting week."

Ron: "Yes." *He glances warily at Harry.* "He kissed my sister."

Harry: "Well, yes, and I also - "

Ron: "My sister."

Harry: "Yes, but I - "

Ron: *interrupting* "And I'm fine with it."

Harry: "Yes, and I'm really glad you - "

Ron: "I SAID I'M FINE WITH IT."

Hermione: *sighs* "Plus, I got a note from Gossip Girl, so people have finally stopped thinking it's me."

Harry: "You have? What did it say?"

Ron: "$SURELY NOT THAT YOU KISSED MY SISTER."

Hermione: *turns red, looks away* "Nothing."

[Scene cuts to camera feed of Hermione and Draco in the corridor.]

Hermione: "So, um. Are you okay?"

Draco: "No."

Hermione: "Does it hurt?"

Draco: "Yes."

Hermione: "Did it scar?"

Draco: "Yes."

Hermione: *muttering* "I told Harry it was a bad idea to use that spell - "

Draco: "Oh. I thought you meant - " *he cuts himself off, shaking his head.* "No, that part's fine."

Hermione: *blushes* "Oh." *She looks at her feet.* "I, um, got a note from Gossip Girl."

Draco: "So did I."
Hermione: [curiously] "What did yours say?"

Draco: "It said 'it's never too late to be whoever you want to be.'" [He looks saddened.] "Yours?"

Hermione: [pulls a slip of parchment from her pocket, reading it aloud.] "Suddenly she realized what she was regretting was not the lost past but the lost future; not what had been, but what would never be."

[They pause.]

Draco: "We probably shouldn't tell anyone what they mean."

Hermione: "No."

Draco: "Also, um." [He shifts awkwardly, as though he doesn't want to say whatever he's about to admit.] "I might have to, um, do something soon that - "

Hermione: [interrupting] "Probably better that you don't tell me."

Draco: "Yeah." [uncomfortably] "Okay."

Hermione: "So, um." [She pauses, tilting her head at him.] "I'll see you around, you horrible disgusting moonbeam."

Draco: [fighting a smile] "I loathe you. You know that, right?"

Hermione: [nods] "Yes."

Draco: "Good. And - "

Hermione: "Yes. I loathe you too."

Draco: "Oh, good. Ideal."

[They smile at each other and part ways, walking in opposite directions. Luna runs into the camera frame.]

Luna: "DID YOU SEE THAT?"

Severus: "Yes."

Luna: "WELL? AREN'T YOU GOING TO - "

Severus: "Fine." [He lifts an arm.] "Come here."

[She runs to him, ducking under his arm and clinging to his waist.]

Lee, off screen: [wails] "THESE GARBAGE PEOPLE ARE GOING TO RUIN ME."

[Cuts back to Harry, Hermione, and Ron.]

Harry: "Well, anyway, as I was saying, the horcrux - "

Hermione: "Wait." [She frowns.] "It's the end of the school year, isn't it?"

Harry: [confused] "Yeah. So?"
Hermione: *shrugs* "So, somebody's probably going to die."

Ron: "Surely not anyone who kissed my sister. ANYONE BUT THEM."

Harry: *glancing at him, hurt* "I thought you were okay with - "

Ron: "I'M OKAY WITH IT. I LOVE IT."

Hermione: "He's fine."

Ron: "I'M FINE!"

Hermione: "Totally fine."

Harry: *shrugging* "Okay. Well, I'm really bummed about being gone for probably like the ten minutes or whatever it will take to find the horcrux, so can you guys keep an eye on Malfoy?"

Hermione: *slipping her leather jacket over her shoulders, putting on sunglasses* "Sure."

Ron: "What the hell is this?"

Hermione: "Me being cool about Malfoy."

Ron: "Oh." *He pauses.* "Can I - "

[Hermione hands him a leather jacket and an alternate pair of wayfarers. He puts them on.]

Ron: "Who kissed whose sister? Nobody I know."

Hermione: "See? Works."

Ron: *impressed* "Totally does."

Harry: *looking at them suspiciously* "What is this?"

Ron: *shrugs* "We're cool."

Hermione: "The coolest."

[Ron and Hermione bump fists and sit back, rolling cigarettes.]

Harry: *nodding* "Cool."

[Cuts to Albus and Minerva.]

Albus: "Okay, so, I'm off, hold down the fort, Minnie - " *trails off, muttering to himself* "Not like it's hard - "

Minerva: *rolling her eyes* "Okay so if you die can I at least have your job, or - "

Albus: *coos reassuringly* "Yes, yes, of course!"

[Cuts to Albus.]

Albus: "I lied." *He grins.* "I'm amazing."
Chapter End Notes

a/n: Draco and Hermione's Gossip Girl notes are both quotes from F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Almost nearly caught up on this foolish undertaking . . .
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XXIV

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts
Episode XXIV

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent, day 24. Merry Christmas Eve!

[Scene opens with Nearly Headless Nick, the Grey Lady, the Fat Friar, and the Bloody Baron.]

Nick: "I'm so glad to see that you've finally given us our due."

Lee, off screen: [muttering] "Well, considering we've no fucking choice - "

Interviewer: [gently] "What Lee means is that the students are very busy studying for their end of term exams."

Lee, off screen: "Don't be a twat, what I mean is that they're boring!"

Grey Lady: [huffily] "Are you saying you're only talking to us because there are no living people to interview?"

Interviewer: [politely] "No, no, of course not - "

Nick: "Okay, good, because - "

Lee, off screen: [yelling to someone off camera] "WHAT DO YOU MEAN THERE ARE DEATH EATERS AT HOGWARTS?!"

Grey Lady: "So, anyway, as I was -"

Interviewer: "Get out, we found something better."

[Cuts to interview with Rosmerta.]

Rosmerta: "So, funny story, turns out I've been under the Imperius curse for a year."

Interviewer: "Huh. No kidding."

Rosmerta: "I had the same reaction."

Interviewer: "Well, anyway, we're just, um - trying to piece together the events of the night - "

Rosmerta: "You mean you're trying to stay out of the castle."

Interviewer: [shrugs] "Let's not squabble over it."

Rosmerta: "Well, Albus came by alone - "

Interviewer: "Alone, really?"

Rosmerta: "Looked that way, anyway."
Interviewer: "Okay. Continue."

Rosmerta: "Anyway, he came back about half dead with Potter just as I was putting the cat outside."

Interviewer: "What did he look like?"

Rosmerta: "Just a shitty tabby."

Interviewer: "I meant Harry."

Rosmerta: "Oh. A bit overwhelmed."

Interviewer: "And then what?"

Rosmerta: "I pointed out that the Dark Mark had been cast over the castle about a few minutes before I'd let the cat out."

Interviewer: "How did he react?"

Rosmerta: "Pissed all over the side of my geranium planter."

Interviewer: "Harry?"

Rosmerta: "No, Albus."

Interviewer: "Albus?"

Rosmerta: "Yes."

Interviewer: [stunned] "Albus Dumbledore?"

Rosmerta: "Oh, no. The cat's name is Albus."

[There is a pause.]

Interviewer: "Just so we're clear, I'm definitely not asking about your cat."

Rosmerta: "I thought it was a bit dodgy that you kept asking. I mean there's been Death Eaters at Hogwarts and all that, and with everything going right to shit quicker than a knife fight in a broom closet - " [She shakes her head.] "And then you're sat here wanting to know what my cat's reaction was - "

Interviewer: [interrupting] "I really don't give a fuck what your cat did."

Rosmerta: [sniffing] "Well there's no need to be rude."

[Cuts to Hagrid interview.]

Hagrid: "Er, yes, I didn't see any of the goings-on up a' the castle - a bit otherwise occupied - "

Interviewer: "I heard your hut was on fire."

Hagrid: "Yeah, it was," [He sighs.] "An' then Harry tol' me 'bout Dumbledore bein' - bein' - " [He cuts off with a loud wail.] "About how he's - he's GONE - "

Interviewer: "Er, yes, um - " [pats Hagrid's shoulder awkwardly] "It'll be alright - "
Hagrid: [openly weeping] "He did so much for me - he even gave me my own hut - "

Interviewer: "It was a very shack-like hut, though, right? He seemed to be very free with shack distribution - "

Hagrid: [bawling] "HE WAS SUCH A GOOD MAN - "

Interviewer: "Oh, yes, certainly - "

Hagrid: " - UNFAILING GENEROSITY - "

Interviewer: "True - "

Hagrid: " - THE PERFECT KARAOKE PARTNER - "

Interviewer: "Okay, that I actually do see."

[Cuts to Pansy and Daphne interview.]

Daphne: "Lupin, Lockhart, and Snape."

Pansy: "Ooh. Fuck Lockhart?"

Daphne: "I don't know. I sort of liked how dirty Lupin always looked."

Pansy: "True - "

Interviewer: [interrupting] "I asked how you were coping with the Headmaster's untimely demise."

Pansy: [haughtily] "Yes, and I feel like this is a pretty telling answer." [She turns back to Daphne.] "Well, marry Snape, maybe?"

Daphne: "Marry Snape over Lupin? But Lupin looked so sad all the time."

Pansy: "How is that - "

Daphne: [earnestly] "Like a sad greyhound, you know? I always wanted to hug him."

Pansy: "You know, I worry that if we ever stop seeing each other you'll just fuck homeless people."

Daphne: [shrugs] "You might have a point."

Interviewer: "Um, guys - "

Pansy: "Ugh, hold on - " [She turns to the interviewer.] "Look, we get it. You want us to talk about Dumbledore dying, but there's not much to say."

Daphne: "Yeah. I mean, was it sad? Yes."

Pansy: "Was it disturbing? A bit."

Daphne: "Do we feel supremely endangered now as students at this school? Incredibly."

Pansy: "Yeah. I've been thinking of getting a pet dementor."

Daphne: "Name it Basil."
Pansy: "Obviously."

Interviewer: "Okay, but surely his death must affect you in some way."

Daphne: "Oh, it does. Objectively, in terms of an overall preference for people not being murdered in the vicinity of where I sleep, it definitely does."

Pansy: "But - and this is the important question - did he let us win the house cup first year?"

Daphne: "No."

Pansy: " - no."

Daphne: "So really, our hands are tied."

Pansy: "We can only feel so much."

Daphne: "We try."

Pansy: "Not very hard, mind you."

Daphne: " - but we try."

Interviewer: "Well, that's . . . honest."

Pansy: "Okay, my turn. [She thinks.] "Karkaroff, Maxime, Dumbledore."

Interviewer: "Whoa, whoa, whoa, too soon."

Pansy: [sniffing] "Ugh, you and your sensibilities."

[Cuts to Minerva interview.]

Minerva: [sadly] "You know, I was hard on him, but I really did love Albus in my way."

Interviewer: "Oh yes, that was - "

Minerva: "I mean, he was terribly irresponsible, but he was also very good at karaoke - "

Interviewer: "You know, I'd heard that."

Minerva: "And he did have a very lively air about him. [She stands.] "Well, I suppose I should start taking care of things now that he's gone. Such a pity, such a pity - "

[She leaves. Camera cuts to footage outside the Headmaster's office.]

Minerva: "Well, I suppose you'll be wanting me to change the password, then?"

Gargoyle: "Nah."

Minerva: "What do you mean 'nah'?"

Gargoyle: "You're only temporary. He didn't name you as his successor."

Minerva: "Are you - " [She sputters angrily.] "Are you fucking kidding me?" [She kicks the base of the gargoyle.] "FUCKING ALBUS!"
Free Verse #301

Sorry I got most of my murder ideas from you
The Filch thing
And the coins
It's only that I can't help listening when you talk
And you are always talking
About things that are very helpful
For someone planning a murder
Might want to keep that in mind

Sonnet #36

Many times over a sinner,
And more times than that, just a fool;
I thought you would find me a winner,
It turns out that I'm just a tool.
I said I'd be better than Weasley,
Perhaps I was wrong all along.
Or maybe I gave up too easily?
No, it's the first thing, I was wrong.
Someday I'll make up the difference,
I promise you, someday I will,
But go on and call me your Icarus,
You are my sun, and I loathe you still.
One request, if I can, should you wish not to injure;
Promise me, please, that you won't fuck a ginger.

Free Verse #317

I found myself in the swell of your lips
Undone and devolved by the sway of your hips
In your breathy sweet sigh, when I came on your tits
Myrtle preferred this not rhyme.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: I know this was sort of a dark place to end given the holiday but I promise there will be loads of big reveals in tomorrow's chapter (the END) and hopefully you will laugh at them. I love you all, and merry Christmas Eve xx
The Real World: Hogwarts, Episode XXV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Hogwarts

Episode XXV

Summary: The Real World, concluded. Olivie Advent, day 25. Merry Christmas, happy holidays, besos for all!

[Scene opens with Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "It's been a tough end of the year. It's been a difficult year overall, really, particularly for me."

Interviewer: "I'm very sorry to hear that."

Hermione: "Oh, it's quite all right. [She shrugs.] "Anyway, it was quite lovely being interviewed by David Attenborough."

David Attenborough: [astonished] "I wasn't aware anyone knew who I was!"

Hermione: "Well, I did grow up a Muggle, you know."

David Attenborough: "Yes, I suppose that's true."

Hermione: "I also happen to have an appreciation for nature documentaries. [She pauses.] "Why on earth are you doing interviews for a wizarding reality show?"

David Attenborough: [shrugs] "Trying to expand my reach."

Hermione: [nodding] "Ah."

David Attenborough: "Important to appeal to a larger demographic, you know. At the risk of someday being replaced by Oprah."

Hermione: [making a face] "Oh, they're so unrefined in the colonies."

David Attenborough: "I'm inclined to agree."

Hermione: [kindly] "I'm sure they wouldn't."

David Attenborough: "Well, who's to say, really."

Hermione: [shrugging] "Well, in any case, it was a pleasure. Sort of."

David Attenborough: "Heavy emphasis on the 'sort of,' I presume."

Hermione: "Yes. Quite."

David Attenborough: "Fair."
Theo: "Well, here's to a morbid end of another satisfying year at Hogwarts."

[He raises a glass. Blaise meets it with his own.]

Blaise: "The best."

Theo: "I've learned so much."

Blaise: "All the things."

Daphne: "I've learned almost nothing, honestly."

Pansy: "So, the usual."

Daphne: "Yeah, I'm not upset."

Pansy: "I am!"

Theo: "About your education?"

Pansy: "No, fuck that. [She shrugs.] "What upsets me is that we still don't know who Gossip Girl is."

Daphne: "That's true, it is odd."

Blaise: "I really thought she'd be type to reveal herself in some dramatic fashion at the end of the year."

[Lavender and Parvati pause, overhearing this as they walk by.]

Lavender: "Wait, are you guys talking about Gossip Girl?"

Theo: "Yes."

Parvati: "We were starting to think she was a Slytherin."

Pansy: "Nah, I'd have sniffed her out by now if she were."

Daphne: "That's true."

Blaise: "We thought she was a Gryffindor."

Lavender: "No. We're sort of an oblivious bunch, to be honest."

[Harry, Hermione, and Ron pause as they walk by.]

Harry: "Not me. I notice everything."

Hermione: [placatingly] "Oh yes. Of course you do."

Ron: "Is this about Gossip Girl?"

Theo: "Yes."

Ron: "Is she not Pansy?"
Pansy: "No she is *not*, you twatting - "

Daphne: [interrupting] "We thought it was you, Granger."

Hermione: "Yes. You all made that quite clear."

Pansy: "Only because we hate you."

Hermione: "Thank you for clarifying."

Pansy: "You're welcome."

Theo: "Do you know who it is, Granger?"

Hermione: "No."

Pansy: [rolling her eyes] "Well, if *almighty* Granger doesn't know the answer - "

Hermione: "Well, if I were to speculate, then it would have to be someone who wasn't ever actually out to destroy us."

Blaise: "So definitely not Pansy, then."

[Justin Finch-Fletchley walks by.]

Justin: "I don't know, *my* letter was pretty damaging - "

Theo: "Nobody cares."

Justin: "Okay."

[He leaves.]

Ron: "Well, it also has to be someone who was around a lot."

Parvati: "Yes. And if it wasn't anyone from the show - "

Blaise: "Someone who kept popping up all the time, then."

[They all slowly turn to the right.]

Luna: "Oh, hi."

Pansy: [suspiciously] "Lovegood, it was you, wasn't it?"

Luna: "Yes."

Theo: "How did we not just immediately guess that?"

Luna: "You're all fools."

Harry: "Wait, Luna! How come *I* never got a letter?"

Luna: "Oh, Harry. You're just so . . ."

Harry: "Yes?"
Luna: "Public."
Hermione: "That actually makes sense."
Ron: "Yeah. Like if anyone was going to write a book - "
Theo: "They'd pick Potter's perspective."
Blaise: [muttering] "The bastard."
Harry: "I don't know why. I'm just trying to live my life."
Parvati: "Yes. But you make such a mess of it."
Harry: [nodding] "That's fair."
Blaise: "Well, at least now the Gossip Girl thing is over."
Ron: "I feel like I should be mad - "
Luna: "But you're not, because it's me. Right?"
Ron: "Yes. It's very difficult to be mad at you."
Luna: "Why?"
Ron: "Well, mostly because I can't make eye contact for too long. It's very unsettling."
Luna: "Thank you."
Ron: "You're welcome."
Harry: "The Gossip Girl notes also weren't so bad, really - "
[Justin comes back.]
Justin: "Hey, Potter, speak for yours- "
Theo: [interrupting] "Go away."
Justin: "Cool."
[He leaves.]
Daphne: [thoughtfully] "Well, that, and it's also kind of nice that the search for Gossip Girl brought us together for a moment."
Pansy: "Yes. Now leave."
Theo: "Annnd moment over."
Harry: [to Pansy] "You're going to try to fuck me over someday, aren't you?"
Pansy: "Definitely."
Harry: "Cool."
Pansy: "No offense, really. It's only because I hate you."

Harry: [shrugging] "Fair enou-"

Pansy: "I SAID NO OFFENSE!"

[Cuts to Luna interview.]

David Attenborough: "I have to say, I'm surprised to learn it was you who'd been writing those notes."

Luna: "I can be very surprising."

David Attenborough: "Oh, I hadn't doubted that. It's only that I didn't think you would be familiar with Romeo and Juliet -"

Luna: "Oh no, I love them. They're old friends of my father."

David Attenborough: [confused] "Um, okay - or F. Scott Fitzgerald, for that matter -"

Luna: [dreamily] "Easily my favorite of the Scott Fitzgeralda."

David Attenborough: "... and Mrs. Robinson, then?"

Luna: "Such a lovely elf. I do so love that she takes such pride in carrying the pudding into the feast."

David Attenborough: [suspiciously] "Miss Lovegood, can we play a game?"

Luna: "Of course."

David Attenborough: "Finish the end of this poem: 'roses are red, violets are blue'-"

Luna: "Nargles have a slightly teal finish."

[There is a pause.]

David Attenborough: "So... you're not Gossip Girl."

Luna: "Lol no."

David Attenborough: "Okay then."

[Cut to scattered footage of Lee and staff.]

Lee: [talking to someone off screen] "Listen, we've been canceled, so we'll have to obliviate the staff." [He looks around.] "Can't seem to find Joanne. Any of you twats seen her?"

[Offscreen mumbling.]

Lee: [irritably] "Joanne - you know, the coffee girl? With the hair? And the -" [he gestures] "The face?"

[Offscreen mumbling.]

Lee: "What do you mean she's run off? Where's she run off to?"
[Offscreen mumbling.]

Lee: "Well, that's a problem." [He sighs.] "You're sure you're thinking of the right one? What's her last name again?"

[Offscreen mumbling.]

Lee: "Rowling?" [He shrugs.] "Fine. Whatever. Surely she's around here somewhere - "

[Offscreen mumbling.]

Lee: "Ah, well." [He shrugs.] "You don't think she'd tell anyone, do you?"

[Offscreen mumbling.]

Lee: "That was my thought. I mean, who the fuck wants to know about these titbunting miscreant wizard kids?" [He waves a hand carelessly.] "Anyway, pack all this shit up. They want us for a bloody dating show."

[Offscreen mumbling.]

Lee: "I don't give a cunting fuck what you think, just wrap it up!"

[Offscreen mumbling.]

Lee: "What's going to happen to the footage? Don't know. Nothing, I'd guess - suppose we should just destroy it - " [He walks offscreen, muttering.] "Never got anything interesting anyway - "

[Footage cuts out. Camera jostles unsteadily and then opens to Severus sitting at Albus' desk.]

Severus: "It was me. I killed Dumbledore."

[He pauses.]

Severus: "I am also the Half-Blood Prince, should anyone be wondering that."

[He pauses again.]

Severus: "Oh yes. And I'm Gossip Girl."

[The camera shifts sharply to the right.]

Luna: "Promise we'll burn the place down?"

Severus: "Promise."

Luna: [whispering] "XOXO."

[Footage runs out.]

Chapter End Notes

a/n: David Attenborough is the narrator of Planet Earth, among other things. Oprah
voiced his narration in the American version of Life, to general disappointment.

A final reminder that Alpha is available on my website! If you like graphic novels, science fiction, fantasy, ridiculously good art, potentially interesting stories, etc., the art is truly breathtaking - Little Chmura has a Gift.
Correspondence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Correspondence

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: T, some language, implied sex

Summary: This is my very fluffy D/Hr Advent 2016 one shot. It was originally posted in AO3, so I added it to the FFN collection but will only be linking to it here. Thank you to everyone for the nomination! The prompt for this was Christmas cards: Every year, Draco insists that Hermione take a picture for their Christmas card. Why? Hell if she knows, but if it will make him happy, so be it.

You can find this one shot posted here: Correspondence [ AO3 ]. Sorry for how confusing this is, but wanted to post in Amortentia on FFN without double posting on AO3, so here we are.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Thanks to Sally and UnicornShenans for their alpha eyes on this, and to aurorarsinistra for the PERFECT aesthetic she made for it during her Aesthetic Advent. Find it (and all her pretty things) on Tumblr!

Update info for Amortentia: Next week I will post two incredibly smutty rare pair one shots and the dark Harmony I've been hinting at, so this collection is less on hiatus than one might think. My other works will each receive one update over the next two weeks (except for Nobility, which will get two, one coming shortly) because I am going to focus on finishing up a novel manuscript the first week of January. Thanks for your patience, thanks always for reading, and here's to a happy 2017!
Movements

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Movements

Pairing: Black Pansy (Sirius Black x Pansy Parkinson)

Universe: Post-War, Sirius Lives AU

Rating: M for language, sex

Summary: A response to thewaterfalcon's prompt for the Quills and Parchment 'Under the Mistletoe' collection on AO3: He's leather, she's lace. He's young at heart, and she's all grown up. A room at the Leaky, a full bottle of Ogden's Finest Firewhisky, and the promise of a Christmas Eve neither will forget...

This is the least plot I've ever written in a one shot. Happy 2017!

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You can find this one shot posted here: Movements [ AO3 ]. Sorry - again - for how confusing this is, but wanted - again - to post in Amortentia on FFN without double posting on AO3.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: So, I have a few darker one shots that need to be posted (i.e. the dark Harmony and the Theocissa that some of you have read from the Q+P collection) and am considering posting them - and moving some of these, including Birds (the Regulene) and Perchance to Dream (the Sleeping Beauty Pottgrass) - to a new collection, as this collection was always intended to be for fluff and humor. If you have thoughts on this, do share.

Also, January 7th is the anniversary of Clean, aka my first fanfic-iversary! One year in the books, hooray. What should I do to celebrate? A drunk rewrite? A scene re-written from Theo's perspective? If you have thoughts, feel free to let me know.

Happy new year, and all the best for 2017!
The List

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The List

Pairing: Pottgrass (Harry Potter x Daphne Greengrass)

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, EWE

Rating: M for language, sex (like, a lot of sex)

Summary: This is my entry for the Quills and Parchment Lemonade competition, which received Fan Honorable Mention, Most Creative Plot, Best Banter, and Best Dirty Talk along with a slew of wonderful runner up-manships including Character Chemistry and Best Smut. Sadly for all (read: me) - I was only runner up for Best Blow Job, but we can't all have the things that we want (she says, with gentle devastation). In any case, a massive thanks to all who participated, judged, and voted! And without further ado: Nobody taught them how to be young and irresponsible, so they'll have to teach each other.

You can find this one shot posted here: The List [ AO3 ]. Sorry - YET AGAIN - for how confusing this is, but wanted - YET AGAIN - to post in Amortentia on FFN without double posting on AO3.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Psst . . . if you like this pairing, you should definitely be reading Prince by DrSallySparrow on FFN, and you might also be interested to know that Daphne and Harry are a background pairing in my multi-chaptered version of Ride or Die. Also, I happily lost this round to Sally's stunning Harmony AU, so if you're in the business of seeking out beauty in the world, I encourage you to hop on over to FFN for Sally Drabbles, or read it in the Lemonade collection (it's called "Like This").

SPEAKING OF SALLY, for Valentine's day we are doing a little OS exchange, because we are fucking adorable loons. She has written me what promises to be forbidden love/poetic genius, while I will be bringing some AU Dramione banter with a healthy side of HEA to the table. Stick around for that update tomorrow, and watch for Drunk History: Part I coming sometime this week, with Part II to follow shortly.
When the blindfold was ripped from his eyes, Draco Malfoy was surprised to find that he was in precisely the same chair he had been sitting in mere hours earlier - of course, when he had first taken the seat, he had still possessed full mobility of his hands - but it still took a moment to adjust to the dim light of his captain's quarters. He jerked his wrists up instinctively, testing the magical restraints, but wasn't surprised when they didn't move.

He sighed.

"What do you want?" he asked, squinting around his cabin. "Is this some kind of trick?"

"No trick," a feminine voice replied from behind him. He tried to turn his head to catch a glimpse of her face but she gripped his neck tightly, holding him in place. "A very serious matter, in fact."

"Deathly serious," a male voice said from his right, and Draco eyed him from his periphery, catching a glint of messy black hair and less-than-reassuring smile that suddenly looked hazily familiar. "I hate to tell you this, Mr Malfoy," the man remarked, breaking Draco's reverie, "but unfortunately you're no longer the captain of this ship."

"I'm not?" Draco echoed skeptically, scoffing in annoyance. "Seems unlikely."

"Well, we'd both be pretty shit at our jobs if it had ever seemed likely," a third voice muttered, materializing from Draco's left and emerging from the shadows to reveal a lanky redheaded man. "Seems bloody reasonable to me."

"So," Draco said, his head suddenly starting to throb, "you're saying I've been kidnapped, then?"

"If it helps, you've also been robbed," the woman said airily, stepping around the chair and prompting Draco to helplessly follow her movements with an unsubtle sidelong glance as she came into view. She was wearing trousers, he noted, making a face, though in all fairness they did serve to accent her form quite nicely; quite nicely, in fact, and as she took a few calculated steps to face him, he processed the overlarge brown eyes, the particular angle on the pert bow of her lips, the barely visible dusting of freckles across the bridge of her sun-tanned nose.

"Why would that information help?" he asked warily, a little dazed.

She examined him through narrowed eyes.
"I said if," she murmured, frowning, before leaning entirely too close to his face and prompting him to inhale sharply.

"Now," she said sternly, "where's the diadem?"

"What diadem?" Draco asked indignantly, and her eyes narrowed further.

"Ronald," she sighed, glancing at the redhead, "did you not give him the Veritaserum?" She looked back at Draco, her brow furrowing as she eyed his face. "He doesn't seem particularly forthcoming to me."

"Oh, did I not tell you?" the redheaded man said, eyeing his fingernails. "We're out."

She let out a frustrated groan.

"That didn't seem relevant to mention?" the woman demanded, leaning away from Draco to put her hands on her hips. "For heaven's sake, Ron - "

"It's not his fault," the dark-haired man interrupted. "I forgot, too. But," he continued, with a rather distinct shamelessness, "I'm sure we can think of other ways to get the truth from this one."

"Ugh, Harry, you always get so messy," the woman sighed. "Just once I'd like to get through the day without having to break anyone's thumbs."

"Excuse me," Draco interrupted, having had about enough of whatever was going on, and the woman turned back to him.

"Lovely," she muttered, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at the man she'd called Ron. "Look what you've done. Now we just look unprofessional."

"In what world were we ever considered professionals?" Ron countered, and the woman let out a surprisingly vicious growl.

"Ronald, I beg you," she sighed, as Draco watched the man she'd called Harry duck his head to hide a laugh. "And you," she said, rounding on him. "Don't think I'm letting you slide on this, either."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Harry said drily. "But, for the record, I'm afraid we might be boring our guest," he reminded her, gesturing at Draco.

"Oh," Draco said, as the woman's eyes fell on him. "No, that's - "

"I hate it when you're right, Harry," the woman muttered, and the other man chuckled, inclining his head. "Hold on," she sighed, rounding on Draco. "We'll have to revisit the situation once we've regrouped."

Draco frowned as she suddenly brandished her wand from nothing. "What does that - "

"Stupefy," she said primly, and everything went black.

12 hours earlier

"Ah, Captain Malfoy," Rosmerta said briskly, offering him a wry smirk as she came up behind him. "Getting a bit wet before you head out from dry land, I gather?"
"Stop trying so hard," Draco muttered, his glass of Firewhisky hitting his teeth with a dull clang. "I'm drinking. We get it. There's no need to reach for subpar pun work."

"How many of these have you had?" she asked, picking up an upended glass and arching a brow at him.

"How many of you are there?" he countered, closing one eye to focus, and she sighed.

"You'll have to stop coming in to make a mess of my pub," she said, giving him a light smack across the back of his head. "Your father would die if he knew - "

"Yes, from lack of surprise," Draco muttered, toasting her. "Always said I was a little shit, and now look at me - " he paused to empty the liquid into his mouth, slamming the glass down on the wooden counter. "Living up to expectations in truly spectacular fashion," he ruled with misery, licking the burn of whisky from his lips.

Rosmerta sighed, stepping behind the bar to charm the dishes. "Where are you headed in the morning?" she asked, and Draco let his forehead slap against the wood of the bar, suddenly exhausted by the prospect of maintaining control of his posture.

"Back to Diagon," Draco replied, his voice muffled. "Apparently His Eminent Voldyship needs me to bring something back for him."

"From the castle?" Rosmerta asked, glancing at the outline of it through the window of the pub.

"No, Rosmerta, the Dark Lord wanted me to pick up something from the vast treasury of your opulent establishment," Draco drawled sarcastically, jolting upright to glare unevenly at her. "Fucking of course from the castle - "

He broke off as someone clipped his shoulder; he glared suspiciously at the man who walked by, squinting at the hazy formation of light around his messy black hair. "Excuse me you little shit, do you have any idea who you just - "

"There's no need to get snippy, Captain Malfoy," Rosmerta said quickly, brandishing a dull kitchen knife in his face from behind the bar. "Either with me or my patrons."

"This place is disgusting," Draco announced loudly, disrupting the scattered handful of people in the pub. "Inimitable vermin underfoot - "

"That's about enough, Captain," Rosmerta hissed, swapping out the kitchen knife for her wand and flicking it to let the door burst open, ripping his stool from beneath him and leaving a clear path for his exit. "You're cut off," she informed him bluntly, "and I shall have to ask you very firmly to get out - "

"Now who's snippy," he sniffed, making a face at her. "What's that?" he asked innocently, gesturing behind her.

"I'm not falling for that, Captain," Rosmerta growled, and he shrugged.

"Fine," he said neutrally, reaching behind the bar to grab a bottle of Firewhisky and strutting unsteadily out the door with it. "Charge it to my account, would you?"

"You haven't paid in two months," she called after him, to which he raised the bottle in acknowledgement without looking over his shoulder.
"Probably should stop kicking me out, then," he yelled back, but the door slammed behind him, leaving him to shiver in the cold night air.

"Well," he muttered to himself, "I take it my room reservation has been nullified." He looked around, stumbling through the snow. "Ship it is, then," he mumbled, and made his way there, his fingers tightening around the bottle of Odgen's he'd stolen as he raised it to his lips.

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Draco struggled to lift his head, coming back to life as the woman's face slowly swam before him.

"Sorted - " he began, coughing on dryness in his throat. "Sorted it all out, then?"

"What is it that Lord Voldemort asked you to bring back to Diagon?" she asked, and suddenly Draco remembered the pieces of his night, turning his head to eye the messy-haired man who stood beside her.

"You," he said accusatorily, feeling his eyes narrow. "You're the one shoved me at the pub."

"You deserved it," Harry returned, unfazed, and the woman sighed.

"Focus," she said, snapping her fingers in front of Draco's face. "The thing that Voldemort asked you to bring - "

"How did you manage this?" Draco interrupted, glancing from Harry to Ron to her and gesturing to the magical shackles around his wrists.

"Your crew doesn't like you," Ron supplied flatly. "One of our easier abductions, truth be told. They were happy to leave the ship in our hands."

"So you're pirates," Draco sighed conclusively, shaking his head. "And you," he added, glancing up at the woman. "What are you, the Pirate Queen?"

"I," she retorted, teasing her shoulders back, "am merely a person looking for something, and it's a something which I suspect you know how to find."

"Well, you're wrong," Draco said testily. "A diadem, was it?"

"Yes, a diadem," she confirmed. "And you, Captain Malfoy, are going to help us find it."

"And if I don't?" he prompted. "If I can't?"

Her lips curled up in a smile as she leaned forward, resting her hands on the arms of his chair and staring intently at his face. "Then," she said quietly, "to that, I'd ask you how you wish to die, Captain Malfoy."

He swallowed, staring back at her. "Peacefully in my sleep," he commented, aiming for nonchalance, "when I'm about a hundred and fifty."

To his surprise, she scoffed. "How conventional."

"Have you given this much thought, Pirate Queen?" he asked, tilting his head, and her smile condescended to a smirk.
"Yes, actually," she said without hesitation. "I think I'd like to die mid-orgasm, with a handsome man's head between my legs. Ideally while wearing a tiara," she added, her brown eyes glinting, "or a diadem, which brings us back to the subject at hand."

On their right, Harry chuckled.

"You have issues," Draco informed her.

"I have your ship," she replied.

"They're not mutually exclusive."

"Perhaps not."

"Perhaps you might consider mercy."

"Perhaps I wouldn't," she said crisply, "as like I said, nobody seems to like you, and therefore perhaps sparing your life wouldn't be much of a favor to anyone."

"I didn't realize likability was such a factor," Draco retorted. "You don't seem to care much for either of your companions, after all."

Ron opened his mouth to argue, but the Pirate Queen cut him off.

"You misunderstand, Captain Malfoy," she told him. "I very much need them both. Harry, for example, is brave and fierce and loyal," she said, nodding to him, "and more importantly, when he takes aim, he never misses. And Ron," she added, with a playful glance at him, "is a fair hand at chess."

"Thanks," Ron said, rolling his eyes.

"Altogether," she continued, turning back to Draco, "they're men with a variety of talents."

"I have many talents," Draco offered carefully.

Her smile broadened, slipping delicately over her lips.

"I bet you do," she murmured, her gaze raking over him in open appreciation.

Behind her, Harry let out a small cough.

"Shall we do this," he asked, eyeing the small dagger that Draco realized with a jolt he had been holding in his hand, "or would you like to continue toying with him?"

She paused for a moment and then straightened, leaning away from Draco.

"Neither," she said, placing her hands on her hips. "I think we should leave Captain Malfoy here to his thoughts for a while, personally."

"Fine by me," Ron determined, coming to his feet. "Let him sweat until we get to Diagon, anyway, as it's no skin off my back."

"I love when you're given to fits of flexibility," she remarked, throwing an arm over his shoulder as they and Harry headed towards the door. "Truly looks ravishing on you, Ronald."

"You're incorrigible," he said, ruffling her hair as she ducked.
"Wait," Draco called, pulling helplessly at his restraints, and she turned. "You clearly know who I am," he said. "Who are you, Pirate Queen?"

She smiled.

"I'm Hermione Granger," she said over her shoulder, "and I'm nobody of consequence."

As they shut the door behind them, Harry immediately crossed his arms, lifting one brow as he stared at her.

"What," he began steadily, "the fuck was that?"

"What?" Hermione said, playing at innocence. "The interrogation, you mean?"

"It was bloody flirting is what it was," Ron said, the words pouring out of a listless yawn. "You could at least try for subtlety, Mione."

"It's not flirting, it's manipulating," Hermione chided him, tossing her long braid over her shoulder. "You'll see. He could turn out to be useful."

"Even if he did, it's nothing a broken arm couldn't accomplish," Harry muttered. "I don't see why feminine wiles are your method of choice."

"Well, what exactly is the point of being a pirate if I can't have any fun?" Hermione said, giving his shoulder a little shove.

Ron shrugged. "I don't know," he guessed, "gold?"

"You don't get it," Hermione sighed, and he shrugged again. "Just give me a little time, would you? He's obviously got something," she said, glancing at Harry. "There's something on this ship that Voldemort wants."

"True," Harry said. "He did say he was delivering something."

"Nothing valuable on the ship, though," Ron reminded them. "We already checked."

She grimaced in agreement, but then brightened in her unfailing optimism. "Maybe Captain Malfoy is cleverer than we think," Hermione said hopefully, to which both Harry and Ron scoffed loudly.

"Doubtful," Harry said, "but if it's fun you want, I'll let you have it. Just make sure you don't lose your grip on the situation," he warned, tapping Hermione's nose. "I know how soft you really are, Miss Granger."

"I'm not soft," she snapped indignantly. "I've no interest in him, whatever you two goons might think."

"I hope not," Ron remarked. "He seems like a bit of a dickhead."

"You think everyone's a dickhead," Hermione reminded him, and he nodded, serving the impression that this were not a statement of relevance. "But I promise, I have this under control."

Harry threw an arm over her shoulder, kissing her forehead. "Best of luck," he murmured dubiously, at which point she obligingly backhanded him in the stomach and sighed with satisfaction as he choked.
When the door opened again, she came in alone.

"Pirate Queen," he remarked in somber acknowledgement, offering her an irreverent bow of his head. "Your Majesty."

"Captain Malfoy," she returned. "I see you're in high spirits."

"Oh, the highest," he muttered sullenly, trying not to think of his sore wrists. "An ideal day."

"So," she said, wandering in and glancing down at the nautical charts on his desk. "You're headed to Diagon."

He shrugged, or tried to. "No secrets there," he said. "Main port and all that."

"Mm," she agreed. "But you're also carrying something," she remarked, glancing up at him. "No point denying it," she warned, picking up his compass to jab it accusingly in his direction, "as Harry already heard you say it."

"No denial," he confirmed. "I was instructed to retrieve something, and I did."

"Well," she said, looking expectantly at him. "What is it?"

He licked his lips. "Not telling," he said. "Not until you let my hands loose, that is."

She scoffed. "And why would I do that?"

"It's a boat," he reminded her, "on the open sea, and you've taken my wand. Where am I going to go?"

"Say I don't wish to have you wandering about my new ship," she offered. "What then?"

"Then," he reminded her, "I suppose I just won't tell you what I have."

She narrowed her eyes for a moment, but then reached into the pocket of her trousers, taking a few steps to brandish her wand at his forehead. "Legimimens," she said, and waited.

He laughed.

"So you're an Occlumens," she commented, lowering her wand. "And to think I thought you were just an unlikable imbecile."

"Sorry to disappoint," he said. "Though the offer stands. Cut me loose," he offered, using his chin to gesture to his hands, "and I'll tell you what I'm carrying for the Dark Lord."

She shook her head. "No."

"Don't you trust me?" he asked, smirking at her.

"Not at all," she quipped easily, and then tilted her head, thinking. "Tell me what you're carrying for him," she countered, "and then I'll cut you loose."

"Why should I believe you?" he prompted. "You're a Pirate Queen. A practiced liar."

"Practiced at a lot of things," she confirmed, leaning towards him. "Quite a few, in fact," she murmured, and just as he felt his brow furrow in confusion - is she saying what I think she's saying? - she had settled herself on his lap, straddling him in the chair.
"Tell me what you have for Voldemort," she whispered in his ear, the smell of gardenias and the sea carrying from the wayward curls that had sprouted free of her long plait, "and I'll cut you loose."

He forced a swallow. "Who says I have any interest in being cut loose?"

She laughed, rolling her hips a little and prompting him to jolt forward, biting his lip as he felt himself stir. "Don't you?" she prompted sweetly.

_Touché._

"This isn't fair," he managed hoarsely, clearing his throat. "You can't do this."

"Why not?" she asked, adjusting to slide a little lower on his lap and smiling as he held back a choked out groan. "I'm just sitting."

"No, you're seducing me," he growled. "And I have to say, it's very rude."

"Why, because you can't touch?" she murmured, reaching up to the buttons of her blouse. "You could use your hands, you know," she said, slowly undoing one button and then another, his eyes falling helplessly down the line that parted against her cleavage, "if you just tell me what it is you're keeping safe for him. I promise," she added, leaning forward to improve his view, "I'm a woman of my word."

"I doubt that very much," he said, fully hard now. "But you drive a difficult bargain."

"You have your expertise, Captain Malfoy," she said, shrugging. "I have mine."


"Hm," she said, leaning back to frown in thought. "Where is it?"

_That wasn't part of the deal, Pirate Queen," he growled in frustration, bucking his hips up beneath hers. "You asked what, and I answered. Let me go."

"Oh, but surely the intent stands," she demurred, fixing her laughing gaze on him. "Why would I ask what if I had no aim to lay claim to the item?"

"Not fair," he insisted, and she shrugged.

"Pirate," she reminded him with a smile, and he sighed.

"Not telling you where," he muttered, forcing himself to look away. "Certainly not now."

She pursed her lips in a beautiful portrait of sympathy.

"Oh, Captain Malfoy," she sighed, leaning forward to whisper in his ear. "It's just one more thing," she murmured, her breath skating along the line of his neck. "Obviously this diary means nothing to you, and I - " she shifted, her breasts flush against his chest as she brushed her lips against his jaw, "I would so prefer it if we both got what we want."

"Stop this," he muttered, squeezing his eyes shut as her hands slipped to his waist, finding the strip of skin between trousers and the untucked material of his shirt. _Stop it - _

"Don't you trust me?" she whispered, her fingers dropping lower until -
"ALL RIGHT," he said quickly, "stop, it's - it's over there," he said, jabbing his chin towards his small set of drawers on his writing desk. "Top middle drawer. Wrapped in parchment - "

"Thank you," she said delightedly, pulling the thin chain from his neck that held the key - damn it, he thought, hoping she wouldn't have noticed it - before kissing his cheek and leaping from his lap, buttoning her blouse as she strode over his desk. She made quick work of opening the drawer and quickly taking hold of the diary, nodding in satisfaction and heading for the door.

"Fucking excuse me," Draco said, glaring at her. "What about cutting me loose?"

"Mm, changed my mind," she said, flipping the pages. "Have to see if this pans out first, I'm afraid. Sadly," she added, glancing up at him, "since it's blank, I'm afraid I might have to kill you anyway. Which is a real shame," she clarified, looking him up and down. "I'd have liked a very different outcome."

"You're - " he sputtered. "You - "

"Not to worry, I haven't decided," she assured him spiritedly, closing the few quick strides to the door. "Sit tight, would you?" she asked, her smile merciless as she threw open the door. "Don't go running off."

"I hate you, Pirate Queen," he spat at her back, but she had already gone, her melodic laugh carrying in her absence.

"It's blank," Harry said with a grimace. "Kill him and get it over with."

"Well, maybe it's got magic of some sort," Hermione countered, running her finger across the page. "Try writing in it."

"Oh, you just don't want to admit you've been conned," Ron told her, patting her head. "I'm sure it was a delightful effort, Mione, but - "

"I haven't been conned," she cut in irritably, bristling. "Whatever it is, he thinks it's important, and I could tell."

Harry sighed, humoring her. "Hand me a quill, would you?" he asked, reaching out for one, and Ron placed it in his hand. "Let's see," he said, bending his head over it and scrawling into the page.

Hello, he wrote.

Instantly, the ink dissolved.

Hello, another set of words appeared. And you are?

"Bloody hell," Ron remarked, and Hermione nodded her tentative agreement.

Nobody important, Harry wrote back.

I doubt that, considering you have my diary, the words responded.

"Ask them what year it is," Hermione suggested, and Ron scoffed.

"Boring," Ron said. "Who cares?"

"Wait," Harry said. "I have a thought."
Where are you? he asked. Are you trapped?

I'm at Hogwarts Castle, the curling letters responded. Perhaps you should come and find me.

Harry glanced at the other two.

Do you know anything about a diadem? he wrote.

Yes, the diary replied. It's here, too, and it is also mine.

"Well," Hermione said, after about a minute of silence. "I guess we should stop for a moment and think about how we plan to - "

"TURN THE SHIP AROUND," Harry interrupted, barking at Ron. "Go. Head back to Hogwarts, now."

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, as Ron diligently headed off to charm the sails. "What can you possibly - "

"There's a ball at the castle this evening - some kind of gala," Harry supplied neutrally. "I saw it on a parchment in Malfoy's office."

"You know we'll need someone to get us into that party," Hermione said in disbelief. "You know how strict they are - "

"We already have someone that's invited," Harry reminded her, jutting his chin out at where Malfoy was still restrained in his quarters. "We'll just have to use some polyjuice, and then - "

"We're out, mate," Ron said, having returned from altering their course. "And anyway, Malfoy would know everyone there, and vice versa. None of us could get away with pretending to be him."

"Well," Harry said, leaning back to rest his head against the wall. "We'll have to break in, then, while the party's going - "

Hermione smiled. "Or," she offered neutrally, "perhaps something a little easier."

"We're going to a ball," she announced, bursting in through the door.

"A pirate ball, Your Majesty?" Draco asked grimly, making a face. "No, thanks. I'm otherwise occupied."

"You certainly are," she agreed, "as you're to be my escort to the ball at Hogwarts Castle this evening."

Draco stared at her for a moment, and then promptly burst out laughing.

"What?" he demanded. "Are you serious?"

"Quite serious," she supplied. "Do you take issue with the proposition?"

"Do I take - " he broke off, shaking his head in disbelief. "Yes, I fucking take issue with it," he snapped. "You know who's throwing that ball, don't you?"

"Does it matter?" she asked, and he let out another mirthless laugh.
"My father," he said. "Lucius Malfoy, the fucking Minister for Magic."

"Oh, lovely," she determined, shrugging, and he growled his annoyance.

"You don't understand," he told her. "My father hates me, and I hate him, and if I show up there tonight there will be questions - "

"So lie," Hermione said. "It's really quite fun."

"Yes, well, you would know, wouldn't you," Draco muttered, not having quite forgiven her. "And as I presume you wouldn't let me have my wand back - "

"I wouldn't, no," Hermione agreed.

"- then I don't really see why I would ever choose to do such a thing," he finished, sitting back conclusively. "Fuck that, I'm out."

"Let me be clear, Captain Malfoy," she said, taking a few long strides to reach him and whipping her wand from her trousers again. "You will do this," she murmured, "and you can do it of your own volition, or - "

She paused, letting the tip of her wand spark against his forehead. "Have you ever been under the Imperius Curse, Captain Malfoy?" she asked carefully, prompting him to force a heavy swallow.

"No," he admitted.

"Well, I have," she said softly, "and I'll tell you, I don't care for it. If you think you are restrained now," she added, tapping the shackles at his wrists, "I assure you, you will not care for an Imperio."

He swallowed.

"Fine," he muttered. "But you'll need a fucking nice dress if you're going to meet my father and get away with it. And do something about your hair," he added, eyeing a tendril of it that he momentarily wished to tuck behind her ear before brusquely shaking himself of the thought. "It's an unmitigated disaster."

"Mm," she knowingly agreed, having caught his lingering glance. She straightened, smiling brilliantly. "Delightful," she determined. "See you in a few."

When the door opened again, it was to a blur of crimson silk lined with gold, a flawlessly cut gown set against a petite, alluring figure that he scarcely believed belonged to her.

"Better?" she asked, tilting her head at him, and he stared.

Her unruly hair had been expertly tamed, pulled back into a low chignon with curls that whispered fashionably around the delicate edges of her face. She'd been slightly made up, a little rouge applied to her cheeks and a swipe of color on her lips, and the gown floated above her curves like it had been charmed to wrap around her, the entire effect making her without a doubt the most beautiful woman he'd ever set eyes on.

"Well," Draco managed with difficulty, "you look - "

"We know," Ron informed him, stepping through the door in formal attire. "Don't think for a bloody second that we don't know what you're thinking, or that we won't be watching you this
"Or that we're okay with this," Harry added firmly, appearing beside him. "Let's be very clear about that."

"How did you get this?" Draco asked, staring at her. "That gown had to have cost a fortune - "

"I'm a very rich woman, Captain Malfoy," Hermione reminded him airily, and in spite of his awe at her he managed a huff.

"That's not your money," he reminded her, and she shrugged.

"You and I have very different definitions of possession," she informed him. "Now," she added, "are you ready?"

He made a face. "Of course I'm not - "

She flicked her wand quickly and he felt his hair slick back from his face, his clothes transforming to his formal attire and something that felt like a splash of cold water serving to startle something he guessed to be a semblance of color to his cheeks.

"You'll behave, won't you, Captain?" she asked, her wand pausing in the air as she made to tap it against his restraints. "I'll have my wand if you don't," she reminded him, "as will Harry and Ron, and I just want us to be very clear. No running," she instructed firmly, "no looking for help - "

"Nobody would help me," he said honestly. "Nobody likes me."

Her lips quirked up slightly; gentle amusement, he judged. "Too true," she said, and then his shackles were gone.

He raised a hand in relief, rolling out his wrist before bringing it up to his face; she'd shaved him, he realized, laughing a little as he touched the polished smoothness of his cheek.

"Well," he said, looking over at her. "Any final instructions?"

"Behave yourself," Ron snapped instantly. "You're there to help us get in and nothing else. Act normal."

"Or not," Harry interjected, "seeing as your normal gets you kicked out of pubs."

"Oh, you're coming too, wonderful," Draco muttered, but lost his concentration as Hermione stepped in front of him, adjusting the state of his collar.

"There," she said, and he inhaled the scent of gardenias from her hair. "Ready, Captain Malfoy?"

He sighed. "Ready, Pirate Queen," he said reluctantly, offering her his arm.

"Ah, Draco," his father said, looking less than pleased to see him. "And I see you've brought friends."

"This is Hermione Granger," Draco said neutrally, and she offered a surprisingly excellent curtsy. "And her two associates, Harry and Ron - "

"You brought three companions," Lucius commented. "How very . . . inconsiderate," he finished, and as Draco felt his cheeks flush in irritation, Hermione's hand tightened warningly on his arm.
"Well, so long as you all behave yourself, I suppose there's no harm in a few too many uninvited guests," Lucius ruled obnoxiously. "And you will behave yourself, won't you, Draco?"

"Yes, Father," Draco replied tersely. "With pleasure."

"I thought you had left for Diagon, by the way," Lucius remarked, suddenly frowning as he remembered. "Didn't you?"


Behind him, Harry let out a loud cough.

"Sank?" Lucius returned skeptically, his grey eyes narrowing in suspicion. "But isn't it currently docked at - "

Draco heard a rustle from Hermione's free hand, and then Lucius' face went blank.

"Your ship sank," Lucius agreed mechanically, gesturing inside the castle. "Enjoy the party."

"Thank you," Hermione said sweetly, winking at Draco before prompting him to lead her inside.

"What did you do to him?" he murmured to her, and she shrugged.

"Nothing he didn't deserve," she whispered back. "Your dad's an utter cunt, Malfoy."

He had to fight a laugh as he nodded politely to Avery and Mulciber, trying to maintain his composure.

"Too true," he agreed, and felt a rush of warmth as Hermione gently squeezed his arm.

"We're going to search the castle," Harry had said, and immediately disappeared into the crowd with Ron.

Hermione had nodded, looking around the room. It had been a while since she'd attended any sort of party, either invited or otherwise, and she felt oddly uncomfortable; the gown was tighter than her britches, uncomfortable and heavy and ungodly hot - though, in terms of temperature, that may have partially been due to her proximity to -

"Well, Pirate Queen?" Malfoy said, leaning over to speak in her ear. "Shall we dance?"

"Dance?" she asked, slightly taken aback, and he nodded.

"You need to blend, don't you?" he reminded her, gesturing to the other couples on the floor. "Surely you realized this was part of your obligation."

"Of course I did," she snapped, glaring up at him - so tall, she thought, so much taller on his feet, and now that he'd sobered and been cleaned up, he was really rather -

"Then dance with me," he instructed, leading her to the floor with an impeccable grace and resting one hand on her waist. "Your Majesty," he added, laughing a little in her ear, and she sighed, placing one hand on his shoulder.

It was a waltz, thankfully, and so no great feat; he was an excellent partner, quick and practiced, and she had no trouble following his lead. She caught occasional glimpses of Harry and Ron in the
crowd but it was particularly difficult to focus with Malfoy's gaze following the angles of her face, and then, as more dancers joined the floor and she was forced to hold herself more tightly against him, when he bent his head to let his cheek brush against hers.

The music changed; something faster, more complex, and she struggled a bit more, pulled flush against him and stumbling a little as he led her through a complicated series of steps. She hesitated, nearly colliding with another set of dancers, when he pulled her close again, speaking in her ear.

"Don't you trust me?" he whispered, and she felt her breath catch.

"Yes," she said uncertainly, and then he promptly spun her to her left, gripping her left shoulder with his right arm before leaning her back and dipping her - his eyes following the line of her neck - as he supported her shoulder, his grip strong and reassuring.

When he brought her back to his level, she was breathless, staring at the color of his eyes as they darkened, a grey that cooled and stormed before her.

"If you trust me," he said, his eyes falling to her lips, "ditch your chaperones."

She swallowed, pausing in indecision just in time to catch Harry eyeing her from afar.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked neutrally, and felt the surprisingly unsettling blow of Malfoy's smile.

"Where are we going?" she whispered nervously as they reached the seventh floor. "Won't somebody notice?"

"Where I've gone?" Draco asked dubiously. "No, certainly not." He glanced up at the wall, waiting for the door to appear. "Here it is," he said, gesturing to it. "Open up."

"What's this?" she asked, frowning, and he smirked at her.

"You look a bit nervous, Pirate Queen," he said. "Surely Her Majesty isn't suffering from any misgivings."

"Could be a trap," she said, and he shrugged.

"You have a wand and I don't," he reminded her. "And anyway, I thought you trusted me."

"I shouldn't," she said grimly, but sighed. "Fine," she agreed, taking a deep breath before pulling open the door.

The inside of the room, as he recalled from his time there in the past, was about as disastrous as it had been the first time he'd seen it; equally worth marveling at, he thought, eyeing the towers of stuff, the many vials and books and trinkets that were piled towards the vaulted ceiling, but certainly no different.

He watched her face as her lips parted in wonder, fighting a smile at the hungry look in her eye.

"I forgot I'd brought a pirate in here," he murmured. "I assume this awakens the thief in you."

"How did you find this?" she asked, her eyes wide as she stared around the room.

"Well, as I've mentioned, nobody likes me," he said effortlessly, "so in the times I have been here with my father, I've done quite a bit of wandering around by myself. This room" - he gestured
around it - "appeared one day when I was very distressed over misplacing my father's pocketwatch. I ended up finding one just like it, and he, thankfully, didn't notice."

"This is incredible," Hermione said, a little awestruck; then she glanced at him, her gaze softening as it met his. "Why did you take me here?" she asked, and he shrugged.

"You're looking for a diadem," he reminded her. "I imagine it will be here somewhere."

"Why not tell Harry?" she asked. "Or Ron?"

"Because they're terrible," he said without hesitation. "And I'd rather you find it."

She stared at him, resolute in her confusion. "Why?"

He sighed. "What was it you said?" he asked facetiously. "Ah, that obviously this diadem means nothing to me, and I - " he took a careful step towards her, relishing her sharp intake of breath. "I would so prefer it if we both got what we want."

"And what do you want, then?" she asked, her tongue tracing across her lip.

"Come on, Pirate Queen," he murmured, backing her against a large black cabinet. "Don't you know what it's like to look at something and want it for your own?" He stepped in closer, as close as he'd been when they were dancing, watching the hesitation on her face. "Don't tell me you're not familiar with the feeling," he added, brushing his lips against her neck.

"I will hex you where you stand," she warned him, delicately placing her palms against his chest. "Careful, Captain Malfoy -"

He moved quickly, taking hold of her hands and pressing them back against the cabinet, his fingers wrapped around her wrists.

"Kiss me and I'll cut you loose," he said quietly, watching her eyes widen as she looked at him. "I'll even help you find the diadem, I swear."

"A kiss," she echoed, breathless. "That's what you want?"

He nodded. "And then I'll cut you loose," he promised. "And I, being a captain and not a pirate, will keep my word," he added pointedly, "unlike some other people who have found themselves in similar situations."

"There's no need to be such a snot, Malfoy, no wonder people don't like you," she whispered, and as he opened his mouth to argue she leaned forward, catching his breath of indignation between the soft curves of her lips.

He leaned into the kiss, deepening it; he felt her breath rise and fall heavily against his chest as she kissed him with the fierceness he'd come to associate with her, the fire with which she burned. He released her wrists, freeing her - because he, unlike her, was actually a person of his word - but she only brought her hands to his face, her fingers twisting in his hair to pull him impossibly close, permitting his hands to travel to her waist and then rising on her toes, letting him sweep her up in his arms.

After a moment, dizzied, they broke apart, staring at each other.

"We should find the diadem," he said, forcing himself not to think about how badly he wanted to continue, to rip the shreds of fabric from her skin -
"We should," she agreed, and he let his grip slacken to lower her back to her feet. He pressed his forehead against hers and she closed her eyes, sighing.

"I still might kill you," she whispered.

"Good," he agreed. "I'd hate to lose the element of surprise."

"Where'd you find it?" Harry asked, leaping forward to take the diadem from Hermione once they'd returned to the ship. "I swear, I looked everywhere - "

Hermione shrugged. "Malfoy here has a way with concealed rooms," she said, glancing at him. "Or at least, he seems to know the castle fairly well."

"Told you I had many talents," he drawled, leaning against his desk. "And to think you deviants thought I meant sex," he added, lamenting obnoxiously and prompting Ron to roll his eyes.

"Well," Ron said, glancing at Hermione. "We have the diadem."

"And the ship," she reminded him. "So get to sailing, would you, Ronald?"

"Wait," Malfoy interrupted, staring at them. "What about me?" he asked. "Going to kill me, are you?"

"Oh, of course," Hermione said, glancing at Ron. "Right?"

"Right," Ron lazily agreed, throwing an arm over her shoulder. "Finally, I might add."

"Right," Malfoy muttered, glancing at his feet.

Hermione looked questioningly at Harry, who tilted his head, considering her.

"Well," Harry ventured, "maybe we shouldn't be too hasty."

"What?" Ron and Malfoy asked in unison.

"Well," Harry said again, locking eyes with her, "there are other things we need, after all."

She felt herself smile.

"True," she confirmed.

"Wait," Malfoy said. "Are you - " he paused, shaking his head. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," Hermione told him, "that maybe you should stick around. To help," she clarified. "I mean, you do have the diary Voldemort wants - "

"And you do get us into parties," Harry said. "So you have your uses."

"I have uses?" Malfoy repeated, glancing between them before settling his gaze on hers. "You," he added quietly, nodding towards her. "You want me to stay, Pirate Queen?"

"I mean, it wouldn't be the worst thing," she permitted, fighting the flutter in her chest.

A smile pulled at his lips.

"That's not enough," Malfoy said, lurching forward to stand in front of her. "You're a pirate, after
"all," he reminded her. "You know how this works." At her silence, he slipped a hand under her
chin, lifting it to look her in the eye. "What are you offering me?"

She blinked.

"I have a ship," she supplied.

Draco sighed, rolling his eyes. "This is not your ship."

"You and I have very different definitions of possession," she reminded him, and he smiled.

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*Six months later*

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Lord Voldemort strode through the doors of his office, taking a seat at his desk and propping his
feet on top of it.

"Lucius," he yelled, sorting through the papers on the desk. "Have you arranged for Draco to go
back to Hogwarts? There's something I need to - "

He broke off as the heavy doors suddenly fell shut; he lunged forward in alarm and was instantly
jerked back as a conjured set of shackles materialized around his wrists.

"Pardon me," someone said, tapping him on the shoulder. "I'm afraid the Minister is otherwise
occupied at the moment."

"Wha- " Lord Voldemort spun around, looking for the source of the voice. "Who - "

"Ah, here it is," a female voice said, slender fingers reaching under his shirt to yank at the chain
around his neck. "Thank you, Harry," she added, stepping out from behind his chair to head
towards the door. "Proceed," she added, gesturing to where Lord Voldemort sat at the desk. "As
you were."

"Many thanks," the man called Harry said, suddenly yanking Lord Voldemort's chair back to look
him in the eye. "Things will get messy, I'm afraid," he informed her, as Lord Voldemort stared
helplessly into the man's laughing green eyes.

"I expect no less," the woman agreed, sparing a chuckle. "I'll catch up with Ron and meet you back
at the ship."

"Who are you?" Lord Voldemort asked, staring between the man called Harry and the woman who
stood at the door, poised to exit. "You," he shouted wildly after the woman, "you - you can't just
leave me - "

"I can, and I will," she countered. "Harry's been waiting a long time for this, Lord Voldemort," she
informed him, feigning a regretful sigh. "What kind of friend would I be if I didn't permit him his
entertainment?"

As she stepped forward to reach for the handle of the door, Lord Voldemort caught a glimpse of
something sparkling from where she stood, a glimmer that was perched within the clutches of her
unruly hair.

"My diadem," Lord Voldemort growled, realizing now what she had taken from around his neck.
"And my locket - "
"Mine, actually," she said, shaking her head. "But, in fairness, I've recently been given to understand my concept of possession is somewhat more malleable than others', so - "

"Who are you?" Lord Voldemort demanded, frantically hurling the question at her as she threw open the door.

She stopped, a smile spreading across her lips as she paused.

"I'm Hermione Malfoy," she said over her shoulder, "and I'm the Pirate Queen."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Happy Valentine's Day! And head on over to Sally Drabbles for a Harcissa that will surely murder us all.
Better If You Run

Pairing: NottPott (lol, Theo Nott x Harry Potter), Dramione (Draco Malfoy x Hermione Granger)

Universe: Non-Potterverse magical AU, monarchy AU

Rating: T for language, violence

Summary: This oddity of a plot is based on two things: a Theo x Harry request from Jelibean323, and another thing I will list in the end notes. This AU is … difficult to explain, but suffice it to say this: not everyone is powerful, but those who are are much more powerful than they seem. Aside from the main cast, there is a Dark Lord, a troubled (and troubling) monarchy, a horcrux hunt, and a lot of sassy banter.

It starts somewhat ordinarily, or so Theo thinks at the time.

"Well," he remarks to Draco, nudging him as he catches sight of a head of messy black hair that is trying unsuccessfully to hide somewhere it shouldn't. "This is new and interesting."

"Don't touch me," the man says, scowling at him. "Or her."

"Oh," Theo replies, adjusting his periphery to take note of a very small girl with hair that floats around her head like an absurdly mismanaged halo. "Well, I'm so glad you've set some ground rules. Normally I just carry on without any sort of restriction, which I'm told makes me somewhat unbearable."

"It's exhausting," Draco agrees, eyeing his fingernails. Theo notices he is pretending not to look at the girl's face.

Theo inwardly laughs.

"What do you want?" the man demands; upon closer inspection, Theo can see that he and the girl are likely the same age, but that the dark-haired man has a certain sense of trauma carved into his features. An anger, Theo thinks, that buries itself in a scowl. "Are you Snatchers?"

"We are," Theo says, settling agreeably into the lie; he finds it to be as good as any. Draco leans forward like he might suggest otherwise and Theo promptly buries his elbow in the blond's ribs, cutting him off. "And you, evidently, are either worth something or worth nothing, as either is as good a reason as any to hide aboard a train." He pauses, lifting a brow. "I'm going to guess it's something, though."

The man instinctively steps in front of the girl - woman, Theo corrects himself, as the longer he's looked, the more he's noticed she's not unremarkable herself - and holds a dagger out, brandishing it at them.

"I'll kill you," he warns, pulling the woman protectively behind him. She narrows her eyes at Theo and Draco, consenting to remain in the man's protection; Theo can see, however, that she's not
particularly worried about her own safety. Another woman of her size and slightness might cower, might tremble in fear - but Theo watches her toy with her fingers and notices that she has a defensive stance of her own. He considers also that perhaps her weapon is different, but no less devastating.

He knows it. He's seen it before.

"That's very hospitable," Theo comments slowly, offering them a show of quiet applause. "Top form."

The man frowns. "What are you - "

"I'll get to the point," Theo announces. "In a moment, this train is going to run off its tracks." He pauses, waiting for a reaction that doesn't come. "It will be very unfortunate for anyone still on board, I assure you," he says, somewhat warmly.

Draco glances warily at him, but shrugs. "Yes," he says. "I wouldn't advise you being here."

"I have to be here," the man says stubbornly. "I have unfinished business with a man on this train."

"I'm sure you do," Theo says smoothly. "Personally, I like to maintain a healthy level of unfinished business myself. Gives me a reason to get up in the morning, or else why bother?" He shrugs. "Vengeance, I find, is a crucial motivator, or else I'd never manage anything at all."

"Vengeance," the girl - woman, Theo says sharply to himself, by god, Nott, get a hold of yourself - echoes with confusion. "Do you mean you're here to - "

"Kill Lord Voldemort?" Theo says, fighting a yawn. "Yes."

"But you're … Snatchers?" she says, her gaze darting between them. "What on earth do you have to gain by killing him?"

"What do you have to gain by being on the baggage compartment of one of Lord Voldemort's trains?" Draco counters, and she demurs, scowling.

"Who are you?" the man demands, and Theo shrugs.

"A pair of witless fools with access to explosives," he supplies, as Draco nods his head slightly in acknowledgement. "And you, of course, are Harry Potter and Hermione Granger."

"What?" Harry says, his green eyes widening. "But how did you - "

"Oh, it took me a moment, but I eventually arrived there," Theo says, shrugging. He points to Harry, gesturing. "The scar, for one thing, and her - " he gestures to Hermione, "general air of sorcery - "

"General air of - " Hermione breaks off, staring. "What?"

"Well, you're the witch Lord Voldemort's after, aren't you?" Theo prompts her, crossing his arms over his chest. "You have a sort of unhinged quality about you," he tells her with a wave of his hand, delighting internally at how Harry's gaze instantly becomes murderous. "Something that crackles of power," he adds with a respectful nod, "in addition to overall insanity."

"Excuse me," Hermione says loudly, frowning. "But - "

"What's your name?" Harry accuses, jabbing the dagger at Theo's chest.
"Steve," Theo lies. Draco groans quietly into the palm of his hand.

"Steve," Harry echoes skeptically, with a hint of a scoff.

"Hey," Theo protests, drawing a hand to his chest in offense. "I don't make fun of your name."

"First of all," Harry begins brusquely, "fuck you - "

"Thank you, I accept."

"Second of all," Harry continues, "your name is not Steve."

"Rupert, then," Theo amends.

"No."

"Carl?"

"Stop," Harry grumbles, just as Hermione steps forward.

"Harry," she says softly, staring at Theo. "I think we should listen to them."

"Why?" Harry demands, and Draco and Theo exchange a glance.

"I just think we should," Hermione says, nodding to herself. "Whatever their names are," she adds, though the knowing look she gives Theo - she can't know, of course, he reminds himself, that would be highly improbable - is slightly unnerving. "If they say this train is about to explode, I'm going to err on the side of caution and say we should probably listen to them."

"They're certainly crazy enough," Harry agrees, his mouth tightening in indecision. "How are you two getting off the train?" he asks, brandishing the dagger at them again.

"Uh," Draco says, glancing at Theo. "We should probably review that."

"I was thinking a combination of havoc and hoping for the best," Theo says. "Right?"

"Well, sure," Draco agrees slowly, and Hermione sighs.

"Look," she offers. "If you don't tell anyone we were here - "

"Alternate offer," Theo interrupts. "You're now our hostages."

"What?" Harry and Hermione demand in unison, while Draco plants his hands on his hips, releasing a loud, exasperated sigh.

"You really must stop this," Draco mutters under his breath. "Almost no one can follow your insane plots."

"Almost no one," Theo reminds him. "And then there's you," he adds, pulling the gun from his waistband as Draco moves to do the same, "who seems to perform so beautifully to my exact specifications. Oh, watch it," he warns, gesturing to the tentatively quick motion of Hermione's hands. "I'm fully aware you can't actually use any magic, you know, so I'd rather you not threaten me with it."

"She doesn't need to," Harry grounds out, his fingers tightening around the hilt of his dagger. "You still have me to contend with."
"Oh?" Theo asks, tapping the trigger of his revolver. "You're literally bringing a knife to a gunfight?"

"If I throw this knife," Harry informs him with breathtaking certainty, "I promise you, I won't miss."

"Can you throw faster than I can pull a trigger?" Draco counters.

"Yes," Hermione assures them, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Well, perhaps I can appeal to your logic," Theo suggests. "Or at least the part of you that wishes not to die."

"Big words," Harry mutters.

"A variety of big things," Theo agrees, and Draco casts him an irritated sidelong glance. "Anyway," Theo continues, ignoring him, "how about this: she can't do magic, because then Lord Voldemort will know she's on the train - " he stops, looking pointedly at Hermione. "Yes or no?"

She grits her teeth, but concedes. "Yes," she mutters.

"And you, apparently, can kill one of us," Theo reminds Harry, "and while that's not ideal, it's certainly not going to win the hand." He pauses, grinning. "Yes or no?"

"Fuck you," Harry says.

"That's a yes," Draco murmurs, and Theo nods.

"So, instead," he offers, "you can come with us, and we'll take you to our employer."

Draco lifts an eyebrow, but Theo resolutely ignores him.

"Yes," Theo prompts, "or no?"

"Who exactly is your employer?" Hermione asks, shaking her head. "You can't really expect us to take that deal, can you?"

"You won't even tell us your names," Harry reminds them gruffly. "What are we supposed to call you, the blond one and the idiot?"

"Okay, now you're being intentionally hurtful," Theo warns him, tapping the trigger of his gun. "And that's just rude."

"Hey," Draco says, catching Theo's attention. "We're a little short on time, don't you think?"

"Fine," Theo agrees, sighing. "So," he offers to Harry and Hermione again, "get blown up on the train, or live another day?"

Harry and Hermione glance at each other.

"What if," Hermione suggests, "we decide to go, but opt not to be hostages."

"I think you misunderstand the term 'hostages,' but go on," Theo says.

"Clearly you know who we are," she says, and they nod, "and so you know how much we're worth. Unfortunately," she continues grimly, "we happen to know that your attempts to kill Lord..."
Voldemort will ultimately prove unsuccessful."

"That's disheartening," Theo says, just as Draco demands "What does that mean?"

"He can't exactly be killed," Hermione says slowly, glancing again at Harry. "Which I don't have time to explain at the moment - "

"But you will," Theo realizes aloud, "if we agree to work together?"

"We clearly want the same man dead," Harry rumbles. "And since you're obviously deserters of some kind - "

"Something like that," Draco says smoothly, and Theo nods, a little impressed with the philosophical accuracy.

" - maybe we can come to some kind of agreement," he concludes. "We get off this train, we meet your employer - "

"And I assume you know how to actually kill Lord Voldemort?" Theo presses, and Hermione nods. "Well," he decides, tucking his gun back into his waistband. "That's settled, then."

"Wait," Draco says, his gun still in the air. "How do we know we can trust them?"

"Because they're not idiots," Theo says smugly, gesturing to them. "Are you idiots?" he prompts. "Yes or no."

Hermione sighs. "No," she says tartly.

"Still," Draco protests, and Theo interrupts.

"And," he adds, "we now know that there are fingerprints from our little witch all over this compartment." He winks at her, and she grimaces; he knows she is aware what this means. "So if she doesn't agree to come with us, we can always use any one of them to find her for a profit."

"Wait a minute," Draco says accusatorily, dropping his gun. "Did you have a plan when you came in here?"


"Oh good," Draco says. "Shall we go, then?"

"Put the knife down, Harry," Hermione sighs, taking his arm before holding out her hand. "Hold on," she warns, offering it to Draco; Theo notices with a heightened degree of amusement that Draco holds his breath as he accepts, his fingers brushing hers with a careful, deliberate caution. "And you hold him," she bossily tells Theo, who nods once, smirking as he grips Draco's shoulder. "Ready?" she asks primly. "One - two - three - "

Lord Voldemort somehow manages to survive an explosion that takes out the entire train, not to mention perhaps a mile of track; news reaches them that he is alive and well, residing comfortably in a manor house in one of the northern regions.

"Told you," Hermione says smugly. Theo rolls his eyes at her.

"What's the deal?" he asks, looking up to watch Harry run some kind of fighting drill with a tree in the forest they're currently hiding. "Why can't Lord Voldemort die?"
"He's got these things called horcruxes," she explains. "Pieces of his soul that keep him alive. We've destroyed most of them," she adds, wincing a little. "There's one left. At least, we think there is," she corrects herself. "We think the sword of Gryffindor is the final horcrux, and then he can be killed."

"I take it that's what you were looking for on the train?" Theo prompts, and she nods.

"Yes," Hermione sighs. "We'd heard there was train departing and thought he might have been in the process of transporting it elsewhere, as it wasn't among the other horcruxes."

"Sword of Gryffindor, huh?" Theo asks, glancing up at where Harry has taken aim at a tree trunk. "That one certainly seems to have an affinity for pointy things," he says, gesturing to Harry.

"He's got a bit of a vendetta," Hermione agrees, her expression darkening. "As do I."

"Is it true that Lord Voldemort taught you magic?" Draco says, reappearing from the woods. "They say you're as powerful as he is."

"They're not wrong," she admits slowly. "But they're not right, either."

"Oh good," Draco says. "I was worried you'd be overly specific."

"Yes," Theo agrees. "We hate clarity."

"Look," she says, sighing in what strikes Theo as moodily feigned exhaustion. "Yes, he taught me. Yes, I'm powerful. But in the end, I can't do what he does," she says, shaking her head. "He's willing to do anything for power." She throws a branch at the fire, letting it rise. "I'm not."

"Where exactly do you draw your limits?" Draco asks drily. "I heard you were there while he took over the orphanage at Hogwarts."

"No," she says, her cheeks flushing a violent shade of plum, "I was the reason he took over Hogwarts. He was looking for me," she murmurs, looking enraged in a way that Theo has not yet witnessed from her. "He got what he wanted, and about a hundred deaths on top of it, too," she finishes darkly.

Draco has the grace to look sheepish, catching the barbed tone of her voice. "I didn't mean," he begins, stammering. "I wasn't - I didn't mean to - "

"What's your deal?" Hermione interrupts, ignoring him in favor of interrogating Theo. "Who did you desert, the King or Lord Voldemort?"

"I dislike being made to choose," Theo tells her. "Does it really matter which I deserted?"

"How could it not?" she counters, her expression hardening. "How can it not matter where you stand?"
"You mean how can it not matter who I prefer between a weak King and a tyrannical wizard?" Theo murmurs, tilting his head. "Hm, yes, how utterly foolish of me."

"At least the King isn't a murderer," Hermione mutters, sulking.

"Yes, well, what an excellent standard to live by," Theo says roughly, rising abruptly to his feet and stalking away, feeling a brush of irritation that compels him towards Harry.

"Hey," Theo calls, ripping his shirt over his head. "Fight me. The tree's had enough."

"Who says you're any better an opponent, Steve," Harry counters, sweat already pooling at his chest. "And if I say no?"

Theo promptly makes a fist, aiming for Harry's nose. Harry ducks.

"You don't hear 'no' often, do you?" Harry asks drily. Theo punches him again, or tries to, except Harry really is unnaturally quick, even for as trained as Theo is.

"I find people actually enjoy saying yes to me," Theo informs him, leaping out of the way as Harry lunges forward. "It's much more satisfying for all parties involved."

"More satisfying for you, you mean," Harry mutters, hooking his heel behind Theo's knee. Theo falls forward but catches himself, twisting to pull Harry in a headlock.

"Yes, me," Theo confirms. "But people tend to prefer me in a good mood."

"I'd prefer you on your back," Harry says, throwing him. Theo quickly clambers out of his hold, darting away.

"Would you?" he asks mischievously, and Harry turns red.

"I," Harry begins, but he's lost focus, and Theo knocks him over easily, promptly propelling him backwards before pausing to step lightly on Harry's chest.

"You're good," Theo says, wiping sweat from his brow. "But I'm better, of course."

"You're a cheat," Harry tells him, and Theo shrugs.

"I've been called worse," Theo says, reaching down to help Harry up.

"I'm sure you have," Harry agrees, pulling Theo to the ground and rolling over him, promptly producing a small knife and holding it expertly to Theo's throat.

"Huh," Theo comments wryly, staring down at the tip of the blade. "Where'd you get that?"

For a moment, Harry smirks, and Theo finds it difficult to swallow.

"You're good," Harry acknowledges indifferently, suddenly retracting the knife and leaping to his feet. "But I'm better," he calls over his shoulder, walking over to kiss Hermione on the cheek before settling himself in front of the fire, leaving Theo to stare at his back from afar.

"So the sword isn't at Hogwarts," Hermione sighs. "We found the diadem there. And it's not at Gringotts," she adds, crossing that off on the makeshift map they've drawn in the dirt, "which is where the cup was - and it wasn't with the locket - "
"It's in Godric's Hollow," Draco says, biting into an apple. "Obviously."

"What?" Harry asks, jolting upright. He and Hermione exchange a glance.

"That's Godric Gryffindor's birthplace," Theo says. "If it's anywhere you haven't already looked, then it's probably there."

"Godric's Hollow," Hermione says, blinking rapidly. "But - "

"Why do you think it's the sword?" Draco interrupts listlessly, taking another overlarge bite.

"He had something from every other Hogwarts founder," Hermione replies. "That place meant something to him." Harry looks down; Theo notices Hermione does the same. It's an orphanage, he recalls, and then feels an odd moment of sorrow for them.

Then he notices Draco noticing Hermione, and he arches a curious brow. Draco shakes a head in warning. Shut up, he mouths.

"Well, we can certainly go there," Theo says, clearing his throat. "Find you your little sword thing - "

"And then?" Harry asks, glaring at him. "We've been traveling together for three days," he mutters. "Are you ever going to tell us who you work for? Or who you are?" he prompts, his expression tightening.

Theo holds up a hand as Draco opens his mouth to protest. "We will," he says simply. "We'll do your thing first, and then we can have a nice celebratory meal. To which we can all wear name tags," he says jauntily, offering Harry a wink.

"You know, I've known a lot of shady people," Harry says, rising agitatedly to his feet. "But you are by far the shadiest."

"If by that you mean most interesting, then yes," Theo says placidly. "Fair enough."

Harry stares at him for a moment, considering something, and then his grimace tightens.

"On your feet," he says, picking up his dagger. "Hermione," he adds, turning over his shoulder. "Make this a sword?"

She hesitates. "Harry, I - "

"Do it," Harry says, and she sighs, waving a hand. In an instant, Harry's dagger has been replaced, a standard Royal Army replica in his hand. Harry stares at Theo, who knowingly rises to his feet. Hermione sighs in resignation, recognizing the challenge for what it is and levitating a rock in the air, turning it into a sword that matches Harry's.

"Don't kill each other," she murmurs, as Theo moves to mirror Harry's stance.

"What is this?" Theo asks, but Harry lunges forward, nearly nicking Theo in the ribs. Theo parries expertly, darting away. "Ah, you could have just said so," he laughs, slapping Harry's arm with the broad side of his sword. He enjoys sparring with Harry; the other man is a natural, quick and precise, and it is more enjoyable a challenge than any other he faces these days. Harry whips around, raising the hilt above his head before bringing it straight down, the point of it aimed at Theo's torso. Theo cuts him off with a practiced defensive arch, waiting for the next move, when -
"I knew it," Harry says bitterly, throwing his sword to the side and walking away, not looking over his shoulder.

"What?" Theo asks, blinking; he is more than a little unsettled. He turns to find Draco and Hermione staring nervously at him, though they seem no more informed than he feels. "What did I - "

At their vacant looks of confusion, Theo throws his hands in the air, jogging after Harry.

"What's the deal?" he demands, yanking Harry's shoulder to pause his progress. "I thought you wanted to - "

"You're Army," Harry growls, practically spitting at his feet. "You're a soldier, aren't you?"

"I - " Theo pauses, realizing the move Harry just employed is a standard in the Royal Military Academy. "You've always known I was a deserter."

Harry hesitates. "Yes, but - " he clenches a fist. "I thought better of you."


Harry winces, and Theo remembers who he is. The Boy Who Lived, they whisper, stopped Lord Voldemort's reign, and then disappeared along with him - resurfaced decades later as the consort of a witch, the most powerful in the land, destined to run -

It has never occurred to Theo that perhaps Harry was a soldier at some point during his 'disappearance,' or that perhaps he had once taken pride in being one.

"I had to leave the Royal Army," Harry says, somewhat defiantly. "Hermione needed me."

There is a ferocity of devotion in Harry's green eyes that for some reason causes a sharp pain in Theo's chest.

"Oh," Theo says, as patiently as his personality allows. "Okay, but - " he stops. "Did you say you thought better of me . . . than you?" he asks, squinting at Harry in confusion.

Harry glares at him. "Go the fuck away, Steve," he says, disappearing into the trees.

"So," Theo says. "Does she hate you any less yet?"

Draco bristles, making a face. "Who says I want her to hate me less?"

"Only me," Theo offers. "Your best friend for the entirety of your lifetime."

"Eh," Draco says, shrugging. "Expendable."

"Just be yourself," Theo suggests gleefully.

"And then what?" Draco asks. "She'll like me?"

"No, certainly not," Theo replies. "But it will be more fun for me to watch."

Draco stops abruptly, sighing.
"Sometimes," he says slowly, "I think it might be fun to stab you."

"I'm sure it would be," Theo agrees. "Very satisfying, I'd imagine."

"Think of all the blood," Draco sighs dreamily. "Just smeared all over your smarmy face."

"God, delightful," Theo permits with a nod. "Plus, I mean, the stabbing itself - "


"Where are they?" Theo asks, stepping into their camp and looking around for Harry and Hermione. "I would have thought they'd - "

"Put your hands up," a voice sneers, interrupting them. Theo and Draco glance at each other, reaching around for their guns as the faces of several Snatchers appear around the forest clearing. One, Theo notes, has his knife to Hermione's throat; the other points a gun at Harry's head.

"Careful," the Snatcher warns, tutting as Theo's hand closes around the handle of his revolver. "I wouldn't."

He and Draco look at each other, sighing.

"Well," Theo says lamely. "It's been fun."

"Sort of," Draco agrees.

"They do this," Harry mutters to the Snatcher whose gun jams against his temple. "I agree, it's the worst."

"Put your weapons down," Theo announces, reaching up to rub the bridge of his nose. "Now," he adds, in case the command requires a sense of urgency.

"Says who?" the Snatcher demands with a dubious snarl.

"Says Prince Theodore," Draco informs him, stepping forward to pull his shirt aside, brandishing the tattoo with the royal seal. "And Captain Malfoy of the Royal Guard."

"God, it sounds so ridiculous when you say it," Theo mutters. "Remind me to rehearse it the next time we have to do a big reveal."

"It's not my fault that's your name," Draco tells him, rolling his eyes. "Anyway, let them go," he says, gesturing to Harry and Hermione, whose mouths have fallen open. "Royal orders and all that."

"Fuck, we really need to rehearse," Theo says. "This is an absolute massacre of amateurish proportions."

"You're - you're not the prince," the Snatcher says in disbelief. "Prove it."

"Wait a minute," Hermione says, looking furious as she struggles against the Snatcher's hold. "You're Prince Theodore?"

"I prefer Theo," he replies. "Theodore is my father's name, and anyway," he shrugs, "it has a ring of douchery to it."

"It does," Draco agrees. "I hate it."
"Not the time," Theo reminds him sternly.

"You're the prince," Hermione repeats, and though Theo would expect her to find this information surprising and at least a little bit arousing, she looks as though she will strike him down where she stands. "You weren't trying to kill Lord Voldemort on the train at all, were you?"

"What?" Harry asks, staring at him. He looks betrayed; Theo feels a tinge of guilt.

"He wasn't even on the train, was he?" Hermione demands. "You were there to kill us, weren't you?"

"Oh, so you're an extraordinary witch and inhumanly clever," Theo says, throwing his hands up. "Wonderful."

"Well," she says, her cheeks flaming. "Why didn't you?"

"He needs you," Harry realizes aloud, and now the betrayal on his face has turned to rage. "You need her on your side, don't you?"

"Well, now that you mention it, yes," Theo confesses, and now even Draco looks hurt, which is not helpful. "Though you've not asked what my side is, have you?"

"The King's, obviously," Hermione grits out. "Your father's -"

"Nah," Theo says, shrugging. "He's a little too into Lord Voldemort. I find it discouraging."

Harry gawks. "Wait -"

"- what?" Hermione finishes for him. "So that means -"

"That means," Theo supplies for her, "I need you to choose me so that we can defeat Lord Voldemort and then take over the country together. Oh, but since this is such a sensitive topic of conversation," he adds, leaning over to nudge Draco. "We should probably kill all these Snatchers, just in case."

"Just in case," Draco agrees, quickly drawing his revolver and firing on the one who holds Hermione, prompting her to stagger forward as chaos erupts around them.

She's quick, though, and no less clever than Theo has estimated, and so she takes out a few Snatchers of her own as Draco and Theo open fire, turning the gun that belongs to the Snatcher holding Harry to point into his own forehead, pulling the trigger with a twitch of her finger from afar. From there Harry makes quick work of the remaining Snatchers, pausing only when the four of them are the only remaining figures standing in the clearing. Harry stops abruptly, his knife pointed at Theo's head as Hermione knocks the gun from Draco's hand.

Draco, who has never been disarmed before, lets her do it, Theo notes; some captain of the guard, he thinks, shaking his head.

"When you say you need her," Harry says, panting a little, "you mean -"

"I need to marry her," Theo admits, and Draco looks more than a little wounded, which Theo tries to ignore.

"Let me get this straight," Hermione says furiously. "You knew we were on that train."

"Yes," Theo says curtly. "Sorry, but you didn't hide very well - and more to the point," he adds
emphatically, "Lord Voldemort knew you were on that train."

"You knew, too?" Hermione asks, glaring at Draco.

He looks uneasy, which tickles Theo. "Yes," he admits. "I didn't realize we were going with any sort of hostage scheme," he adds hopefully, but Hermione isn't thrilled.

"Lord Voldemort wouldn't want me killed, though," Hermione says uneasily, glancing at Harry. "It doesn't make sense."

"Oh, no, he didn't want you killed," Theo agrees. "He wanted my father's Royal Guard to take you to him."

Recognition dawns on Harry's face. "But then - "

"I saved you," Theo cuts in gleefully. "Really, you should be thanking me.\" He pauses as Draco glances broodily at him. "Sorry," he offers, gesturing to Draco. "We saved you."

"You manipulated us," Harry corrects him, scowling. "Excuse us if that doesn't sit particularly well, considering I thought you were - " he stops, hesitating.

"Honorable?" Theo offers bluntly, and shrugs. "Not particularly."

"So you're the captain of his father's guard," Hermione says. She's still somewhat unnecessarily fixated on Draco, in Theo's opinion, considering she's just discovered he's a prince. "You were told to bring me to Lord Voldemort?"

"Yes," Draco says, somewhat miserably.

"And instead," Hermione says with a thoughtful frown, "you blew up a train?"

"Yes," Draco says, looking at his feet.

Hermione gapes at him. "Why?"

"Well, if I might step in," Theo says, holding up a finger for pause. "Primarily, I wanted a reason for Lord Voldemort to think you were dead. At least temporarily," he assures her. "To give me time to do whatever it took to get you on board with overthrowing my father and using you as a means for public support. But also," he adds cheerfully, "because I have a tendency to make a larger mess than necessary of any given situation."

"That's true," Draco says.

"Why go against your father?" Harry demands, and Theo remembers suddenly that he has served under the name of King Theodore I, and likely felt it worth doing at one time.

"Well, unfortunately, my father's crawling into bed with Lord Voldemort where it comes to kidnapping and torturing innocent people to get what he wants," Theo laments facetiously. "Besides," he adds. "Haven't you ever looked at your father and thought 'you're a little shit'?"

"My father's dead," Harry says flatly.

"Huh," Theo comments. "Lucky you."

"He means," Draco sighs, "that Lord Voldemort's about to become a lot more powerful with King Theodore's support. So," he adds slowly, "he thought he could do with having a witch on his side."
"You want me to marry you?" Hermione asks, staring at Theo. Beside her, Harry's fists clench, accenting the sleek muscle of his forearm. "But - but I'm - "

"Beloved," Theo provides for her. "Adored? Surely you've noticed," he adds. "The people practically uphold you as a martyr, and if you were Queen - "

"I can't be Queen," Hermione stammers, glancing fearfully at Harry. "I'm - I can't - "

"You can't marry her," Harry says sternly, reaching instinctively for her hand. Beside Theo, Draco wilts almost imperceptibly. "I won't let you."

"Well," Theo sighs, "this is why I was hoping to have more time to win her over. You," he says apologetically, bowing slightly to Hermione. "Win you over."

"I'm not a prize to be won," she tells him, making a face, and he shakes his head.

"You certainly are," Theo informs her. "Though, in case you missed it, I'm a prince," he reminds her saucily, "and thus not entirely prizeless myself."

"But," she says, glancing between Harry and Draco. "But I don't - "

"Oh, fuck, you don't have to love me," Theo assures her, laughing a little. "But my offer is this - agree to marry me," he suggests, and then nods to himself, deciding to get down on one knee for poetry's sake, "and I'll help you find this Sword of Gryffindor you're after."

He tries not to look at Harry, whose face is pulled into a tight mask of misery.

"Prince," Theo reminds her, pointing to himself as she bites her lip. "Handsome, some say."

"Ha," Harry mutters to himself, which Theo ignores.

"You'll help us," Hermione says slowly. "You'll help, and if I marry you" - Draco inhales sharply, staring at his feet - "then - "

"You'll only have to bear royal heirs," Theo assures her, forcing a smile. "Other than that, your time is your own."

"Fuck this," Harry says, kicking moodily at the ground and walking away.

Theo does everything he can not to look over his shoulder at Harry's exit; he focuses instead on Hermione's brown eyes, hoping she can feel his resolve. She glances up, looking at Draco; Theo can tell, knowing Draco as he does, that Draco has also turned away.

"Okay." Hermione whispers, staring after Harry and speaking more to the distance between them than to him. "I'll do it."

Hermione's magic takes them straight to Godric's Hollow, but they decide to wait until nightfall to venture into town; Theo is less likely to remain anonymous now, but darkness will do most of the work for him.

He finds Harry at the outskirts of a small town graveyard in the peak of the afternoon and joins him, saying nothing.

"My father," Harry says after a few minutes, pointing. "My mother." He sighs, closing his eyes. "Lord Voldemort murdered them."
Theo forces a swallow. "I'm sorry," he murmurs, and Harry shakes his head.

"I was born here," Harry says. "In Godric's Hollow." He gestures over his shoulder, nudging his chin at the town. "I went to Hogwarts when my parents died, and then I served in the King's army until Hermione needed me to come back."

"Draco and I served, too," Theo admits. "Until we, um - took up other posts," he says awkwardly.

"You're not a deserter, then," Harry says, glancing at him. "I guess I was right the first time."

"No, not a deserter, technically," Theo agrees with a laugh. "A traitor, actually, which bears a slight distinction."

Harry turns, looking at him. "You wear so many faces," he says, and Theo wonders if it is an insult, or merely an observation.

"Which is your favorite?" he asks, half-teasing.

Harry stares at him. "Say something that is not a joke," Harry says, "and not a lie."

Theo swallows, weighing his worth.

"I'm afraid," he says eventually. "Afraid that I will take the throne and fail. But I am more afraid," he continues, "that if a man as weak as my father joins up with a man as corrupt as Lord Voldemort and I do nothing to stop them, then I will face my own inadequacies for eternity, and - " he stops abruptly, letting out a sharp exhale. "And I will lie awake at night," he finishes, "with the blood of thousands on my hands."

Harry says nothing for a moment, his green eyes fixed on Theo's.

"You're very dramatic," he says eventually.

Theo lets out an uncomfortable peal of laughter. "Yes," he agrees.

Harry nods, seeming to have cemented something for himself. "But you're right," he says quietly. "And I would rather fight for a man like you than a man like your father."

Theo bows his head, surprisingly speechless.

"Thank you," he murmurs.

Harry reaches out, gripping his arm tightly; then, as though he has been stung, he quickly withdraws his hand, pulling it back to his side.

"I wouldn't let her do this if you were any less," Harry says gruffly, and Theo is reminded with a somewhat graceless jolt who is the priority in Harry's life. "Don't disappoint me."

"I could say the same," Theo sighs, feeling the moment slip irretrievably between his fingers. "But as I'm such a gentleman," he says airily, falling back on his more impervious nature, "I won't."

He swears he sees Harry fight a smile.

"Shut up, Steve," is all he says.

"I feel it," Hermione whispers, her hands outstretched in the dark. "It feels like - " she frowns. "It
feels like the magic at Hogwarts," she says, looking distressed. "It has that same ancient hum to it - it's reverberating, and it's somewhere nearby, but - "

"But what?" Draco asks, standing at her side; Theo notices he has been making a habit of this. Hermione's eyes flutter open.

"It doesn't feel right," she says, biting her lip. "Not like the others. It feels more like Hogwarts than like" - she pauses, shuddering - "him."

Theo watches Draco reach out a hand to comfort her and then retracts it midair, cringing instead.

"Well," Theo suggests, "perhaps it's still worth seeking out?"

Hermione nods, chewing her lip. "This way," she says, her fingers moving slowly through the air; deliberately, with a sense of return, like she's running them through an ocean current. "Towards that house," she says, pointing, and Harry suddenly stops.

"What?" Theo asks, glancing at him, but when he looks back he knows. "It happened there, didn't it?" He chews his lip. "Your parents?"

Harry nods, but swallows. "Keep going," he says roughly.

In two words, Harry is braver than Theo feels he has ever been.

The house is abandoned, set up like a memory, with a ghost of magic all around it; Hermione feels around the preserving wards, finding a spare bit of vacancy for them to enter. They are slow to climb the stairs, hesitant to follow her; Theo and Draco, who are accustomed to traps, constantly look over their shoulders. Harry, who seems to recognize the place, looks around, his green eyes settling with longing on the pictures on the frames, the furniture, the spectrals of lives that once filled these four walls.

"There," Hermione says, pointing, though they can all see it when they arrive. The room is empty except for the glow of the sword in the center, which seems to pulse as they come nearer.

"Wait," Draco says, pulling her back. "Are you sure - "

"It's not a horcrux," Hermione says sadly, shaking her head. "It has Godric Gryffindor's magic on it, but nothing else."

"I remember it," Harry says suddenly, stepping forward. His eyes catch on the gold of the hilt; he likes pointy things, Theo thinks, and stores the joke away for a more appropriate time. Harry crouches to touch it, reaching out -

And as his fingers close around the hilt, Hermione shudders, falling to her knees.

"Hermione," Draco says in panic, catching her and sinking to the ground with her. Theo watches them, feeling his brow furrow as he watches her struggle to take in breath, her brown eyes fixed on Harry from across the room.

Harry is momentarily entranced by the sword, but he turns when he notices that she is in Draco's arms. "Hermione," Harry says with a frown, turning over his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She can't speak; Theo feels a rush of knowing dread.

"We should go," she whispers.
"It's him, isn't it?" Theo asks her when they are alone, and she manages a nod.

For a day and a night they travel, leaving Godric's Hollow behind but taking with them the sword. Theo leaves Harry to his silence until he finds him by himself in the center of a clearing, staring at a tree.

"Is it not hitting back today?" Theo asks.

Harry doesn't look over his shoulder.

"I'm not very good at this sort of thing," Theo tells him. "It's why I only have one friend, and even with him I'm fairly inept." He pauses. "I think if the opportunity ever arose, Draco really would enjoy stabbing me."

Harry swallows, but doesn't speak.

"How long have you known?" Theo asks, and then permits the question to rest in the air between them.

Harry eventually sighs. "It feels different actually knowing," he finally says. "But I've always thought there was something … odd," he admits. "There were moments when I thought I could feel him, the way Hermione can, but - "

He trails off. "He disappeared after killing my parents," Harry says. "Hermione seems to think that after splitting his soul so many times, maybe that last piece of him just sort of ricocheted around until it settled in me."

He shudders. Theo wants to reach for him, but doesn't.

"Is there anything you can do?" Theo asks, and Harry lets out a startlingly hollow laugh.

"Die," he says simply. "At the right time."

"I meant," Theo begins, but Harry cuts him off.

"I know what you meant," Harry says, with a rough edge of meanness. "You want to be helpful?" Harry asks, turning to face him. "Fight me," he says, putting up a fist. "We're soldiers, aren't we?"

"Harry," Theo warns, but Harry throws a punch, and Theo instinctively shifts to avoid it. Harry laughs, somewhat maniacally, but the essence of a smile is on his lips and Theo is at a loss, so he raises his fists, beckoning.

The sparring is conventional at first, like Army practice drills, with more mechanical repetition than creativity; but then Harry suddenly hits harder, and then Theo is gritting his teeth, and then there is a blow to Harry's stomach that is met with an elbow to the back of Theo's neck and they are on the ground, Harry's fist poised at Theo's face.

"If it will help," Theo rasps. "Just do it."

Harry stares at him, breathing hard. "You wear so many faces," he says hoarsely, and Theo, who has calculated at least three ways to slip out of Harry's hold in the last five seconds, chooses not to move; he chooses not to breathe, not letting his gaze falter.

"Bash them all in, then," Theo invites him. "If that's what I can do for you, then- "

He is cut off as Harry yanks him forward by the collar of his shirt and kisses him, a kiss that tastes
like salt, a metallic drip of sweat and a coppery hint of blood. Theo's hand drops to Harry's chest and he can feel his heart beating, can feel his lungs stretching to take in air, can feel him bone by bone and every strand of muscle, and thinks with an inward laugh that no Dark Lord could have ever taken up residency there and survived it.

He thinks, for a moment of insanity, that Hermione must be wrong; she must have miscalculated, misjudged, she must be mistaken - because there is no fiber of this man's being that is anything less than a warrior, no less than a hero, no less than a god -

Harry pulls away with a soundless twist of anguish; he turns his back on Theo and rakes a hand through his hair, shaking his head.

"You're supposed to put up a fight," Harry snarls, and then he gets up, and he doesn't come back.

*Good,* Theo thinks with brutal satisfaction, letting his head fall. *Better if you run.*

They decide to part ways; it seems only fitting, knowing one of them is meant for death and the other is meant for arranged marriage. Theo figures they need time to grieve.

"I'll need three days to put together something of an army," Theo says, and Draco nods his tactical agreement. "Then we'll meet you at Malfoy Manor."


"Yes," he confirms grimly. "That's where Lord Voldemort generally resides."

Hermione reaches towards him for a moment, like she'll cup her hand around his cheek; she doesn't, and they both look disappointed.

Theo grips Harry's shoulder, offering him a smirk that is really more of a grimace. "When you come back," he says, aiming for airy indifference and discovering with bitter amusement that he can still so easily find it, "I'll give you a palace. Or two," he suggests. "Depending how much you suffer while you're gone."

"I don't want anything," Harry grits out, his mouth tightening. He glances behind Theo at Hermione, his eyes lingering helplessly on her face. "Just deserve her," he says quietly.

*Deserve her.*

Theo nods, and his heart doesn't break.

It shatters.

But there is no time to build an army; no time even to escape.

"Prince Theodore," Lord Voldemort says, his raven-black hair winking in the light with his hoard of Death Eaters at his heels. "How kind of you to lead me to my wayward protégé." He turns his head, smiling slyly. "And young Captain Malfoy," he says, the words slithering off his tongue. "I wondered where you'd been."

He abandons both Draco and Theo in favor of Hermione, who is staring up at him defiantly. "Hello, little one," he coaxes her, an eerie tenderness to his voice. "Haven't you run far enough?"

"Don't touch me, Tom," she hisses, and Draco and Theo exchange a look.
"Hermione," Lord Voldemort whispers, curling one long finger under her chin. "Surely you knew you would leave traces in Godric's Hollow." He leans forward, speaking in her ear. "Are you sure you didn't wish me to follow you?" he murmurs, brushing his lips against her cheek. "You know I'm drawn to your magic."

Beside him, Theo can feel Draco stiffen in anger; in rage. He moves to take a step forward, but then -

"Ah, and Harry Potter," Lord Voldemort says, turning to him. "Lovely," he murmurs. "I'm so thrilled to have a complete set. To be done with all of you," he says with a laugh, "minus you, of course, Hermione."

"You can't have her," Draco snarls, and Lord Voldemort raises one brow.

"You misunderstand, Draco," he tuts quietly. "She is already mine." Lord Voldemort laughs, yanking the sleeve back on her shirt and exposing the snake and the skull, the Dark Mark on her wrist. "I put it there myself," he tells Draco, taunting him. "Tell him, Hermione," he adds, curling her under his arm, stroking a finger along the edge of her cheek. "It seems you've garnered yourself yet another little admirer, haven't you? Tell him," he murmurs again. "Tell him that you are not yours to give away."

She shrinks from his touch, not looking at Draco. "I had no choice," she whispers to him, and Draco stares at her, speechless.

"We're connected, Hermione and I," Lord Voldemort tells them gleefully. "We possess power that calls to the other, and there are none equal to us." He turns, cupping her face in his hands. "None of your pets can save you from what you are," he murmurs to her. "Not Harry Potter, not Draco Malfoy - not even young Prince Theodore," he taunts, "who's even less of a man than his father - "

"Hermione," Theo interrupts, calling to her. "Don't listen to him - "

"Silence," Lord Voldemort says, making a slashing motion with his hand that eliminates Theo's ability to speak, leaving him to paw helplessly at his throat. "You've been running for too long, Hermione," he tells her, his voice like a lover's; like a twisted lullaby. "I'll always belong to you, Hermione, and you to me - "

"Yes," she says suddenly, gazing up at him. "I am yours, aren't I?"

Beside Theo, Draco's hands shake.

"I'm yours," Hermione says, stepping towards him. "Everything I am."

"Yes," Lord Voldemort agrees, bending his head to press his forehead against hers; it is a caress, Theo notes, though a disturbing one. "Yes, everything you are - "

"And you are mine," Hermione whispers, and it is then that Theo realizes what she is doing; he turns to Harry, sees his green eyes go wide, catches the shimmer of a gold hilt that is slung across his waist -

"And everything you are, Tom," Hermione says, taking hold of Lord Voldemort's throat, "belongs equally to me."

Lord Voldemort lets out a terrible, inhuman scream as the earth suddenly thunders around them, a curtain of darkness falling as Hermione takes hold of Lord Voldemort's power and steals it from him, dragging him to his knees. Behind them, the other Death Eaters leap forward and Draco holds
them off, his grey eyes narrowing as he takes aim.

Beside Theo, Harry is shouting -

"Do it," Harry begs, thrusting the sword at Theo. "You have to be the one - "

"I can't," Theo says, panicked. "I - Harry, I can't - "

"She can't hold him off for long," Harry pleads. "It has to be me first. Save her life, Theo," he says adamantly, "save Draco's - "

"I can't," Theo says desperately. "Harry, don't make me do this - "

"I will find you," Harry promises, reaching out to grip the back of Theo's neck. "I swear it," he says, his green eyes wild, his fingers digging into the ridges of Theo's skull.

Theo closes his eyes, broken beyond repair. "I'm sorry," he whispers.

He plunges the sword into Harry's chest, his eyes fluttering open as Harry staggers backwards and then falls, the hilt still gripped in Theo's hand. There is a moment - a rip in the fabric of time - and Lord Voldemort staggers forward, feeling the loss of whatever piece of him had taken residence in Harry, and this is the moment when Theo turns to Hermione. She takes the sword from him, swaying slightly, and then buries it in the side of Lord Voldemort's neck, panting as she stumbles backwards and falls.

Draco catches her and the others flee as she raises her hands; Theo knows she is too weak to conjure much of anything but they don't know that, and so they run, and Theo falls to his knees beside Harry, clutching the head of messy dark hair in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, half a sob rising up to choke him. "I'm sorry - "

"Theo," Draco says, and reaches for him, one arm still wrapped protectively around Hermione; but Theo continues, shaking -

"I'm sorry - "

He feels something, a stirring in his chest; fear, he thinks, or trauma, or weakness, or simply an uninvited breath -

"I can't breathe, Steve," he hears, and when Theo opens his eyes, it is to a radiant view of emerald green, and he promptly collapses in the dirt.

Hermione Granger marries the newly-crowned King Theodore II in a very public ceremony, to great fanfare, and atop the shining steps of the newly rebuilt Hogwarts Castle. She announces shortly afterwards that as her first objective as Queen, her priority is to restore its glory; to make it a school for children like she once was, and like her dear friend Harry Potter, whose death in defeating Lord Voldemort is commemorated as though he were a martyr, or even a saint.

Theo permits this. He finds it keeps his wife happy, and there is much to be said for such things.

Theo nods to his guards as he moves to enter his chambers.

"Wait," one says. "There's someone in there to see you, Your Majesty."

"Well, is it a murderer or a thief?" Theo prompts irritably, pushing open the door. "Because either
way, I'm already displeased."

"Neither, actually," a familiar voice calls from inside, and Theo freezes.

"Captain Malfoy said to let him in," the guard says uncertainly. "But if you'd like us to - "

"No, no," Theo says hastily. "Just - um." He swallows. "Don't interrupt," he warns, brandishing a finger at both guards before throwing the door open, wandering inside.

"King Theodore," Harry says, smiling at him. "Been a while."

"Don't call me that," Theo tells him. "It sounds ridiculous."

"It's your name."


"Less exciting than you might think," Harry replies, yawning. "Easier this way, of course, but it's absolute murder to get anything done."

"Of course," Theo agrees, rolling his eyes. "And you would know murder."

"Not as well as you," Harry assures him with a wink, "but I'm familiar."

"Going to rub that in again?" Theo sighs, and Harry shakes his head, smiling.

"How's the Queen?" he asks.

"Honestly?" Theo says, and Harry shrugs.

"Why not?"

"Well," Theo informs him, "I think she's fucking the captain of my guard."

Harry laughs. "Are she and Draco happy, then?"

"Like little clams, the both of them," Theo informs him. "It's me who gets the shit end of the stick, really."

"Really?" Harry says, rising to his feet and joining Theo. "Unsatisfied, are you?"

"Quite," Theo replies. "Incredibly, actually."


"Which is your favorite?" Theo asks, holding his breath, and Harry laughs in his ear.

"Tell me something that is not a joke," he suggests softly, "and not a lie."

"I miss you," Theo says.

"And?" Harry prompts, his hand traveling to Theo's trousers.

Harry smiles. Theo wants to reach for him.

He does.

"This one," Harry says, brushing his lips against Theo's and closing the distance between them. "This one is my favorite."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Inspired by my recent mostly-dissatisfied read of the Grisha Trilogy by Leigh Bardugo; a different plot and a vastly different ending, so not a spoiler for those who haven't read them. Thanks for letting me get this one out of my head! And onwards, I promise, to Drunk History, which is about halfway done and - of course - very very late. Thank you again to Jelibean323 for the pairing request; hope it was all that you wanted!
Drunk History: The Voldemort Wars, Part I

Pairing: None

Universe: Post-Hogwarts

Rating: M for language

Summary: Part I of two episodes of Drunk History: The Voldemort Wars. If you have never seen the show Drunk History, here is the actual synopsis: In each episode, an inebriated narrator, who is joined by host [in this case, Lee Jordan], struggles to recount an event from history, while actors enact the narrator's anecdotes and also lip sync the dialogue.

Camera opens to the Headmaster's office, where Minerva McGonagall sits behind what is now her desk. The room is mostly sparse, cleared of its former inhabitant's trinkets and occupied instead by volumes of large, distinctly heavy-looking books. Minerva delicately sips a glass of Ogden's in complete silence as Lee Jordan is perched awkwardly across from her. Every now and then she is heard to murmur "excellent year" or "full-bodied indeed," as Lee silently partakes in his own glass of Firewhisky.

After perhaps thirty minutes of this, Lee clears his throat.

Lee, anxiously: "So, Professor - "

Minerva: [takes a long sip] "Drink, Mr Jordan."

Lee: [nods quickly, taking a sip.] "I just wanted to thank you again for agreeing to this."

Minerva: [shrugs] "I felt it was important. [She leans back, eyeing the liquid in her glass.] "Well, history certainly is, I should say."

Lee: "Yeah, I was sort of … surprised you agreed to the drunk bit, honestly."

Minerva: [eyeing him hawkishly] "Mr Jordan, do you imagine me to be the kind of woman who cannot hold her alcohol?"

Lee: "I try not to imagine, Professor. I find I travel to disturbing places when I do."

Minerva: [ignoring him] "I assure you that I will maintain a commendable - if not heightened - sense of integrity and decorum befitting both my age and my stature, immune as I have always been to any particular sway of intoxication."

Lee: [shuddering] "Yikes."

[ Fifteen minutes pass. ]

Minerva: "... the obvious thing being, of course, that I am highly respected, but also surprisingly not very polarizing. So really, the irony of me doing this job is that I was always extremely
qualified for it."

Lee: [hesitantly] "Is that technically irony?"

Minerva: [Takes a long, deliberate sip, emptying her glass and then dropping it on the desk with a loud bark of laughter.] "It's fucking truth is what it is, Jordan."

Lee: "Well." [Tentatively] "Personally, I think you're a boss ass bitch, Professor."

Minerva: [chuckles to herself, reaching up to vacantly touch her hair.] "Where's my hat?"

[Fifteen minutes later. Minerva is now wearing the Sorting Hat.]

Minerva: "Do it. Tell him."

Sorting Hat: "No."

Lee: "Tell me what?"

Sorting Hat: "Don't."

Minerva: [coaxingly] "Come on."

Sorting Hat: "Stop."

Lee: "WHAT?"

Minerva: "Come on - "

Sorting Hat: [to Lee] "She's telling a raunchy joke in her head."

Lee: "Really?"

Minerva: "Oh, it's not that bad."

Sorting Hat: "The punchline is 'two lips on your organ."

Minerva: [giggles]

[Fifteen minutes later. Lee is now wearing the Sorting Hat.]

Minerva: "... and I was like, fuck goblins, you know?"


Minerva: "I fucking know, right?"

Lee: [lets out a sharp exhale] "Bro."

Minerva: [nodding firmly] "Fucking - exactly."

Sorting Hat: "Gryffindor!"

[Fifteen minutes later. The Sorting Hat is sat on the desk, having been awarded its own glass of Ogden's.]

Minerva: "You know what's like ... hilarious?"
Lee: "Tell me."

Minerva: "You know who's got the biggest dick?"

Lee: "Snape." [*He pauses.] "No, Dumbledore. No, Filch. No - "

Minerva: "Stop talking, Jordan."

Lee: "Okay."

Minerva: "It's motherfucking Filius, Jordan." [*She pauses, smirking.] "Filius Flitwick."

Lee: "You're joking."

Minerva: [*taking a loud gulp] "I'm fucking - not." [*She hiccups once.] "You know whose is second biggest?"

Lee: "Mine." [*He pauses.] "No, yours."

Minerva: [*nodding slowly] "Good wager, Jordan, but no." [*She leans forward conspiratorially.] "It's Binns, Jordan. Fucking Binns." [*She leans back, looking smugly delighted.]" [Fifteen minutes later.]

Lee: "Wait." [*He blinks.] "I think you forgot Hagrid."

Minerva: [*into her glass] "I didn't forget shit, Jordan, you cocksucking whore."

[ Fifteen minutes later. ]

Minerva: "You know who my favorite student was?"

Lee: "Harry?"

Minerva: "Remus motherfucking Lupin, that werewolf son of a bitch."

Lee: "Did you know he was a werewolf?"

Minerva: "His name was fucking Moon Moon, Jordan." [*She pauses, squinting at the bottom of her glass.] "Or is it Wolf Wolf?"

Lee: "Interchangeable, I say."

Minerva: [*sighs nostalgically] "I'd have stooped to deviance for Sirius Black, though."

Lee: "Oh, for sure. It wouldn't even really be stooping."

Minerva: "No. It would have been some unapologetic schtoop-ing, though." [*She holds up her glass, emitting a strangely tinkling laugh before touching her finger to her nose, missing the orifice entirely.] "I don't say this a lot, but - " [*he takes a deep breath] " - you make me want to be a better person."

Minerva: [*nods] "I get that."

[ Fifteen minutes pass. ]

Lee: "Ready, Professor?"
Minerva: [blinks] "Yes. No." [She pauses.] "Yes." [She stares vacantly into space for a moment.] "What's that you're smoking, Jordan?"

Lee: "Me?" [Looks around.] "I'm not smoking anything."

Minerva: "Oh." [A pause.] "Okay then."

Lee: "Is that … okay?" [He waits; she says nothing.] "Because if you want I can get you a - "

Minerva: "Yes. Do that."

Lee: "Oh - "

Minerva: "If you want to."

Lee: "Right."

Minerva: "No pressure."

[Fifteen minutes later.]

Minerva: [waving away a thick cloud of smoke] "If anyone asks, there's a fire in my office, Jordan."

Lee: [smirking] "There's definitely something hot, Professor."

Minerva: [Stops abruptly] "Jordan, you'd better be prepared to back that up."

Lee: "Oh." [He pauses for a moment.] "That sounds scary."

Minerva: "Well, now we know who has the smallest balls."

[Fifteen minutes later.]

Minerva: "Have a biscuit, Jordan."

Lee: "Where is it?"

[A long pause commences.]

Lee: "We should probably start the show now."

Minerva: "That seems best."

[Cuts to Minerva interview segment.]

Minerva: "Hello." [She pauses.] "Did I say that right?"

Lee: "Did you say hello?"

Minerva: "Yes."

Lee: "How did you say it?"

Minerva: "Hello."

Lee: "Again?"
Minerva: "Hello."

Lee: "Okay." [He nods.] "Keep going."

Minerva: "Hello, I'm Minerva McGonagall, and today we're going to be talking about the first Voldemort war." [She takes a sip.] "Nailed it."

[Camera cuts to pan the outside of an old, rickety cottage.]

Minerva voiceover: "So here's the fucking deal. There's some shitty purebloods, right? Because every story starts with some shitty purebloods. Fucking - every story. We all know this. It's widely accepted - "

Lee voiceover: [interrupting] "Shitty purebloods. Got it."

Minerva voiceover: "So like, there's the Gaunts. Fucking Daddy Gaunt, Marvolo - "

[Viktor Krum steps into view, wearing a light brown wig and crouching, clutching an oversized gold cocktail ring.]

[Editor's cut:

Viktor: "Hermione vill vatch me, yes?"

Lee: "I don't see how she could miss it, honestly."

Viktor: [nodding] "Very vell."]

Minerva voiceover: "Then Brother Gaunt, Morfin - "

[Irma Pince wanders on screen.]

[Editor's cut:

Irma: "Librarian: oddly not a lucrative post."

Lee: "I'm really not in a position to make judgments."]

Minerva voiceover: "And finally, Merope Gaunt, the daughter."

[Kreacher toddles into view, wearing a lank, dull wig and his usual garb in addition to a set of crazy-eyed false glasses that Muggles occasionally wear for children's birthday parties.]

[Editor's cut:

Harry: "What did you say you needed Kreacher for again?"

Lee: "Nothing important."]

Albus voiceover, via his portrait: "Oooh, are you telling Tom Riddle's backstory?"

[Camera cuts back to Minerva.]

Minerva: [leaping up in her seat] "Fucking hell, Albus, you cunting shit, I nearly spilled my drink."

Albus: [sighs happily] "I love this story."
Minerva: [scoffing] "Funny that, as you certainly never shared it with anyone while you were alive."

Albus: "I know. I still think about that and laugh."

Minerva: "You laugh?"

Albus: [chuckling] "I was such a scamp."

Minerva: "Yeah. [Sarcastically] "That's definitely the word I'd use, too."

Lee: [whispering loudly] "It's not."

Minerva: [sniffing] "Don't interrupt, Jordan, it's rude."

[Camera returns to the set of the Gaunt family shack, where Kreacher is being instructed to hold a broom and sweep the floor. He scowls.]

Minerva voiceover: "So anyway, Merope is miserable. Her brother's a deviant little nut job and her father's a completely unhinged maniac who's even more obsessed with his ring than Gollum - "

Lee voiceover: [interrupting] "Who?"

Minerva voiceover: "Don't worry about it. So like I was saying, Merope's all 'my life sucks' - "

[Camera closes up on Kreacher mouthing along with the voiceover, though he appears to say 'Mistress would be ashamed' before dead-eyeing the camera.]

Minerva voiceover: " - and then she sees Tom Riddle - who, by the way, is a fucking panty-dropper - riding around outside on a horse all 'look at me, look at me' - "

[Camera pans out the window to show Cornelius Fudge in a wig and perched uncomfortably on horseback, repeatedly sneaking dubious glances at the ground below as though he expects to fall there shortly.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Wow, so we're just ... not even trying, are we?"

Minerva voiceover: " - and like any thirsty bitch, Merope's like, you know what? Love potion." [Kreacher very unhappily mouths along with her narration, his ears drooping forward.] "I'm a witch, I'm fucking magic, he doesn't need to like my tits or my personality, he just needs to put it in me a solid twice a day. No, wait."

[Camera cuts back to Minerva.]

Minerva: [frowning] "Three times a day?"

Lee: "Is that real?"

Minerva: "I mean ... have you ever seen young Tom Riddle?"

Lee: "No?"

Minerva: "Honestly, if you're not going to take this seriously - "
Sorting Hat: "I've seen him. Three times sounds reasonable."

Minerva: [throwing her hands up] "Thank you! Anyway - "

[Camera cuts to a scene of Irma Pince being dramatically dragged away from the shoddily constructed set of an even more shoddily constructed Gaunt shack.]

Minerva voiceover: "So there's a whole thing where Morfin gets arrested for fucking up some Muggles, and then Marvolo gets arrested for trying to curse the Ministry worker who shows up to be like okay, what the fuck - "

[Scene of Viktor Krum wildly brandishing his fists at Seamus Finnegan in costume as a Ministry worker. He swats delicately at Viktor's hand and then promptly runs away.]

Minerva voiceover: "So then it's just Merope left alone with her thirst and her Muggle fuckboy."

[Cornelius tries tentatively to put his arm around Kreacher, who immediately curls into a ball and wails.]

Minerva voiceover: "Eventually Merope is like 'ugh, I'm tired of sex, I want love now' - "

Lee voiceover: "Dumb."

Minerva voiceover: " - so she stops giving Tom Riddle Sr the love potion, and then he sees her crazy eyes and is like, 'holy shit, what' - "

[Corneius and Kreacher relay this scene with great accuracy.]

Minerva voiceover: " - and he leaves, but she's pregnant, so she gets all sick and gross from like, being sad or whatever, but she makes it to Wool's Orphanage to have the baby, names him Tom Marvolo Riddle in honor of both their shitty fathers, and then she dies."

[Kreacher staggers dramatically across the wooden floor of the orphanage set, pulls a toy doll from beneath his rags, and promptly lets his head fall against the floor. Seamus rushes out as a social worker, fanning himself and then collapsing atop Kreacher's chest, wailing.]

Minerva voiceover: "Naturally, Tom Riddle is a weirdo right from the start."

[Gilderoy Lockhart bursts onto the scene in full costume, which includes a dark wig and a set of period-appropriate bloomers. He is joined by a cast of extras, among which is a reprised Seamus Finnegan and a deeply displeased Dean Thomas.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "You really went with Lockhart for this? You didn't think maybe we could find someone with a bit more … gravitas?"

Muttered response.

Lee: "Oh, you couldn't? Well. Then this makes sense."]

Minerva voiceover: "Tom gets in a fight with some kid and hangs his rabbit from the rafters - which, ew - "

Lee voiceover: "Ew."
Minerva voiceover: "- and then he did something else that was apparently so unspeakably horrible that they literally could not speak - "

[Gilderoy leaps into view as the other extras, who appear to be eating lunch, are startled into dropping their food.]

Minerva voiceover: "So anyway, obviously eventually Tom Riddle turns eleven, so Albus Dumbledore goes to see him - "

Albus portrait voiceover: "EHEM."

[Camera cuts back to Minerva's office.]

Minerva, to Albus' portrait: "What?"

Albus: [innocently] "Oh, are you going to tell it?"

Minerva: "I'm telling it. Right now."

Albus: "I mean, someone else could always tell it."

Minerva: "What?"

Albus: "You know." [suggestively] "Someone else."

Minerva: "I don't understand what you're saying."

Albus: [sighing heavily] "Right, right, carry on."

[Scene returns to the orphanage where Gilderoy Lockhart is now speaking to Luna Lovegood, who is wearing a full white beard and a Sorcerer's Apprentice hat.]

Minerva voiceover: "So Dumbledore meets Tom, tells him he's a wizard, blah blah - "

[Gilderoy mouths along with the narration, giddily overemphasizing the words 'blah blah'.]

Minerva voiceover: "Dumbledore, in the meantime, discovers that Tom's like, totally insane, and that he keeps trophies from all the little kids that he psychologically ruins - "

[Gilderoy leaps into the bathroom as Dean is brushing his teeth, startling him into dropping his toothbrush and then grabbing it and running away.]

Albus voiceover: [interrupting] "Which is very important to remember for later in the story."

Minerva voiceover: "Which, by the way, is a misconception he absolutely refuses to part with, though we'll get into that later - "

Albus voiceover: "You're not telling it right!"

[On screen, Luna admonishes Gilderoy.]
Minerva voiceover: "Whatever. So Tom lassoes together this gang of Slytherin thugs, and they call themselves the Knights of Walpurgis - "

Albus voiceover: [hastily, as though he fears interruption] "And they are a motley composition of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who can show them more refined forms of cruelty."

[Camera cuts to Minerva, who is scowling at Albus' portrait.]

Minerva: "Are you done?"

Albus: [indignantly] "You weren't crafting the scene."

Minerva: "The scene full of bumbling baboons?" [scoffs] "I think the stage is sufficiently set, Albus."

[Scene cuts to Hogwarts, where the Knights of Walpurgis are being played by Dean, Seamus, and now Cormac McLaggen and Marcus Belby, who look deeply pleased with themselves.]

Minerva voiceover: "Tom Riddle either proves everyone on earth to be a fool or himself to be a very good actor despite his latent psychopathy and performs brilliantly in his courses. At some point before his fifth year, after searching through countless records - " [Scene shows Gilderoy searching vehemently through a pile of books, tossing them over his shoulder as he abandons them] " - he discovered that his father could not have been a wizard." [Gilderoy sulks, swaying where he stands and holding his hand to his forehead in apparent lamentation.] "He does, however, use his middle name to uncover his relation to the Gaunts, who are the last remaining heirs of Slytherin."

[The scene shifts to the girl's bathroom, where Gilderoy is shown to be poking indiscriminately at the handles until Lee Jordan walks on screen, gesturing impatiently to the correct faucet, which features a depiction of a snake.]

Minerva voiceover: "He discovers he is the heir of Salazar Slytherin, and then manages to open the Chamber of Secrets in his fifth year of schooling."

[Gilderoy leaps dramatically onto a set that looks to be a poorly replicated imagining of the Chamber, looking immeasurably snotty as he does it.]

Minerva voiceover: "Not sure how Tom did it, exactly. I mean, he's a fucking genius or whatever, so - that, I guess."

[It should be physically impossible for Gilderoy to look more smug, but he manages it.]

Minerva voiceover: "In an effort to carry on Salazar's mission of fucking up Muggle-born students, Tom sets the evil snake - "

Albus voiceover: [interrupting] "The basilisk, Minnie - "

Minerva voiceover: "Shut your whore mouth, Albus, I'm talking."

[Gilderoy gleefully mouths along with this as someone levitates in a small garden snake, which is wearing the same crazy-eyed glasses that Kreacher was wearing earlier. Seamus, in a dress, appears as Myrtle Warren, meeting the snake's eye and collapsing in a heap.]

Minerva voiceover: "So, Tom kills a student, which is just about the only thing that ever happens to
make any school administrators pay attention to anything, and Tom, being smarter than just about anyone who has ever worked at Hogwarts - "

Albus voiceover: "Except me, right?"

Minerva voiceover: "Did I fucking stutter, Albus?"

Lee voiceover: [whispering] "She didn't."

Minerva voiceover: "Tom blames another student, Rubeus Hagrid, whom Albus makes caretaker of the school." [Seamus appears again, this time wearing an overlarge beard and entering on stilts.] "Which, if you're following, here - this kid gets expelled, right, and Albus Dumbledore decides it's not safe to argue that they should keep him as a student, but that it is advisable to give him literally all the keys to the castle? OKAY, sure."

[Luna, still dressed as Albus, shrugs indolently.]

Minerva voiceover: "So anyway, since Tom isn't allowed to murder people with his killing snake anymore - "

Lee voiceover: "Do you mean his - "

Minerva voiceover: [interrupting] "No, I mean his literal snake that kills people."

Lee voiceover: "Right."

Minerva voiceover: "That summer, Tom goes to the Gaunt shack, where an even nuttier Morfin momentarily thinks he is Tom Riddle Sr - " [Irma Pince sits on the floor, clawing manically at her face] " - thus unceremoniously informing young Tom Riddle that his father was a peacocking twat cannon who lives with his parents. [Cornelius Fudge reappears as Tom Riddle Sr.] "Oh, and that he's a Muggle."

[Gilderoy leaps on screen, brandishing a wand at Cornelius. Behind him, Seamus pulls Dean into the frame as the elder Riddles. Dean is wearing an old-fashioned nightie.]

Minerva voiceover: "Tom kills his father and his grandparents and modifies his uncle's memory so that Morfin takes the blame, and once Tom returns to school he uses his father's murder to create his first horcrux, which is an item that holds a piece of his soul." [Screen shows Gilderoy at a Muggle chemistry set.] "He decides on a diary, which includes information about how to open the Chamber of Secrets for the next time a homicidal maniac comes along, or just some empty cannister of a dummy he can temporarily possess."

[Editor's cut:
Ginny: "They're going to be sensitive about all the terrible things Voldemort did, right?"

Lee: "Oh, for sure. Totally."

Albus voiceover: "See, the trophy thing is relevant now."

[Camera cuts to Minerva, who is laying face down on the floor with Lee sprawled out beside her.]

Minerva: "What?"

Albus: "Tom Riddle kept trophies as a kid, right? So I was like, horcruxes. [He snaps his fingers.] "Duh."
Minerva: [lifts her head slightly] "Yeah. Duh." [She reaches for her glass, taking a loud slurp.] "And how long did it take you to find and destroy them again?"

Albus: [hesitantly] "Okay, that's not relevant."

Minerva: "Suck it, Albus."

Lee: [muffled into the carpet] "Yeah, suck it Albus."

Sorting Hat: [hiccuping] "Gryffindor!"

[Scene cuts back to Gilderoy, who is now receiving a medal and shaking hands with Seamus, who is apparently now playing Headmaster Armando Dippet.]

Minerva voiceover: "So Tom gets to be Head Boy, plus he receives the Medal for Magical Merit and also an award for special services to the school, proving that successful people everywhere are probably secret murderers." [She pauses; Gilderoy blinks owlishly at the camera.] "No objections? Okay, moving on."

[Gilderoy pleads momentarily with Seamus in a recreation of the office Minerva is currently occupying, and Seamus very adamantly shakes his head.]

Minerva voiceover: "Tom asks for a post as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, but in an odd moment of unusual clarity, Armando Dippet says no."

Armando Dippet voiceover, via his portrait: "Hey!"

Minerva voiceover: [as giddily mouthed by Gilderoy] "God, I'm surrounded by idiots." [Seamus brandishes an admonishing finger at Gilderoy.] "So Dippet says no, and then Tom gets a job working for Borgin and Burkes, where he meets and charms the panties off a variety of people, including a dumb cunt named Hepzibah Smith. Oh, but I should say - "

[Gilderoy pauses before walking into a set of an elaborately crafted manor house.]

Minerva voiceover: "Sorry, sometime before this Tom murders an Albanian peasant and turns Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem into a horcrux."

[Gilderoy rushes into a different scene, the background of which is painted haphazardly with trees, strikes down a costumed Seamus and grabs a paper crown from his hands and then bounds back off set.]

Minerva voiceover: "Anyway, back to Hepzibah Smith."

[Gilderoy sprints through the manor house, arriving at yet another costumed version of Seamus, this time with false lashes and a resplendent albeit archaic and yellowing gown.]

Minerva voiceover: "She shows him her two most precious possessions - "

Lee voiceover: [giggling] "Her tits?"

Minerva voiceover: "Her most precious possessions, Jordan, not the ones she throws around for free."

[Seamus, on screen, glances down at his false breasts and shrugs, indifferent.]

Lee voiceover: "Got it."
Minerva voiceover: "She shows him Helga Hufflepuff's cup and Salazar Slytherin's locket, and naturally, thieving little hot ass Tom kills her and steals them, and then he blames her house elf, because why not?"

[Gilderoy snatches a cup and a necklace from Seamus, but not before slapping his cheek and scampering away in a cloud of smoke.]

Minerva voiceover: "He obviously turns these things into horcruxes too, in an effort to make himself impossible to kill. Which he sort manages, unless you think about the fact that he eventually fell at the hands of a seventeen year old boy - and one that I once had to teach how to waltz, for that matter. And who once thought I would actually beat him? With ... wood?" [She lets out an undignified snort.] "Honestly, that little messy-haired bespectacled Potter menace was more afraid of me than an actual evil wizard, so if that doesn't prove that Voldemort's a little bitch, then I can't - "

Albus voiceover: [gently] "Uh, Minnie?"

[Screen shows Luna mouthing along.]

Minerva voiceover: "Yes?"

Albus voiceover: "You were saying? Horcruxes? Borgin and Burkes?"

Minerva voiceover: "I know what the fuck I was saying, Albus."

Sorting Hat voiceover: "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Minerva voiceover: [sighs] "Eventually, Tom comes back to Hogwarts to ask Dumbledore for a job as Defense Against the Dark Arts professor."

[Shows Gilderoy sitting on a desk, stretched across it and gazing imploringly at Luna, batting his lashes.]

Minerva voiceover: "He uses this opportunity to stash the Ravenclaw diadem in the castle, and also puts a curse on the position, which is an actual logistical nightmare. Like, of everything he did, that was easily the most inconvenient. The shittiest non-murder move, frankly. Not to say murder isn't shitty, but replacing a teacher every year? Fuck. Fuck, man. Just - curriculum, right? And human resources? Fuuuuck, man."

Lee voiceover: [echoing] "Fuuuuck."

Minerva voiceover: "By this point, Tom Riddle was fully going by Lord Voldemort, which is an anagram of his full name, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Why not Thomas, you ask? Maybe because Merope was a dumb twit. Maybe because that's too many letters. Who knows? Mysteries. Total mysteries. Lost entirely to history, I'm afraid - "

Lee voiceover: [interrupting] "Hey, where'd you get that?"

[Scene cuts to Minerva, who is sipping an elaborate piña colada out of a straw while wearing sunglasses.]

Minerva: "Transfiguration, bitch."

[Scene returns to Gilderoy, who is now dressed in flowing black garb and flanked by Cormac and Marcus, who are dressed as Death Eaters. They have elaborately painted Dark Marks on their
Minerva voiceover: "Word starts to spread about Tom's magical exploration during the ten years or so that he's fucking around in Albania or wherever he is, 'pushing the limits of magic' or just like, smoking shit and tapping ass, who knows - "

[Gilderoy, dressed as Indiana Jones, wanders the conjured desert and smirks at the camera.]

Minerva voiceover: "Oh, and then at some point he also becomes a really fucking pro-ass legilimens, too, and starts entering people's minds for torture and shit."

[Gilderoy presses two fingers to his temple and stares menacingly at Seamus, who withers to the ground clutching his throat.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "What is this?"

Seamus: [shrugs] "Artistic license."

Lee: "That's not a thing. You can't just say that."

Seamus: [pulling something out of his pocket] "Look, see? This says I can do what I want for the sake of art."

Lee: "Who gave you this?"

Seamus: "Dean."

Lee: "For fuck's sake."

Minerva voiceover: "As Voldemort, Tom also starts attracting other species to his cause - dementors, goblins, werewolves. Creatures who were persecuted by wizards for centuries but then were like, 'well, I guess this one seems to know what's up' - "

[Gilderoy appears on screen with a baby Teddy Lupin on his hip, wearing a furry wolf costume.]

[Editor's cut:

Andromeda: "What the hell are you doing with Teddy?"

Lee: "We need a werewolf."

Andromeda: "Teddy's not a werewolf!"

Lee: "Eh, he's werewolf adjacent."

Andromeda: "Why don't you just use Bill?"

Lee: "Oh. Fuck."

Minerva voiceover: "So basically people are really into Lord Voldemort at this point, for whatever reason. People like power, man." [There is a brief sound of gurgling through a straw.] "Dunno. People just like it."
Gilderoy tosses a cape over his shoulder, standing proudly with his hands on his hips. Beside him, Cormac and Marcus participate in what appears to be a carefully choreographed dance routine a la Thriller, which is set to a montage of Seamus dramatically dying on a variety of different sets, representing Tom's rise to power. Cormac, dressed as Lucius Malfoy, happily punches Seamus in the face.

Minerva voiceover: "So, ten years into the war, things are shitty. Real fucking shitty. Meanwhile, people are begging Dumbledore to be Minister for Magic and fix all the fucking shit, but he decides to say 'fuck 'em, I'll stay at Hogwarts' - 

Albus voiceover: [disgruntled] "Okay, that's not exactly how it hap- 

Minerva voiceover: [interrupting] "Well, he does start the Order of the Phoenix, though it is admittedly a bunch of teenagers that I put in detention several times, so there you go."

[Seamus, dressed in tattered robes as Remus Lupin, once again drags a costumed Dean on screen.]

Minerva voiceover: "Things escalate when one of the Death Eaters working for Tom, a young little shit-lord named Severus Snape, overhears a prophecy from Sybill Trelawney."

[Seamus, now dressed as Sybill, sits in a pub wearing a set of oversized spectacles, a gauzy, spangled shawl, and countless chains and bangles. Theo Nott, dressed as Severus, pokes his head on screen.]

[Editor's cut:

Theo: "Honestly?" [Shrugs] "I really had nothing better to do."]

Minerva voiceover: "Sybill makes a prophecy that the Dark Lord can only be destroyed by someone who is born to parents who have 'thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies,' and Tom fucking - freaks. Out."

[Gilderoy enters the scene, clawing at his face and falling to his knees, cursing the heavens in an oddly Shakespearian manner.]

Minerva voiceover: "For the record, this could have referred to two inadvisably young newlyweds: Frank and Alice Longbottom, or James and Lily Potter."

[Seamus drags Dean back on set as the Longbottoms, while Theo, now playing James, appears arm in arm with Blaise Zabini, who is dressed in a simple blouse and skirt as Lily.]

[Editor's cut:

Blaise: "Frankly, I think I look fantastic."

Theo: "You really do. Very tasteful."

Blaise: [nodding] "That was my thought."

Lee: "Why are you here?"

Blaise: [shrugs] "Theo told me this thing had an open bar."

Lee: "It doesn't."

Theo: [drinking from a flask] "Semantics."
Lee: "Nott, are you aware that you're playing both James Potter and Severus Snape?"

Theo: "So?"

Lee: [sighs heavily] "Nevermind."

Theo: "What, did they not get along?"

Minerva voiceover: "So anyway, Tom aka Voldemort goes after the Potters first, which is weird since Frank and Alice were both purebloods so you'd think he would - well, you know what, nevermind. Honestly, if I had the chance to kill James Potter, I'd consider it. I wouldn't do it, obviously, but, you know, he's a little shit. Love him, but he's a shit. Again, love him. Cherish him, adore him completely, but - "

Lee voiceover: "Shitty."

Minerva voiceover: "Affectionately shitty."

Sorting Hat voiceover: "Gryffindor!"

[Theo and Blaise as the Potters are sitting in their house, innocently having a tea party with Grawp, who appears to be playing baby Harry.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Can we re-cast this?"

Theo: "Why?"

Lee: "Why is a baby being played by a giant?"

Theo: [shrugs] "Why not?"

Lee: "I feel like that should be obvious."

Blaise: "This is discrimination."

Lee: "It's honestly not."]

[Grawp is replaced in the next scene by Fleur Delacour.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Okay, really?"

Fleur: "Thees ees fun!"

Theo: "See? She's having fun."

Fleur: "I 'ave talent, Lee."

Lee: "I mean, I know."

Theo: "You know?"

Lee: "Well, yeah."
Blaise: "Do you?"

Lee: [uncomfortably] "I mean, not like personally or anything, but I would imagine - "

Theo: "You imagine?"

Blaise: "Do you ... visualize?"

Fleur: [confused] "What does thees mean, Lee?"

Lee: "You know what? This is fine. This is great. Carry on."

Minerva voiceover: "The Potters were betrayed by their friend, Peter Pettigrew, who turned them over to Tom. He also later fucked over Sirius Black and sent him to Azkaban for twelve years while faking his death, which is proof that even if you're inordinately attractive you still can't afford not to keep a close eye on the weirdo who follows you around."

[Seamus, dressed as Pettigrew, shows up to duel an unenthusiastic Dean, who is dressed in a leather jacket and aviators and sighing deeply.]

Minerva voiceover: "Anyway, in what is an actual tragedy, Tom kills James and Lily as they fight to protect their son, Harry."

[Theo pretends to duel Gilderoy and then is shoved; Blaise, who is clinging extraordinarily closely to Fleur, proceeds to dump her unceremoniously in a crib and then staggers slowly to his knees, dying in an extremely drawn out manner. Gilderoy waits for him to collapse and then takes a step, but is forced to pause as Blaise lets out another tremor of agony; this happens again, and then a third time, until finally Gilderoy steps on Blaise and advances to where Fleur is sitting in the crib, her legs hanging over the side as she innocently sucks her thumb.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Fleur? Can you not do that?"

Fleur: "Why not, Lee? Am I not un bébé ?"

Lee: "Yes, but - "

Blaise: "What's wrong, Lee? Are you visualizing again?"

Theo: "Fleur, can you maybe try yelling for Daddy?"

Lee: "Stop."

Theo: [shrugs, grinning] "I just think the part calls for it."

Lee: "I hate you."

Minerva voiceover: "Nobody fully understands what happened, but for whatever reason, Tom couldn't kill baby Harry Potter. Instead he disappeared, and for a time, people thought that was the end."

[Cuts to Minerva, who is again wearing the Sorting Hat and sipping loudly on a needlessly ornate tropical drink.]

Minerva: "So, that's basically it. That's the first Voldemort war."
Lee: "Wow. Shitty."

Sorting Hat: "The joke was 'what's better than roses on your piano?' in case anyone was wondering."

Minerva: [*pulling the hat over her eyes*] "I need to lie down."

*Scene cuts to preview of Part II.*

Lee voiceover: "Next time on Drunk History - "

Harry: "So, like, my question here is … I'm the Chosen One."

Hermione: [*pausing*] "That's not a question."

Harry: [*laughs, hiccups, and then curls up under a desk.*]

Hermione: [*smiling vacantly*] "He'll be back. It's fine." [*She climbs under the desk, joining him, and both disappear from camera view.*]

Lee: "Guys?"

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Thanks to ellesjourney for the Tumblr request, though it is admittedly turning out weirder than I could have possibly imagined. Part II to come soon enough.
**Paradox**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**Paradox**

Pairing: Dramione (Draco Malfoy x Hermione Granger)

Universe: Deathly Hallows AU, Year 7

Rating: M for language, sex

Summary: This is my gift to Gaeleria for being the thousandth reviewer on Nightmares and Nocturnes. She asked for a Dramione where Draco "is forced to confront and change his blood status bigotry and/or step up to be the hero," and this, my darling, is my very strange interpretation of your request. Without further ado:

Draco Malfoy wakes up one night to find Hermione Granger in his bed. But she's really not Hermione Granger at all, is she?

Draco Malfoy woke up at precisely 12:07 a.m. to a set of overlarge brown eyes and tickle of something soft beneath his nose, prompting a sneeze that was followed by a frantic scream.

"Shh," she said hastily, smothering his mouth with her palm. "You'll wake someone."

"Getoiergfoffme," Draco muttered indignantly, glaring up at her. Mudblood legend and Potter-loving idiot Hermione Granger was straddling him in bed, wearing a set of those Muggle jeans she apparently loved—tighter than he'd ever seen her wear, but that was an observation that would decidedly have to wait—and a shirt of soft grey material that drifted unpleasantly above his bare torso. She raised one brow, pursing her lips; a warning.

"Don't scream," she whispered, and he felt something cold slip against the sharply pebbled flesh of his abdomen. "If you do, I promise I'll leave a mark."

"Whatuiyifruck?" Draco demanded, feeling his eyes widen as he took note of what she had so casually pressed into his stomach. "Isiyqfwirvbljknif?"

"Yes, it is a knife," Granger replied, looking pleased. "Good on you for noticing, Malfoy."

He made a face—*fuck you*, he thought furiously, since she didn't seem to be willing to let him say it out loud—and she narrowed her eyes. "Promise not to scream?"

He nodded. She slowly retracted her hand and he jerked up, reaching for his wand. "Ah-ah-ah, *nope,*" Granger said quickly, shoving him down and then shifting the knife's edge, holding it to his neck.

"My fault," she said, breathing heavily as she grinned. "I suppose I didn't give you explicit enough instructions." She leaned forward, her hair tickling his chin as she spoke in his ear. "If you move," she whispered, "if you breathe, if you say anything, if you *try anything*, I will stab you in the chest, pull apart your ribs, and feed your heart to the peacocks outside." She leaned back, smirking. "Got it?"
"Fucking hell, Granger," Draco exhaled, his heart pounding in his chest. "What on earth happened to you?"

"I need your help," she said quickly, glancing around, "right now. We need to get out, and then I'll explain everything—"

"Like hell you will," Draco retorted gruffly. "I'm not going anywhere with you, you—" he paused, flustered. "You intolerable little mudblood—"

"What does that mean?" Granger demanded, grimacing. "Whatever it is," she sniffed, "I don't like your tone."

"Where's Potter?" Draco cut in, ignoring her. "And Weasley? Are they here?" His pulse quickened, realizing what her presence could mean. "Because if they are—"

Granger frowned. "Who?"

"Potter and Wea- " He stopped. "What do you mean who?"

"Potter?" she asked, blinking. "Wait, do you mean Harry Potter?" She sat back, quietly marveling. "Am I friends with him here?"

Draco gaped at her. "Are you friends with—" He paused. "Did you say—"

She sighed impatiently. "I told you I would explain," she reminded him, "but we have to get out. There's something we have to find."

"What do we have t—no. You know what?" Draco interrupted himself. "No. No. I don't know what you're playing at, Granger, but I'm not just going to play guessing games with you all night. In case you've managed to forget, I hate you," he reminded her, "and secondly, the Dark Lord is living in my fucking house, so I really don't think—"

"Dark Lord?" Granger repeated vacantly. "Who?"

"What?" Draco asked, and grimaced. "No, I—I literally can't," he snapped. "Even if I were buying into your little game, I can't say his name. There's a taboo."

"Oh, are you talking about Grindelwald?" Granger asked. "And what's a taboo?"

"Actually, just stab me," Draco muttered. "Seems easier."

"God, you're difficult," she groaned, redoubling her efforts on the knife at his throat. "And apparently this happens to you often," she added, glancing down at his chest.

"What?" he asked gruffly. "Being awoken by Gryffindor idiots in the middle of the night? No, frankly, that's new."

"No, getting stabbed," she said, running a hand over the lines of his Sectumsempra scar. He shivered a little at her touch, hoping desperately that she wouldn't notice; she didn't seem to, or if she had, she didn't care. "This looks bad."

"It was," Draco grunted. "And you know what it's from, Granger, so I don't know why you're—"

"Listen," she cut in. "If I explain myself, will you be less annoying?"

"No promises," Draco muttered, and at her menacing lean towards him, he shrank back against the
"Fine, yes," he sighed. "Tell me what's going on and I'll be—I don't know." He offered as close a motion to shrugging as he could manage while pinned beneath her. "Better."

"Better?" she echoed skeptically.

"I'll ask fewer questions," he clarified, and she shrugged.

"Close enough. Well," she began, clearing her throat, "I'm Hermione Granger."

He rolled his eyes. "I know that—"

"I'm not that Hermione Granger," she cut in, smirking. "Whoever she is."

Draco frowned. "Are you—is this Polyjuice, or—"

"I don't know what that is," she informed him bluntly, "because where I come from, I'm not magic. Well, I am," she clarified, "or I should be, anyway, but according to—" She broke off, shaking herself of whatever she'd been about to say. "There's a guy named Grindelwald in charge, apparently, and so I'm not allowed to become a witch."

Draco swallowed cautiously, feeling the edge of her knife tease the arch of his throat. "Where exactly is it that you're from?" he asked, suddenly finding his mouth quite dry.

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "I think it's technically a parallel universe. It looks like this," she added, gesturing around. "Same world, really. Just—totally different, also."

"So apparently Hermione Granger without magic is a total psychopath, then," Draco noted, gesturing to the knife. "Do I have that part right?"

"I'm not a psychopath," she informed him. "I'm perfectly capable of empathy, I just choose to discard it. Logically," she added, as though she felt he needed the clarification.

"Comforting," he scoffed.

"The thing is, I have to steal something," she said. "And I don't have a lot of time—I made a deal with someone." She shifted slightly, holding up a small silver pocket watch. "This thing," she explained, "is what lets me go back and forth. Well, it let me go forth," she clarified. "I assume it will work the same way going back."

"What is it you're trying to steal?" Draco asked, the gears in his head not turning quite fast enough to process what was happening.

But then there was a shout from downstairs, and they both froze.

It had been a long time since Hermione Granger had seen Draco Malfoy, but she'd definitely never seen him like this. He was sweating, nervous, fumbling for words, fidgeting with his hands; his face was deathly pale, and he was visibly shaking.

Which didn't seem fair, really, considering she was the one who'd been taken hostage, and Harry and Ron, too. If anyone was going to be dissolving to a puddle of nerves, it should have been them—not him.

For a moment, she despised him. Loathed him. But then she remembered where she was, and figured she really couldn't expend the effort at the moment.
Malfy had done a somewhat shoddy job of denying that he recognized Harry—if that had even been his intent, which from her vantage point remained frustratingly unclear. The stinging hex she'd managed to hit Harry with had been relatively effective but far from miraculous, so Hermione couldn't imagine why Malfoy would not just identify them—unless, of course, he was having some sort of extremely slow-acting moral crisis. He kept glancing into a corner of the room, checking for something, like he was being watched; Hermione couldn't imagine what the problem was, but she did know that they were fucked.

They were *fucked*, and that was not a sentiment she used lightly. Bellatrix had found the sword of Gryffindor, had panicked, had turned dangerously paranoid—which meant that she knew.

She knew, and they were fucked.

"I'll take the mudblood," Bellatrix had hissed, grabbing her arm; Hermione felt her heart plummet somewhere into her intestines, trying to swallow her fear and failing miserably. Half a whimper wormed its way out of her throat before she managed to clamp her mouth shut.

She looked up at Ron, watched them drag him and Harry away, and then slowly let her gaze float to Malfoy.

*Please,* she thought, hoping he could read her intent. *Please, Malfoy, please—*

But then he disappeared, and she was alone with Bellatrix Lestrange.

"You have to help her," not-Granger hissed, her fingers twitching around the worn handle of her knife. "Are you seriously going to let that woman torture her?" she added pointedly, jabbing the blade in the air between them. "Or worse?"

"First of all, 'that woman' is my lunatic of an aunt, and she's not exactly someone I want to mess with," Draco muttered. "And secondly," he reminded her emphatically, "*that wasn't the deal.*"

Very much not-Hermione Granger—the real one being downstairs, blistering his sensibilities with her screams and thus fully traumatizing him for life—had said she would answer his questions, would explain her presence, if he had just snuck down and kept quiet. She would have murdered his family if he did not, or so she'd claimed (and he certainly believed she was mad enough if she felt like following through, which she clearly did) but he'd hardly needed the threat. A parallel universe? And proven, too, by the convenient appearance of the real Granger herself? Draco would be a fool not to ask questions.

Specifically, the very significant question of whether there was a universe where he was not trapped in a house with Lord fucking Voldemort.

"Well, we obviously need a new fucking deal!" not-Granger spat furiously. "You have to do something," she said, her mouth contorting anxiously as the real Granger let out another excruciating scream that made both of them flinch.

"Perhaps I did not make it clear that I *hate* Granger," Draco reminded her. "And her friends, too, and everything that she is, and everything she stands for—"

"Maybe so, but you don't want her to die," not-Granger interrupted bluntly. "I know you don't."

He grimaced.

"Maybe I don't," he growled. "But there's still nothing I can do. The Dark Lord resides in this
house, and as long as we're here, she's not safe—"

"Then we'll get her out of here," not-Granger determined firmly, her brown eyes widening to an unmercifully optimistic degree. "I can get us out, Malfoy."

"Out—you mean, out out?" Draco asked, his gaze flicking to the pocket watch she'd shown him. "Out of this entire—"

*Universe?*

He paused, swallowing. "You're joking."

"I don't joke," not-Granger informed him seriously, managing to cross her arms over her chest with the blade of her knife still aimed at him. "I find it a poor use of my time."

"Fuck, what are you even *like?*" Draco groaned. "I don't *know* you, and I *hate* her—"

"You *don't* hate her," not-Granger corrected. "It's all over your face, Malfoy. You feel bad about this," she urged. "You know it's *wrong*—"

"Yes, I fucking know it's wrong," Draco snarled, desperate, "but that doesn't mean that I can do anything about it!"

"But I just told you that you *can,*" she urged. "Malfoy, come on—I *know* you're not the massive shit you appear to be—"

"Oh, wow, flattery, nice," he muttered.

"—and I *know* you want to save her," she insisted. "Just—just grab her, and I'll get us out—"

"You don't even know how to use magic!"

"No, but I know how to use a pocket watch," she snapped. "I'm not entirely devoid of thought Malfoy—and I swear," she said, her eyes narrowed with purpose. "If you can just get us in there, I promise, I'll get us out."

He felt the line of his mouth tighten, forcefully trapped. "I just—I don't know if—"

"Don't be a pussy," not-Granger interrupted, glaring at him.

"Don't be a cunt!" Draco retorted. She narrowed her eyes.

"Malfoy, if you don't—"

There was another scream, and then something in Draco withered.

"Fine," he snapped, scowling. "Let's go."

Hermione had been crying; trying not to, of course, but feeling the tears work themselves from her eyes, the pain immense and excruciating and *cruel*—

And then there had been Malfoy again, more sure this time—almost angry, actually, had she been in the state of mind to gauge what she'd catalogued of the last six years of his emotions—and then there had been *her*? And then Hermione knew she'd gone mad with pain, gone absolutely *delirious,* watching *herself* spin the dials on a silver pocket watch and then swirling with Malfoy—and
herself—into nothing, nothing, nothing, and then landing somewhere, somewhere else, and yet—

"Where are we?" Malfoy asked, turning to the version of her who was holding the watch. *That* Hermione was wearing a tight pair of jeans—*quite* tight, though she really was pulling it off, wasn't she?—and a grey t-shirt, a knife clutched in her free hand.

A knife?

"Your house," the other Hermione replied, her voice snotty and clipped. Hermione forced her eyes shut, every fiber of her being resolute in its denial of her surroundings. *Is that really what I sound like?* she wondered, and half-shuddered. *No, no, this isn't real—*

"*My* house?" Malfoy demanded, furious. "I thought you said you'd get us out!"

"*We're* out, aren't we?" she countered. "*Do you* see any insane women carving things into her arm?"

"Still, I thought you meant—"

"*It's a parallel universe,* Malfoy," she retorted. "*We moved somewhere parallel.*"

*No, no, it can't be—*

"*What,*" Hermione forced out, slowly dragging herself upright, "*is happening?*" She paused, frowning, as she realized they were indeed still in Malfoy Manor; only Bellatrix had gone, and Lucius and Narcissa, and that could only mean—

"*Harry,*" Hermione gasped. "*Harry and Ron, we have to—*"

"Are you really friends with Harry Potter?" her other self asked her. "*I've met him,*" she offered vacantly, "*and I have to say, I can't believe that. I really can't.*"

"*Neither can I,*" Malfoy muttered. "*Not that it apparently matters what I think, as I've yet to have anything go my way today—*"

"*You are incredibly whiny,*" not-Hermione informed him, rolling her eyes. "*You have no idea how close I am to slapping you.*"

"*It wouldn't be the first time,*" Hermione murmured vacantly, hissing a little in pain as she shifted onto her left arm. "*Ouch—*"

"*Are you okay?*" not-Hermione asked, and Hermione stared at her, wondering what on earth had happened that she would be staring at some animated version of her own reflection.

"*I mean, I've been better, but—*" She paused. "*Who are you?*" she asked, squinting at her. "*I assume this is Polyjuice, but I can't—*"

"*Why does everyone keep saying that?*" not-Hermione snapped impatiently. "*What the hell is Polyjuice?*

"*It's a potion,*" Malfoy informed her, looking distinctly bothered at having to explain. "*It lets you take the form of someone else. Which is the logical explanation for this,*" he added, "*but clearly I'm still waiting on the truth.*"

"*I told you the truth,*" not-Hermione groaned. "*This is a parallel universe.*" She shrugged. "*A paradox, if you will.*"
Malfoy sighed. "Yes, I'm aware that you said that, but—"

"Paradox?" Hermione echoed, frowning. "That's nonsensical."

"Oh, says the witch," her worse version scoffed. "Are you really telling me that you can do magic, and yet you don't believe there might be a way to transfer through universes?"

Hermione blinked. "That can't be," she croaked. "That's—"

"If you say impossible, I'll slap you," horrible Hermione sniffed. "I don't care that you look like me, or you are me, or whatever this is—"

"She's you, but with magic," Malfoy muttered. "And an overdeveloped sense of righteousness, and a fucking unbearable hero complex, and—"

"I have to go back," Hermione said suddenly. "I have to get Harry and Ron out of there."

"—and the worst friends in the entire universe," Malfoy finished. "All the universes," he corrected himself, and Hermione glared at him. "Look, you have a lot more questions to answer," he said, turning back to not-Hermione. "Like what, exactly, you were instructed to steal, and who it was that told you to find me—"

"I believe I can answer that," inserted a new voice—only it wasn't a new voice at all.

"Malfoy?" Hermione gasped, watching him come into view. He was wearing a uniform of some kind, looking even smarmier—and smirkier—than usual, his name and some unidentifiable rank stitched in prominent letters on his chest beside a symbol she'd seen before—something uncomfortably familiar—

"That symbol," she said, her right hand flying to her mouth. "That's— that's Grindelwald's symbol," she realized. "The Deathly Hallows—"

"Very good, Miss Granger," not-Malfoy cut in, smiling. "And speaking of Miss Grangers," he added, his tone cooling as he turned to not-Hermione. "You'd better have good news for me."

"I—hit a bit of a snag," not-Hermione admitted, grimacing. "But—"

"Wait a minute," the real Malfoy interrupted, tugging at his tie— his tie. Hermione thought, rolling her eyes; the middle of the night and he was in a full black suit— "Are you telling me that he's your source?" he asked, staring in disbelief. "Me?"

"Ah, lovely to meet you," not-Malfoy said, taking a jaunty step forward and extending a hand. "Charmed, I'm sure."

"I am not charmed," Malfoy retorted. "You decidedly do not charm me."

"Well, that's just as well, I suppose," not-Malfoy said, grinning. "But as it happens, I will need you to cooperate."

"Are you threatening me?" Malfoy asked, his brow furrowed. "Because if you are—"

"What?" not-Malfoy drawled lazily, glancing at his fingers. "My father will hear about it?"

Malfoy gaped at him, staring, as Hermione slowly gave in to laughter that shook inside her ribs, devolving instantly to sobs.
"Is she okay?" the Draco Malfoy who was so very obviously not him ventured carefully, watching Granger burst into tears on the floor of what was also very clearly not his own family home.

"No way to tell for sure," Draco replied drily, "though I would imagine torture doesn't generally sit well with anyone's psyche."

Not-Draco's smile flickered; a glimpse of irritation that Draco guessed was not entirely foreign to his own countenance.

"So is this what I'm like when I'm important, then?" not-Draco asked him, his gaze sharply appraising Draco. "An utter cunting snot?"

He drew back, affronted. "I am not—"

"Yes, he is," not-Granger ruled definitively. "That about covers it."

"Well, back to you," not-Draco said, arching a brow. "What are you doing back here without the wand?"

"I had to get her out," not-Granger snapped defensively, gesturing to where Granger was now curled in a ball on the floor. "She was being tortured, Malfoy."

"And that's my problem why?" not-Draco asked, crossing his arms. "I thought we had a deal, Granger."

"We still have a deal," not-Granger replied impatiently. "That hasn't changed. I just had a bit of a setback, that's all."

"Mmm," not-Draco permitted, smirking. "Just a bit of a setback, hm?"

"What is it you're looking for?" Draco asked, stepping towards his other self. It was amazing—astounding, really—how strange it was to see himself, as arrogant as ever but in an entirely different way; unburdened, as though he were not living beneath the shadow of something—

A tyrannical Dark Lord, for example.

Not-Draco glanced at not-Granger for a moment, testing, before swiveling to face Draco. "I need to procure a wand," he explained. "I believe in your universe it is currently being used by Tom Riddle—"

"Who?" Draco asked, just as Granger hiccuped out of her hysteria, sniffling and lifting her head in apparent recognition.

"Ah, yes, in your world he is called Lord Voldemort," not-Draco said coolly. "Here, of course, he is nobody in particular. In fact," he added, laughing, "I was quite surprised to uncover that he becomes anything of note under any other circumstances. He's little more than a smuggler," he explained, his nose wrinkled distastefully. "A nuisance."

"Why would you want the Dark Lord's wand?" Draco asked, frowning, and a smile—no, a smirk, which Draco was realizing was an infuriating facial expression, particularly on his face—twitched on not-Draco's mouth.

"Because that wand's not his," he said softly. "It's yours."

"What?" Draco repeated. "But—but how—"
He looked helplessly at Granger, the only familiar thing in the room that was so ironically identical to his own home. She swallowed, slowly sitting up.

"That wand," she murmured, half to herself. "It's the Elder Wand, isn't it?"

Not-Draco took a step forward and crouched to look her in the eye, his fingers tracing his mouth carefully as he eyed her. "Yes, it is," he murmured, watching her. "I wasn't aware anyone in your universe knew that."

Granger's eyes flashed as she glared at him. "I know a lot of things," she said flatly, and to Draco's horror, the other version of himself smiled slowly, seeming to process that information in a way that decidedly did not look promising.

"Look, our deal doesn't have to change," not-Granger interjected, looking annoyed as she stepped towards the other Draco. "I can still get that wand for you, Malfoy, and then you'll teach me magic. Right?" she prompted, her fingers tightening threateningly around her knife hilt.

"Yes, yes," not-Draco murmured impatiently, not taking his eyes from Granger. "Give me a moment alone with Miss Granger, would you?" he asked, turning to let his gaze flick over Granger's scowling doppelgänger. "I suspect she needs tending to."

Draco frowned. "Wait a minute—"

"Let's go," not-Granger said, grabbing his arm. "We'll be back in a few minutes, yeah?"

"Sure," not-Draco said impassively, not looking at them as not-Granger dragged Draco away.

Hermione glanced up, startled by the look in the eyes of the man who was most certainly not Draco Malfoy. He was quietly appraising her, glancing over her face, his grey eyes traveling slowly—as though he were taking in the landscape of something he'd never encountered before.

"Stop staring at me," she said bluntly, avoiding his gaze. "I need to go back," she added. "I need to get to Harry, and Ron—"

"They're not your friends in this universe," not-Malfoy informed her, his tone needlessly blunt. "Nobody is, in fact. Aside from me," he clarified, his teeth flashing as he smiled at her.

She recoiled. "You're not really friends with her," she countered, her eyes narrowing. "You made a deal with her—and it doesn't seem like she really understands it, either—"

"She's curious," not-Malfoy said, shrugging. "She can't help it."

"She's smarter than you think she is," Hermione told him, a bite of rage reaching her voice without warning. "You shouldn't underestimate her."

"Oh, sweetheart, I know precisely how smart she is," not-Malfoy assured her. "I wouldn't have sought her out otherwise."

Hermione frowned. "You sought her out?"

"Of course," he said. "I needed someone from here who also existed in your universe. Specifically, someone who was clever enough to do the job," he explained, "but who would still have an incentive not to turn against me. An incentive, in fact, to join me." He gestured over his shoulder, nodding at where she and Malfoy had disappeared. "Voilà."
Hermione bit her lip. "But how did you—"

"You're hurt," not-Malfoy interrupted, his touch gentle as he took her wrist in his hand. "M," he murmured, his thumb cool as he let it float above the single letter Bellatrix had managed to carve into her wrist; the motion was so oddly soothing she could scarcely believe she was looking at such an upsettingly familiar face. "M for Malfoy," he commented, glancing up at her with a curious look in his eye.

She said nothing, holding her breath at his touch.

"Look at that," he remarked, his lips curling up in a sly smile. "It's a sign."

"It's not a sign," she grumbled, tearing her wrist from his grasp. "It's an abomination."

He shrugged. "Yes, well, so am I," he agreed, his smile unwavering. It was unsettling, really; seeing a version of Malfoy who smiled. "That doesn't mean it can't still mean something."

Hermione's mouth tightened in anger. "That's not the word it was going to be."

"Was it Aunt Bellatrix?" not-Malfoy asked, settling himself at her side on the floor. "It looks like her handiwork."

Hermione's breath caught. "Yes," she said. "She was carving the word mudblood into my arm," she added, her voice breaking with a quietly contained rage that gave her pause for a moment, prompting her to stare suspiciously at him. "You're not calling me a mudblood," she realized, feeling her brow furrow. "You haven't—you're almost—"

"Nice to you?" not-Malfoy asked, grinning. "Is it really that shocking?"

Hermione stiffened, not wanting to answer the question. She shifted, avoiding eye contact with him, and promptly changed the subject.

"Are you really going to teach—" me, she thought, and swallowed—"her how to do magic?"

Not-Malfoy shrugged. "Maybe."

Hermione straightened, making a wordless sound of protest. "What do you mean 'maybe'?"

"Well, it depends, of course," not-Malfoy said slowly. "If I'm going to defeat Grindelwald, I really may not have the time." He shrugged. "Priorities," he clarified, flashing her another cutting smile.

"But—" Hermione stammered. "But you made a deal with her, and you're—you're making her do your dirty work—"

"Yes," not-Malfoy confirmed, unfazed. "And?"

Hermione gaped at him. "You're—you're tricking her!"

Not-Malfoy yawned widely, leaning back to nudge his shoulder against hers. "I thought you said she was smart," he whispered in her ear, chuckling softly.

"Is this—is this because of her birth?" Hermione demanded, pulling away. "Because she's a mudblood like me?"

"Of course not," not-Malfoy assured her, waving a hand. "I couldn't manage to give two fucks what's in her blood, so long as she can give me what I want. See, the thing about blood," he added,
tucking a curl behind her ear and smirking as she drew away, flinching. "The thing about it is that it can only take you so far. For example," he continued. "My pureblood status means something in your universe, but here I'm simply one of Grindelwald's minions, and he doesn't care much for England. I went to Durmstrang," not-Malfoy explained, waving a hand carelessly. "I was well-born enough for that. But I was passed over for Prefect, and for Head Boy, and for Triwizard Champion, and I'll be passed over in the future, too."

His smile faded, melting to a grimace. "I do not enjoy being passed over," he declared flatly, and then glanced at her. "And that's where she comes in."

Hermione frowned, realized she'd been holding her breath throughout the entirety of his outrageously tyrannical speech and registered, briefly, that this Malfoy was also in dire need of a slap. She stiffened, clenching a fist.

"You're still using her," Hermione muttered. "Whatever your motivation—whether or not you're not judging her for her birth," she clarified roughly, "you're still using her."

"Well, we should all aspire to be valued for our talents, don't you think?" not-Malfoy asked her, reaching for her wrist again and letting his thumb brush over the M that was now permanently carved in her skin—or so Bellatrix had promised. "Surely you of all people can understand that," he added quietly, drawing her towards him as she held her breath, frozen, wondering why—why, why, why—she was letting him get so—

So close.

His lips quirked up in a smile at the notion that she was not immediately pulling away, his eyes dropping to the still-bloody letter in her arm. His breath ghosted across her wrist, warming her, flooding her with something unknowable as he lowered his head, pressing his lips to the wound; softly, gently. Intimately.

Like a lover.

She shuddered, pulling away.

"You may not be the Draco Malfoy I know," she said, her voice clipped. "But you're something just as awful, if not worse."

He chuckled, looking delighted with the assertion. "No, I'm not the Draco you know, sweetheart," he agreed, nudging her and brushing his lips against her ear. "I'm better," he whispered, laughing.

She bristled. "You're evil," she croaked, pulling away.

His smile broadened. "Like I said," he assured her coolly. "I'm better."

Draco yanked his arm from not-Granger's grip, glaring at her.

"Are you fucking insane?" he demanded. "Do you have any idea what you've signed up to do?"

"Of course," she said, with the same swotty certainty Granger herself often employed. "I understand everything." She shrugged. "I have to steal a wand. Big deal."

"Big deal?" Draco echoed, flailing in disbelief. "You don't even have magic!"

"No, I don't," not-Granger agreed, spinning suddenly to press him back against the corridor wall,
her knife held deftly to his chest. "But I'm pretty handy without it," she murmured, her brown eyes
flicking over his face as a smile tugged at her lips. "And besides," she added, releasing him to
continue striding down the hall. "Nobody ever expects the Spanish Inquisition."

"What?" Draco asked, jogging after her. "What does that have to do with—"

"Never mind," not-Granger said flippantly, shrugging. "Just a little Muggle joke."

"Oh," Draco said, waiting for a moment of revulsion that didn't come. He supposed things were
odd enough as it was for that not to upset his unerring sensibilities. "Still," he pressed, taking a few
more strides to cut her off, stepping in front of her. "Why the fuck are you trusting him?"

"What?" not-Granger asked, pausing abruptly.

"Why do you trust him?" Draco repeated. "He's obviously arrogant and self-interested—"

"Huh," not-Granger snorted, arching a brow. "Interesting assertion, seeing as he's you—"

"He's some other version of me," Draco reminded her. "A version that doesn't really seem to
understand consequences, for one thing, and who doesn't seem to care much about you other than
how he can use you, so—"

"I don't trust him," not-Granger informed him, unblinking. "I'm not an idiot," she added, scoffing.
"I fully intend to kill him once I have the wand."

"You fully intend to—" Draco stared at her. "What?"

"I'm going to kill him," she repeated, shrugging. "Obviously," she added. "Particularly since I doubt
very much that he plans to stick to his end of the bargain."

"What?" Draco repeated, and then, frantically, "what?!"

"Look," not-Granger sighed. "He's giving me the means to steal a wand. An unbeatable wand," she
emphasized pointedly. "He gave me a portkey that travels between universes. I need him right
now," she clarified, "but I won't for much longer."

"But," Draco said hoarsely, "but you—you don't know how to use magic, and—"

"I'm going to have an unbeatable wand," she reminded him, waving her hand around. "I'll figure it
out. I'm sort of a genius," she added. "I was going to start early at Oxford until Malfoy found me,
and anyway, I can make things happen on occasion. Nothing I can control," she muttered under her
breath, "but I know I have magic. I know I have it."

She looked lost for a moment, dazed, and there was a flash of innocence on her face; of longing,
and Draco felt a pull of something in his chest that he very much wanted to violently smother.

"You don't seem to understand how difficult this will be," Draco exhaled slowly, ignoring it. "The
man—the wizard—that this version of me wants you to steal from is no ordinary target. This isn't
going to be easy, and you might die, and—"

"That word you called me," she interrupted, and he grimaced, realizing that she hadn't been
listening to him. "Mudblood." She stared up at him, tilting her head. "What does it mean?"

"I—" Draco choked slightly, finding himself unwilling to define it. "It," he said, swallowing, "it
means someone who—who isn't a pureblood."
"Like you," not-Granger said, frowning. "You're a pureblood?"

"Yes," Draco said. "I'm a pureblood, and you're—"

"Mudblood," she repeated, biting her lip. "Why?" she demanded. "Because my parents are Muggles?"

Draco shifted uneasily. "Well," he began. "I mean, it's common knowledge that—"

"You saw her blood," not-Granger objected, color flaming in her cheeks. "You saw her bleed. You're going to tell me yours looks different?"

"I—it's not literal," Draco said hastily, "I only—"

"Because we can find out," not-Granger interrupted, suddenly using the entire force of her petite form to shove him against the wall, the knife in her hand once again finding a home against the hollow of his throat. "Shall we?" she whispered. "Shall we find out what pure magical blood looks like?"

He held his breath, staring at her. "Granger," he choked out. "Please."

She glared at him, her eyes flashing gold, and then grabbed his palm, slicing it open with her knife and staring up in triumph as blood began to seep from the wound, oozing up in a troubling, viscous scarlet.

"Fuck," he whispered, and in a single motion she did the same to her own hand, brandishing it in his face.

"Blood is blood," she said through gritted teeth. "Blood means nothing." She stopped, eyeing her own wound; she flexed her palm, watching the same troubling crimson trickle down her wrist. "Blood means nothing," she said again, half to herself. "Magic means everything. Power means everything."

She glanced up at him, defiant. "I want magic," she said flatly, curling her hand into a fist. "It isn't fair that I'm the same as you," she snarled, "and yet I have to do without."

He swallowed, unable to take his eyes from her blood.

"No," he admitted, not sure what possessed him to say it. "It isn't fair."

It took a moment—a considerable effort that clawed its way from an uncomfortable, inexplicable numbness—and then, before he quite processed what he was doing, Draco reached into his back pocket, pulling out his wand.

"Here," he murmured, taking her hand and unclenching her fingers one by one. "When you have a wand. The spell for this is Tergeo," he said, waving his wand and cleaning the wound. He swallowed, watching her face, before doing the same to his palm.

She breathed out slowly, her eyes alight with something he couldn't put a finger on before suddenly nodding once, determining something for herself.

"The wand," she said, meeting his eye. "This Dumbledore guy—"

Draco swallowed uncomfortably. "Yes?"

"He's dead here," she said quickly. "Or so Malfoy says. But anyway, Malfoy told me that you
disarmed Dumbledore in your universe—so even after that Voldemort person took it, you're the rightfoul owner. It will obey you," she clarified. "And that's why he needed me to convince you to steal it."

"Why doesn't he just try to win it in this universe?" Draco asked, frowning. "Surely that would be less effort, wouldn't it?"

"I don't think so," not-Granger said, shaking her head slowly. "The way he tells it, this"—she held up the pocket watch—"is just some family heirloom he came across by accident, and that all you'd have to do to get the wand was to rightfully possess it."

"But then—" Draco swallowed. "But then he'd have to take it from me, wouldn't he?"

She glanced slyly at him, a delicate smirk finding a home on her lips. "He'll have to take it from me first," she reminded him softly, and he forced another swallow, wondering what the fuck he'd gotten himself into.

"Ah, you're back," not-Malfoy said, his cunning smile flashing again as the real Malfoy reentered the room with her counterpart.

Hermione watched herself walk; eyed the presence she had, and marveled. This version of her was brash, unconcerned with others, and she was—bigger, somehow. Not physically, but she carried herself differently, wore her spine straighter, held her chin higher; Hermione recalled herself in the Muggle world and realized that perhaps this version of herself had never made friends, had never needed them—had possibly never wanted them—and she wondered if that had made this version of her dangerous.

Or something else. Perhaps she was lonely, and perhaps that would be—

Useful.

Hermione shook herself, startled.

Had she really just contemplated emotionally manipulating another version of herself?

"Yes, we are," not-Hermione said smoothly, sauntering into the room with Malfoy at her heels. "You were in a hurry, weren't you?" she asked, dropping her gaze to Hermione. "Have you thought of a plan?"

"I—no," she admitted, glancing warily up at the real Malfoy. "I don't know the house very well."


Hermione glanced at not-Malfoy beside her, noting that his pale brows had risen in apparent amusement. "Interesting," he murmured in her ear. "This is the version of me you prefer? The kind who takes prisoners?"

"I hate all versions of you," she whispered back. He smiled, indifferent, and Malfoy seemed to catch the interaction, his brow furrowing suspiciously.

"Maybe we should talk," he suggested, looking uncomfortable with the thought. "Go over the plan? The house?"
"Go ahead," not-Malfoy said, stretching languidly. "I'll get you a wand to use for the time being," he said, nodding at Hermione. "You'll need it for when we go back."

"We?" Malfoy echoed sharply, and not-Malfoy offered him an oddly graceful tip of his head.

"Yes," he said brightly. "You really think I'd let you do it alone?"

Malfoy blanched and his alter ego laughed, somewhat alarmingly. He gave Hermione a small bow before turning to exit the room, not-Hermione slowly falling in step beside him and frowning in thought as she turned the corner.

"So," Malfoy ventured when they were alone, staring uncomfortably at her. "Are you okay?"

Hermione grimaced. "No," she muttered. "But—we should really talk about this," she whispered. "We can't let him get the Elder Wand."

"No, we can't," Draco agreed. "And we can't let her get it either," he breathed, his mouth tightening anxiously. "It can't be good in either of their hands."

"Paradoxes really aren't meant to converge like this," Hermione said nervously. "Those two don't belong in our universe, and the Elder Wand in ours certainly doesn't belong in theirs."

"Oh, so you believe in paradoxes now?" Malfoy joked drily, and Hermione flashed him her most impatient glare; the kind she usually saved for Harry and Ron.

"We have to destroy that portkey," she whispered, ignoring him. "We can get the wand—we should get the wand, it's not exactly safe in You-Know-Who's hands—but we should—I don't know, destroy it." She shuddered. "Nobody should be in possession of an unbeatable wand."

"Given the circumstances, we might have to," Malfoy agreed, much to her surprise. She looked up, catching the grim line of his mouth. "We might need to use it to send them back," he added. "And then we can destroy the portkey—"

"So you agree, then," Hermione confirmed urgently. "We have to get the wand, and then get them through the portkey—"

"Take them back here," Malfoy agreed, nodding. "And then steal the portkey and go back through —"

"And destroy it in our universe," she breathed out slowly. She glanced up at him, treading carefully. "We'll have to work together," she murmured. "Can you stomach conspiring with a mudblood?" she asked bitterly.

His grey eyes dropped to his palm, staring at it. "Yeah," he muttered, and did not elaborate.

It was surprisingly easy work; transference into Draco's version of the Manor was almost worryingly unobstructed as they went from not-Draco's bedroom into his own, landing with a soft thud on the corner of the room.

"Listen," Granger said, nodding her head towards the door. "He's not here yet," she ruled, listening to Bellatrix shriek frantically at Lucius and Narcissa. "They still haven't decided what to do."

"Do we wait?" not-Granger asked, frowning at Draco. "Will he be back later?"

"He will," Draco confirmed slowly, "but—" he paused, shifting uncomfortably. "I could also call
him.

He touched his right thumb to his left wrist, and both versions of Granger looked uneasy; he could tell, instinctively, that even if the alternate version of Granger didn't fully understand, she had some concept that his ability to do that was no flattering connection.

"Do it," not-Draco instructed crisply. "Once we've restrained everyone else—"

"What?" Draco cut in. "Restrained?"

"Yes," he said impatiently, as though this were intensely obvious. "Obviously we don't want to chance someone else getting in the way, like your father," he said pointedly, "or Aunt Bellatrix—"

"Right," Draco said, feeling less and less confident in his choice of company.

He changed his mind, of course, upon realizing what an asset their paradoxical selves were; not-Granger was nearly as good with a blade as Granger was with a wand, and his oddly confident clone was a force to be reckoned with—not to mention that it was an easy enough trap for both Lucius and Narcissa, neither having time to realize that it wasn't him before he'd stunned them from elsewhere in the room.

Within ten minutes, every Death Eater and Snatcher in the house had been apprehended, paralyzed or bound to something they could not easily escape; Granger had carefully left the door to the cellar open after stunning Potter and Weasley and returning their wands, using a fragile sort of reverence with them—treading with a mournful guilt that Draco was pleased to see not-Granger observed from afar with impatience; "is that really who she's dating?" she asked, making a face—and then they were alone in the ballroom, and Draco's wand was pressed to his Mark, his hand shaking as he summoned the Dark Lord.

"Draco," Lord Voldemort said, apparating in with a subtle crack and a burdened frown that gave Draco more than a moment's breath of pause. "I presume," he began silkily, "that if you've called, that must mean you have—"

There was a thud, and then he collapsed, sinking to the floor with an oddly graceless impact. Draco frowned, stunned, and then Not-Granger stepped forward, an overlarge vase in her hand that had shattered upon slamming into the back of the Dark Lord's head.

"Got it," she declared loudly, tearing the wand from the Dark Lord's fingers and then appearing breathlessly at Draco's side.

It was all so rapid and nonsensical that Draco could scarcely process the series of events; he stared at Granger, reaching helplessly for clarity, and she shrugged, seeming a certain degree of unsettled herself.

Not-Draco, as collected as always, held out a hand to the other version of Granger, gesturing to her. "Give it to me," he said, stepping towards her; her eyes narrowed.

"It's his," she reminded him, slowly holding it out to Draco. "Remember?"

There was an uneasy pause; Granger's eyes widened, and Draco struggled to draw breath.

"Ah, yes," not-Draco said, his eyes flashing briefly with a look that even Draco could see was anger before it quickly cooled, the spark of silver soothing back into the grey. "Right."

Draco took the wand from not-Granger, barely breathing as his fingers closed around it, a rush of
something flooding through his bloodstream as he made contact with the wood. "How about a trade," he offered slowly, his voice belying a sudden rapid influx of scattered thoughts. "What if I loan you the wand," he suggested, more firmly this time, an idea piecing itself together in his mind. "You came with us, after all," he added, gesturing to Granger. "You helped us. What if we help you with Grindelwald?"

Granger frowned for a moment, concern flicking over her face; but then she nodded, seeming to grasp his intent. "Yes," she said quickly. "You helped us. It's only fair."

Not-Draco stared between them for a moment, and then promptly burst out laughing.

"You can't seriously think I believe that," he said, struggling through his apparent mirth. "You really think I'd let you just—"

"You can have the wand," Draco offered quickly. "I'll give it to you to hold on to. But I want it back."

Not-Draco frowned. "What?"

"There's a war here," Granger contributed, leaping to Draco's aid. "We could end it with that wand," she added, pointing to it. "Whereas you only need it to disarm Grindelwald once, and then you can take his Elder Wand."

Not-Draco's mouth twitched; a smile.

"Disarm," he murmured, winking at her. "Right."

She bristled, and not-Granger flashed her other self a look of something Draco suspected was skepticism, or else pity. Such naivety, he imagined her saying disdainfully, and realized that part of him wanted to laugh.

"Well, fine," not-Draco ruled. "Give me the wand," he said, beckoning, "and then we'll go back to our universe. I'll get Grindelwald's wand," he clarified, "by disarming him, and then return this to you and send you on your merry way to win your little war with Tom." He smiled, holding out a hand for Draco to shake. "Deal?"

He was lying. He was so, so clearly lying.

"Portkey first," Draco suggested slowly. "Then I hand you the wand—"

Not-Draco waved a hand. "Logistics," he ruled. "Not a problem. Do we have a deal?"

"Deal," Draco said, consenting to give his own hand—but not—a brief squeeze before leaning over to murmur in Granger's ear.

"Get the wand from him," he whispered to her.

She nodded, not looking at him.

"Get the portkey from her," she breathed back, her lips unmoving.

"Let's celebrate," Malfoy's more evil version had declared, the Elder Wand clutched tightly in his hand as he grinned, pouring them each a drink upon arriving at his home. My parents are in Scandinavia, he'd explained, laughing into his glass of Ogden's. They leave me alone often, he added, winking at Hermione. They know how responsible I am.
It had been entropic spiraling from there, and intoxication, and a set of intently focused grey eyes that resolutely never left her face; all things Hermione was woefully inexperienced with, and the last one in particular. When there were two sets—get him alone, Malfoy mouthed urgently, gesturing at his doppelgänger—she'd nervously conceded to clear her throat, glancing up and trying, hopelessly, to set her faltering smile.

"Do you," she began to not-Malfoy, and paused, swallowing an onslaught of nerves. "I'm—a bit tired," she lied quietly. "Is there an extra bedroom, or—?"

She caught the motion of the real Malfoy rolling his eyes; smooth, he mouthed, but she was focused on the other version of him, who had run his tongue slowly over his bottom lip.

"There's mine," he suggested wryly.

She forced herself to stay calm.

"Show me," she murmured, and the grey sparked.

"I'm not stupid," he said to her over his shoulder, leading her down the hall. "You seem to think I'm ruled by my cock," he added indignantly, "which I don't appreciate, but—"

"How did you know to find me?" Hermione interrupted, feeling her already-unsettled nerves begin to fray. "Her, I mean."

"I've used the portkey myself a few times," he answered, shrugging. "Spent a bit of time collecting information about you. You'd be surprised how many people have an answer to a question as innocent as 'what's the deal with Hermione Granger,' even when it's some apparently prejudiced version of me that's asking it," he explained, giving her a distinctly wolfish look of interest that sent a furious thrill up her spine. "Though, in all honesty, I had no idea you knew about the Deathly Hallows."

"Who says I do?" she countered, and he smirked knowingly.

"Don't bother trying to cover it up now," he told her, pausing in the long corridor. "I already know you're brilliant."

"I can be brilliant and still not know anything about the Deathly Hallows," she informed him, her breath catching as he backed her against the wall. "The two aren't mutually exclusive."

"Mm," he agreed, his tongue traveling slowly over his lip again. "Not for you, though. Figured out the monster in the Chamber of Secrets too, didn't you?" he asked. "You know how to get there, and what it is, don't you?"

She held her breath. "$I—yes, but—"

"You brewed a successful Polyjuice potion in your second year at Hogwarts," he said, leaning towards her, the crisp smell of him floating up and prompting a shiver. "You know about the Sorcerer's Stone too, don't you? That's just a rumor here, you know," he added, laughing a little, his breath sliding painfully against her neck. "I've even heard," he continued, his lips brushing her jaw, "that you've been in the Department of Mysteries."

"You've heard a lot of things," Hermione said, trying not to gasp. "How did you—"

"I'm rather clever myself," he whispered, pulling back to look at her, his grey eyes stormy, rakish and hungry. "There's a few things I could still stand to know, though, if we're being honest."
"Why do I feel like you're rarely honest?" she asked, her eyes falling shut as he reached for her waist.

"I'll tell you something true right now," he offered, and leaned down, brushing his lips against hers with an impossible softness that was met with a rush of something wild in her, the insane realization that she was kissing Draco Malfoy—only it wasn't, and that was even crazier, and what was the craziest of all was that she liked it, she liked it, she liked it—

"I'm going to kiss you again," he confessed against her lips, a breathy spill of sweetness into her mouth. "And again," he added, making it true, "and again—"

She gasped as he shoved her legs apart, strategically placing his thigh against her; encouraging her, moving against her, moving with her.

"—and then I'm going to fuck you," he said gruffly, and she felt her knees go weak, letting him pull her with him into his bedroom—letting him toss her back on his bed—letting him undress her and savor her and devour her—letting her eyes rove over the muscle of his chest, the flash in his eyes, the movement of his lips as he spoke her name. She craved him, she ached for him, she coveted him.

But before she did all that, she watched him put the Elder Wand in the drawer of his nightstand.

"So," not-Granger said, her lips brushing against her glass. "She's going to steal the wand back, isn't she?"

Draco choked a little on a swallow, coughing up a lie. "No—no, she's just—"

"Don't lie to me," not-Granger murmured, smiling at him as she slipped her bare foot into his lap, sliding the arch of it against his thigh. "You're not nearly as good at it as he is."

"He's not a very good liar either," Draco muttered, and she laughed, letting her head fall back as the sound of it slipped musically into the air between them.

"No, he isn't," she agreed, setting her glass down and shifting to crawl towards him, straddling him on the floor. "You both have at least that in common."

"You're seducing me," he noted, settling his hands on her hips. "Which is odd," he added vacantly, suffering a moment of instability that he wished he could blame on the Firewhisky instead of the feeling of her skin under his fingers, "as you have nothing to steal from me."

"Nothing but your loyalty," she mused in his ear, and he stiffened, pulling back to stare at her.

"What?"

"You don't even like her," she reminded him. "I could take her place, Draco."

He shuddered at the sound of his name on her lips. "I—you—I couldn't—"

"We could work together," she whispered. "You don't want the wand," she added, laughing a little. "I know you don't—you're just making excuses because her insufferable morality is part of the deal—"

"I—" he began weakly, jolting forward as she moved against him. "It's not—"

"Let him keep the wand," she added, her fingers sliding up the back of his neck to toy with the hair
at the back of his head, twisting and coiling as she lowered herself against him, unsubtly rubbing against his lap.

"She'd—she'd never let that happen," Draco said gruffly, trying not to let his mouth fall open as not-Granger let her hands slope forward over his shoulders, her fingers spreading across his chest. Her fingers, her hands her lips her hair her face her body—Granger, whom he'd secretly wondered about for years, hating himself through every second it—only not Granger at all—Granger, except eleven hundred times more tempting—awful and insane and fucking irresistible—

"You don't know what she's like," he added hoarsely, "I could never get away with not taking that wand with us—"

"What if you didn't have to worry about her?" not-Granger—NOT Granger, he adamantly reminded himself—offered demurely, leaning back to meet his gaze with her fucking golden brown eyes, her absolute vision of innocence that was now somehow veiled with an oppressively coquettish charm, an undeniably sexy disregard for rules or consequences or anything, it seemed, aside from wrapping him around her fucking beautiful finger. "What if," she murmured, brushing her lips against his, "I took care of it?"

"What?" Draco asked, breathless, but then she was kissing him, pinning his shoulders to the sofa he was leaning against and slipping her tongue along his bottom lip, making a show of tasting him and then leaning back to watch him, a smile creeping across her face.

"You want me," she breathed. "Don't you?"

He gulped. He fucking gulped.

"I—"

"Not her," she said, and then smiled. "Well, maybe you want her," she permitted, with a confusing brush of Granger's signature primness that was abruptly tainted—improved—by her roguish smirk. "But you want me more."

He shook his head, fighting to breathe. "I—that's not—"

"You're an absolutely horrific liar," she whispered, and kissed him again, her quick fingers slipping to the strip of skin between the untucked hem of his shirt and the band of his trousers, prompting an immediate shudder. She deepened the kiss, tugging his head back by his hair, and he gave in with a growl, ripping the shirt over her head and pausing to stare at her fucking perfect breasts, just like he imagined but better, less restrained and more—more—

More his.

"You want me," she said again, and he flipped her back onto the floor, marinating in the sound of her laughter as she tore his shirt open, pulling him against her.

"Fuck, I really do," he muttered, pressing his lips to the skin of her abdomen and tracing his tongue down to the button of her jeans, his heart creeping up to beat against his throat.

_Fucking hell_, he thought, his fingers closing on the pocket watch and discreetly slipping it from her pocket before tugging her jeans down her legs, cursing himself breathless with anticipation.

It all happened so quickly.
"Malfoy," she said, grabbing him by the shoulder and throwing his clothes at him. *Jesus, Malfoy,* she thought, grimacing, *did you really—*

*Oh well,* she thought, recalling her own evening and withering in resignation. Maybe something would come out of this after all, even if it wasn't really *him—*

"Malfoy, we have to go—"

It was chaos, turmoil, disarray—not-Malfoy skidding in from the hall after her, his cheeks flushed and eyes wild, a look in his eye like *don't, you wouldn't, how could you, don't,* the other version of her looking furious, leaping to her feet—*her fingers tightening around the wand—"I've got the wand, Malfoy, we have to leave now"—him struggling to his feet—*"let's go, grab my hand"—a touch, a yank, a sudden suction—a tumble, a fall—*

A stumble, a darkness, a sense of loss—*how could you, how could you, how could you?*

It all happened so quickly.

Draco woke suddenly, with a start, lying on his back in his bedroom and suddenly jerking up, gasping.

"Granger," he said hoarsely, his heart pounding. "Granger, how did we—"

"It's okay," she said, gripping his shoulder and stilling him, her fingers cool and stiff. "You—you hit your head on something," she explained, grimacing. "But I've got it," she added, holding the Elder Wand out for him. "We're here. We're safe."

He turned to her, forcing himself to breathe, nodding slowly. "Right," he murmured, and then looked around, feeling for the portkey. "Where's—where's the—"

"Here," she said, offering it to him. He reached for it, fumbling slightly, and then aimed the Elder Wand at it, his breath catching in his throat.

"I," he began, hesitating. "Are we sure about this?" he asked, meeting her eye.

She grimaced. "Paradoxes aren't meant to coexist," she said quietly, her hand tightening around his shoulder. "I know that it's—that we're—" She flushed, dropping her gaze. "I know it was different with them," she admitted. "Different than it is between us." She bit her lip, forcing a shrug. "But still."

He swallowed. "They don't belong in our universe," he said aloud, more for his benefit than hers.

"No," she said sadly, shaking her head. "They don't." She paused, the grimace twitching into a smile. "It'll be okay, Draco," she added, testing his name on her tongue; he felt something ease comfortably in his lungs at the sound of it, and managed a hesitant nod.

He set the pocket watch on the ground, aiming his wand at it. *"Reducto,"* he murmured, and watched as the portkey was blown to pieces, shards of silver thrust into the air and then dissipating into nothing, swept away on an inexplicable breeze.

"They're gone," he exhaled, feeling tightness in his chest. *She's gone,* he thought, and shut his eyes, wondering why it hurt quite this badly if she was right there—she was *right there,* the real Granger, and maybe all wasn't lost—
"Come on," he said wearily, throwing an arm around Granger's shoulders. "Let's—I don't know, find Potter, I guess." He sighed. "And Ollivander and Lovegood, I suppose—"

"Who?" she asked reflexively, and then paused, her eyes widening in alarm.

Draco froze, slowly turning to face her.

"Lovegood," he said, forcing himself to maintain a hold of himself. "You know who that is, don't you, Granger?" he asked, stepping forward to lift her chin with one finger. "Don't you, Granger?"

Her lips twitched into a smirk. "You fucking idiot," she murmured, and he leapt back, breathing hard.

"You," he gasped, his hands shaking in disbelief. "You—but you—" he stammered. "You had the wand," he said frantically, staring down at it. "This is the Elder Wand, it wasn't supposed to be—it was—she was the one who—"

"I made a deal," she explained flippantly, shrugging. "He was amenable. You have a war to win, after all," she murmured, a wary smile crossing her face. "You need this more than he does." She paused, biting her lip. "We need it," she clarified, holding a hand out for him.

He stared at her, blinking; torn and uncertain.

"Draco," she ventured uneasily, taking a step towards him. "Say something."

It seemed like an eternity before he found his voice; but then—

"Thank god it's you," he gasped, yanking her into his arms and burying his lips in the side of her neck.

Hermione opened her eyes slowly, something throbbing in her head.

"Malfoy," she muttered. "What happened, I thought we were—"

"You know, considering everything," Malfoy said, lowering himself to sit beside her on the couch, "you should really start calling me Draco."

"Why?" she asked groggily, bringing a hand up to her temple. "I mean, I guess," she murmured, and then blinked, trying to steady her vision. "Where's the wand?" she croaked. "And the—the portkey, where's the—"

She stopped abruptly, watching the expression on his face come into focus.

"You're not Malfoy," she croaked, and he tossed his head back, laughing.

"I am, actually," he said, winking. "The better version, as promised."

"What the—"

She shifted away from him, struggling to back away as he watched her, the same smile of amusement on his lips that she'd somehow—in infuriatingly—come to expect.

"Did you—did you kidnap me?"

"I wanted you, so I took you," he said, shrugging. "As it happens, I'm rather intent on getting what I
want, and it turns out that what I want is you." He paused, arching a brow. "Are you upset?"

"Of course I'm upset!" she retorted indignantly, as the realization of what had happened suddenly struck her with vicious force, jarring her consciousness. "Malfoy was going to destroy the portkey," she exclaimed, "and—the wand—"

She felt her breath catch. "The wand," she sighed with relief. "He'll know it's not me if she doesn't have the wand—"

"Oh, she has the wand," not-Malfoy commented blithely. "I let her go with it."

"What?" Hermione squeaked. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I only need you," he said. "If I'd known you were an option, I might never have bothered with the Elder Wand at all. After all," he added, shifting towards her, "I highly doubt anyone on earth could stop me with you by my side." He reached for her wrist, his thumb tracing over the M. "If," he mumbled, "you wish to be by my side, that is."

"I could be trapped here," Hermione realized, nervously chewing her lip. "And Harry and Ron, they're—they'll be—"

"They exist here too, you know," not-Malfoy said. "I'm quite good friends with Harry, actually. We share a certain desire for justice, you see," he explained, winking. "We're a rather united front on the whole bringing down Grindelwald thing." He shifted again, closer—much too close, or would have been, had she not been itching to touch him again—and gave her a spectacularly vulnerable look of sincerity. "We need you, Hermione."

She half-shivered at her name on his lips.

"Is this version of Harry as horrible as you are?" she asked, trying not to stare at his mouth.

"Far less horrible," not-Malfoy said, leaning towards her. "Almost not horrible at all, in fact."

"I see," Hermione said, forcing a swallow.

"We could try to find another portkey, or make one," not-Malfoy offered. "You're certainly brilliant enough that we could figure it out eventually. I only hope," he added, his gaze dropping to her lips, "that in the meantime, you will give me an opportunity to prove how badly I want you."

His lips jerked into a smile, as though he'd confessed something by accident. "How badly I need you," he murmured, his lips brushing hers.

She hesitated, not quite giving in. "Why?"

"I have a war to start," he reminded her. "You would help me win it."

She stifled a whimper as he tilted her chin up, his fingers floating delicately along the column of her throat.

"Oh, is that all?" she asked drily.

She felt him smile against her lips. "Not quite," he whispered.

This time when he kissed her, she gave in.
a/n: So weird, I know. A thousand thank yous to Gaeleria, a few extra to UnicornShenans for fostering the idea (which began with a discussion of theories on evil twins), and a few more to Dr Sally for sifting through the monster draft.

Coming soon, I SWEAR: time travel Remione, Battle of the Bands Lucissa, Drunk History Pt. II.
Battle of the Bands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Battle of the Bands**

_Pairing:_ Lucissa (Lucius Malfoy x Narcissa Black), plus background Mulcibery (Darian Mulciber x Caleb Avery), Wolfstar (Sirius Black x Remus Lupin), Jily (James Potter x Lily Evans), Tedromeda (Ted Tonks x Andromeda Black)

**Universe:** Muggle AU

**Rating:** M for language, sex

**Summary:** A Tumblr Anon asked for a Lucissa, and this is what came to mind. (*A note that all the lyrics to the songs featured in this one shot are written by me, because I'm insane like that.*)

The Leaky Cauldron is a shitty dive bar that serves up cheap drinks and sketchy company, but once a year it transforms to something passably not-horrible to host the Battle of the Bands, which is attended by local talent scouts and record label executives. The winner of the Battle of the Bands traditionally goes on to achieve greatness, and the Death Eaters and Marauders are in it to win it—especially when a third rival gets unexpectedly added to the mix.

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**Soundcheck**

"Mulciber, for god's sake," Lucius barked sharply, yanking him off Caleb Avery's lap. "Can't this wait until later?"

"No, Malfoy, it can't," Darian retorted, shoving him away to resume bending over Caleb, grinning at him. "We're busy."

"Yeah, Malfoy," Caleb muttered, sliding his tongue over Darian's bottom lip and letting out a rough tremor of laughter as Darian moved to straddle him where he sat. "Can't you get Thor to take care of it?"

"Can I get Rowle, a drummer," Lucius clarified irritably, "to check the bass amp for soundcheck?" He crossed his arms over his chest, growling. "I could, but I don't see what good that would do Darian—do you, Avery?"

"You need to relax, Lucius," Darian said, not looking over his shoulder. "You've been too busy running Tom's errands and it's making you fucking unbearable."

"Yeah, what does Tom need now?" Caleb asked, giving Darian's rear a slap.

"Don't even get me started," Lucius muttered. "Some particular brand of imported bottled water or something—"

"Coconut water?" Darian asked innocently. "I like Caleb's best."

"That is the most disgusting thing I've ever heard," Lucius snapped, "and also, fuck you both."
"Together?" Caleb asked, smirking. "We could make room."

Lucius made a face. "No, god, ugh—"

"Fine, I'll check the fucking amp," Darian sighed, resignedly clambering to his feet. "I'm assuming that will get you off my back?"

"It will," Lucius said, rolling his eyes. "And speaking of Thor—"

"He's busy trying to fuck Bella's little sister," Caleb offered, gesturing across the room to where Thorfinn had his back to them. "Met her yet?"

"Who, Andromeda?" Lucius asked, frowning. "She's around all the time."

"There's a third sister, apparently," Darian informed him, eyeing his fingernails. "A Miss Narcissa Black."

"Well," Lucius muttered, "if she's anything like the other two, she's clearly—"


Lucius groaned aloud. "I don't understand why you can't choose to fuck someone that's a little more stable," he commented for the hundredth time. "Is her pussy really worth the insanity?"

"She's my muse, Lucius," Tom said, shrugging. "Without her, I imagine our material would be far less—"

"Dark?" Caleb guessed. "Substantially fucked?"

"I was going for 'edgy' or 'emotive'," Tom remarked. "But by all means, demean me, Avery," he said briskly, rolling his eyes. "It only feeds my creativity."

"Well, the more of that, the better," Darian ruled. "You're the odds-on favorite to win." He glanced down, reading an article off his phone. "With his angsty yowl and bedroom eyes, Death Eater frontman Tom Riddle's got more star power in the frayed hem of his impossibly fitted black skinny jeans than most people have in their entire bodies—"

"Why does it always come back to my jeans?" Tom interrupted, scowling. "Never mind my lyrics," he muttered, "or my fucking depth—"

"Or the rest of your band, eh, Riddle?" Thorfinn Rowle cut in, appearing behind them. "I'm really not sure why nobody has anything to say about my expertly clean drumming, or Malfoy's sick guitar riffs—"

"Now you're mocking us," Tom sniffed. "I don't care for it."

"I would never," Thor assured him, grinning. "Mulciber," he called, nodding at Darian. "What's the article say about the Marauders?"

"Ugh, fuck," Tom said instantly, spitting the word out like the mention of the band's name alone had been venomous. "The Marauders are a fucking commercialized blow job," he ruled decisively. "They're nothing but earworm alternative-pop-punk-whatever radio machines."

"Oh my god, Riddle, stop, I'm blushing," a voice drawled behind them, bringing them face to face with the Marauders lead singer, James Potter.
"Just think, Tom," James snarked wryly, "maybe you might actually manage to win one of these things if you ever deigned to write an actual fucking hook, eh?"

"Oh, fuck off, Potter," Lucius snapped, but Tom only smirked at him.

"You sure you're ready for this, Potter?" Tom asked silkily. "Think you're ready to hang with the big boys instead of—" he waved a hand. "Bar mitzvahs, or whatever it is you do?"

"We do weddings, too, thanks," James said airily, tipping an imaginary hat. "I've even been known to play a quinceañera or two."

"By which he means two," Sirius Black contributed lazily, appearing at James' side and slinging an arm over his shoulders. "Exactly two."

"Each one more magnificent than the last," James declared, looking inanely triumphant as Remus Lupin loped in after them.

"Oh, good, the family-friendly gays are here," Caleb commented, smirking at Remus and Sirius. "Marvelous."

"As opposed to what?" Remus asked tartly, arching a sandy brow. "Are you and Mulciber the rotten gays?"


"Hey, I thought we just agreed that's us," Darian argued, as Lucius let out an impatient growl.

"Mulciber, I thought I told you to get ready for soundcheck," he snapped. "And you," he said, turning to face Sirius, Remus, and James. "Can you three please get back in your clown car of ineptitude and—"

"Four," Peter Pettigrew interrupted breathlessly, his guitar slung over his shoulder as he jogged over to join them. "Hey, guys, sorry, was just checking out the set list—"

"Ah, we should maybe figure out what we're playing," James remarked, turning to Sirius. "Thoughts?"

"Don't play the song you wrote for Lily," Sirius replied instantly. "It won't work."

"Okay, I hear you," James agreed slowly, "but what if—"

"Don't do it," Remus sighed, cutting him off. "Seriously, Prongs. Don't."

"Yeah, totally, of course," James assured him. "But hypothetically, if I did—"

"Is the band list finalized?" Tom interrupted, turning to Peter. "Do we know who else is playing?"

"Close to finalized, I think," Peter supplied. "The Prewett twins are playing, and I think Dolohov and Karkaroff have some kind of KGB-themed joke of a cover band—"

"Ugh, hate them," Bella interrupted, sliding in and grimacing. As usual, she wore a long black peasant skirt and a black tank top with no bra—which would have been distracting, except they'd all seen Bella's tits more times than they could count. "Hey babe," she said, giving Tom an open-mouthed kiss that made everyone else wince with discomfort. "All set?"

"Close to it," Tom said, slipping an arm around her waist. "Malfoy's taking care of it."
Bella's dark eyes slid to his. "Good," she said coolly. "Then maybe I can get you to work out some of that excess frustration with Andromeda."

"Aw, babe, are you whoring out your sisters?" Tom asked, chuckling. "That's cute."

Bella made a face, resting her head against Tom's shoulder. "She's being so weird lately," she said. "You know what I found in her desk today?"

"Opioids?" Darian asked brightly.

"GET TO SOUNDCHECK," Lucius yelled at him. Darian shrugged, grinning, and ambled slowly away, throwing Lucius a salute over his shoulder.


"Oh, gross," Tom declared, making a face.

"What's wrong with Kerouac?" Sirius asked. "I love him."

"Yes, because you're shallow and self-indulgent," Remus said fondly, reaching up to pat the top of Sirius' head. "We know."

"I was going to say it's because when I'm drunk I need to be carried around like a suitcase, but fine," Sirius permitted. "Also," he chirped, "he and I share a devotion to universal liberation."

"You mean universal libations," James corrected him, at which point Lucius let out an audible groan.

"Don't you shits have musical instruments to tune or something?" he prompted unhappily. "Honestly, I feel like I get dumber every time you idiots speak."

"See?" Bella said, gesturing to Lucius. "This is why you'd be good for Andy: no nonsense. No fucks. Well, one fuck, which is to fuck her head right," she instructed definitively. "Remind her why a talented, well-monied cock is always an improvement over a brooding, self-aggrandizing Beat narrative. And anyway," Bella added impassively, "a little pussy would do your temperament some good, Lucius. I'd volunteer, but——"

"Gross," Lucius said, making a face, and then blanched. "No offense, Tom."

"She's not my girlfriend, she's my muse," Tom reminded him. "If I thought I had any choice in the matter, believe me, I'd make a different one."

"Sweet of you, babe," Bella purred, and Tom leaned down, kissing her firmly.

"Okay, well, I'm leaving," Lucius announced, and promptly turned, catching sight of Bella's sister Andromeda sitting at the bar and moving to join her. He wasn't actually going to sleep with her, obviously—not at the moment, anyway—but he was fully certain that he was going to need a drink to get through the day.

"Ted," he called to the bartender. "Two fingers of Makers, would you?"

"Got it, Lucius," Ted said, turning apologetically from his conversation with Andromeda. "One sec, Andy."

"Sure," she agreed brightly, drumming her fingers against a battered composition book. Lucius took a seat beside her, eyeing it.
"What do you have in there?" he asked, pointing to it. "Murder plots?"

Andromeda rolled her eyes. "Those would be in Bella's notebook," she corrected. "Mine has—" she reddened, averting her gaze as she stumbled into a pause. "Nothing, really."

"That's not true," Ted said, returning with Lucius' drink and sliding it across the bar, smiling warmly at Andromeda. "She writes poetry."

"Shitty poetry," Andromeda contributed quickly, her cheeks flushed. "Nothing good."

"Oh, stop it," Ted said, winking at her. "It's great. She's got some songs in there, too," he added, nodding to Lucius. "I've been trying to convince her to do Battle of the Bands tomorrow night."

At that—the utter insanity of the idea—it took everything Lucius possessed not to laugh; he supposed by the horrified look on Andromeda's face, his opposition must have showed.

"I said no," Andromeda assured him, hastily backpedaling. "They're not good. The songs, I mean," she clarified, looking down. "I—" I could never, really—"

"I mean, Battle of the Bands is a pretty big deal," Lucius ventured carefully, letting the bourbon soak into his tongue before speaking. "So maybe not that—but something," he said, attempting lightness. "I'm sure something considerably less—qualified, he thought disdainfully, but bit his tongue—competitive would be a better place to give it a go."

"Oh," Andromeda said, visibly deflating. "I mean, yeah, that's what I was saying, too," she sighed. "It's nothing good, really, just scribbles—"

"Andy," Lucius heard behind him. "Haven't we already discussed how self-deprecation is so terribly passé?"

He caught the motion of someone sliding in beside him and turned to meet the startling blue eyes of a lithely slender blonde, her hair pulled back in a long ponytail that cascaded down over one strap of her floaty grey-blue sundress. "Narcissa Black," she offered, holding out a hand. "You were in the business of discouraging my sister?"

Lucius swallowed, startled, before accepting her proffered hand, finding her fingers cool and dainty in his. If she hadn't said her name was Black, he would never have guessed it; Narcissa barely had a trace of Bellatrix's dark features—either the older sister's ornately slanted eyes or her wild hair—and almost none of Andromeda's stiff brand of prettiness. Comparatively, Narcissa was coltish, airy, delicate; more forest sprite than urban muse, and entirely out of place against the flimsy facade of the bar's daytime persona, her sundress glowing warmly against her dewy skin.

"Lucius Malfoy," he supplied slowly, "and I wasn't discouraging her."

"Andromeda writes songs," Narcissa informed him carelessly, "and she plays piano." She shrugged. "What else would she need?"

Lucius gaped at her for a minute, and then laughed. "Okay, now you're fucking with me, I take it," he commented, shaking his head. "You really think that's all it takes to win this competition?"

"What, did you have to obtain some kind of advanced degree in rocker bullshit to do this?" Narcissa countered. "A license to emote or something?"
"Narcissa," Andromeda warned, tilting her head, but Narcissa only rolled her eyes, waving her away.

"Something like that," Lucius permitted, smirking at her. "Thanks for noticing my credentials."

"Well, I have to assume there's some magic to it that I don't know about," she offered sweetly, her voice a little too high to be authentic. "Tell me, are you the authority on how to be a musician?"

"No," Lucius said, "but I do know that winning this competition is harder than you seem to think." He paused, taking a sip of his drink. "Songwriting by itself, even," he added pointedly. "Just because you throw together some rhymes doesn't necessarily mean you're any good."

Beside him, Andromeda's chin dropped, her gaze falling to her lap; Narcissa's eyes narrowed, catching the motion, before she turned back to Lucius.

"Anyone can write a song," she determined, dropping her coquettish act to glare defiantly at him. "Watch, I'll do one right now—"

"Narcissa," Andromeda sighed, but Narcissa ignored her.

"There's a man sat here drinking whiskey, his shirt's got buttons down the front," Narcissa sang. "He thinks that he's a poet, but he's really just a—"

"Cissy," Andromeda interrupted sharply, and Ted stifled a laugh behind his hand.

For a moment, Lucius was speechless, inflamed by a rush of irritation; but then, at the particularly coy look of smugness that had flitted across Narcissa's pale pink lips, he made a decision, rising sharply to his feet.

Lucius stepped behind her barstool, spinning her to face him and then leaning her back against the bar, his chest dropped down to hers. "You're taunting me," he murmured to her, lowering his chin to speak in her ear. "If you want something from me, princess, just ask."

"You think I'm hitting on you?" she asked bluntly, her pale brow furrowing as she stared up at him in challenge. "You couldn't be more wrong, Malfoy."

"Couldn't I?" he asked, and placed his hands on either side of her ribs, resting his palms on the bar to leave a breath's width of space between them. "I don't think so," he murmured. "In fact, what I think," he added carefully, "is that this dress—he shifted back, tracing his finger over the strap of it before meeting her eye—"would look better on my floor."

There was a pause—an incalculable stiffening of her shoulders—and then Narcissa shifted slowly towards him, an unreadable smile spreading over her painted lips as her breath skated across his skin. Lucius felt himself smirk, satisfaction nudging at the corners of his mouth, and moved to close the distance.

He only realized that she had taken his glass of whiskey in her hand when he suddenly felt its contents splash across his cheek, the motion so quick he nearly missed it. He gasped as the liquid collided with skin, sputtering in shock as he reached up—startled, offended, and unforgivably sticky—to wipe the burn from his jaw.

"Sorry," Narcissa murmured insincerely, making a soft tsk-ing sound. "I just thought your drink would look better on your face."

Then she hopped off the stool and walked away, the floaty grey-blue material clinging to her hips.
with a whispered softness as she disappeared without looking back.

Lucius stared after her, fists clenched; Ted gingerly held out a cloth for him but he shoved it away, growling furiously under his breath.

"For the record," Andromeda remarked drily, "you did deserve that."

Lucius glared at her. "I have to go to soundcheck," he said bluntly, pivoting and walking away.

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**Battle of the Bands: Night One**

"Alright, Tom, you and the Death Eaters are up first," Horace Slughorn called, speaking into his headpiece. "Followed by the Marauders—"

"We're here," James said, panting as he showed up, the other three half a step at his heels. "Sorry, just—had some issues—"

"With?" Minerva McGonagall asked, arching a brow.


"He's lying," James assured her quickly, nudging Tom beside him. "It was my hair," he muttered under his breath, grinning. Tom shoved him away, making a face.

"Have you seen Bella?" Tom asked, shifting uncomfortably to speak into Lucius' ear. "She's normally around to take care of the, um—"

"Nerves?" Lucius prompted drily.

"Cock," Darian corrected, his arm slung around Caleb's neck. "We're good on the cock front, if anyone was wondering."

"Nobody was wondering," Lucius muttered back, shifting slightly as Thor slipped through the fray to stand beside him.

"Last minute entry," Thor murmured to him. "Band I've never heard of called 'The House of Black'—"

"What?" Lucius said loudly, prompting Tom to glance curiously at him. "Black? As in—" he turned, glancing at Sirius. "You're not in two bands, are you?"

"Not that I know of," Sirius replied lazily, then paused, tilting his head. "I suppose Reg might be in one."

"Reg?" Tom echoed skeptically. "Don't tell me you have a brother."

"He does," Remus informed them. "Regulus Black, narrow-hipped tornado of pestilence."

"Hear, hear," Sirius said brightly, smacking a kiss against Remus' cheek as Minerva glared warningly at him from down the hall.

"Ah, so nothing to worry about," Tom said, clapping Lucius on the shoulder. "Right?"

"Thirty seconds to intro," Minerva called. "Everyone ready?"
"Yeah," Lucius muttered, turning to Thor. "Don't come in too fast on the count in, okay? You've rushed it the last two times, Rowle, and I fucking swear, if you—"

"Relax," Thor assured him, clipping him in the ribs with his elbow. "We're fine."

"Yeah," Lucius said again, though he couldn't shake his uneasy feeling. "Did you hear Dumbledore's here?"

"Is that the guy who owns that Order label?" Thor asked. "Damn," he remarked with a low whistle. "That'd be ideal."

"I know," Lucius said, fidgeting. "If we could win this, get his contacts, maybe get him to listen to a demo—"

"One thing at a time," Tom said, glancing around again. "Fuck," he said under his breath, scowling. "Where the fuck is Bella?"

"Ready, Death Eaters?" Minerva asked, getting a signal from Horace. "You're on in three—two—one—"

"Let's do this," Tom said, shaking himself once before striding out onto the stage, painting his signature broody smirk across his lips and sauntering to his mic. "Ladies and gentlemen of the Leaky Cauldron," he shouted, pausing to accommodate the sound of screams at his arrival as Lucius picked up his guitar, joining Caleb on Tom's right. "We are the Death Eaters, and this song —"

Lucius struck a thundering chord, smiling at the renewed sound of cheers.

"—is called Tomorrows."

Tom turned, nodding once at Thor, who counted them in at a slightly quickened pace—I told you, you fuck, Lucius thought, growling internally—and then reached for the mic, letting his showman's persona drip over his face as he started to sing, his voice scratchy and low.

Pour me out like a river
And drown me in your sorrows
Let me down and ruin me, baby
I want all of your tomorrows

I split my soul up piece by piece
It's the least that I could do
I kept a sliver for myself
And the rest is all for you

The build into the chorus was heated, instrumental; Lucius bit his lip, feeling the guitar's vibration rattle in his bones.

I'm never gonna die
So you can drown me in your sorrows
I'm never gonna lose my way, babe
I've got all of your tomorrows

By the time they reached the hook, the crowd was singing along, sweat starting to drip down Lucius' spine.
I've got time to burn
I've got time to burn
I've got time to burn, and I want you

Tom's smile was radiantly undeniable as the crowd joined in, singing the words "I want you" in such impeccable unison that even Dumbledore, whom Lucius had spotted at the back of the venue, was visibly impressed.

Lucius let the reverb sink over the crowd, catching his breath as the song slipped back into Tom's solo vocals.

I split my soul up piece by piece
It's the least that I could do
I kept a sliver for myself
And the rest is all for you

The applause was deafening; Lucius couldn't prevent a smile. He turned—glaring once at Thor, who shrugged—before exiting the stage after a final bow from Tom. Lucius paused once at the side of the stage, glancing smugly down his nose at James; good luck, he mouthed obnoxiously, to which James' mouth twitched into a welcoming smirk. Bring it, James returned, nodding at the rest of his band and making his way to the stage.

"What's up, kids," James said into the mic, his impressively unfailing earnestness practically dripping from his grey henley as his faded black Chuck Taylors tapped preemptively against the stage. "We're the Marauders, and we're here to have some fun."

There was a warm round of applause, a couple of shouts; behind James, Sirius dripped half a bottle's worth of water over his head, smiling broadly as a group of twenty-something girls squealed their approval. Emboldened, Sirius tore his shirt over his shoulders, holding his drumsticks triumphantly in the air and basking in the attention.

"Fucker," Tom muttered, shaking his head. Remus, Lucius noted, merely tapped his fingers impatiently against his bass, rolling his eyes at Sirius' antics.

"This song," James started, wiping sweat from his brow and grinning as he looked down at his guitar and then back up, "is called Lily."

"Oh what the fuck, Potter," someone in the crowd groaned. "For the last time, I absolutely will not —"

"Here we go!" James yelled gleefully, making a counting motion over his shoulder to Peter. "One, two, one two three—"

She's a demon
She's a siren
And she's calling from the rocks
She's a monster
She's a trickster
She's a sly too-clever fox

Won't you be mine, baby?
I've been waiting all this time
Won't you be mine, baby?
I've been waiting all the time
Tom had been right about the Marauders' mass appeal; the song was unforgivably catchy, which made Lucius even angrier. It would be stuck in his head for hours.

She's beautiful
She's charming
She's got my heart locked in a cage
She is madness
She is manic
She's a thunderstorm of rage

James smiled broadly, blowing a kiss to the redheaded girl in the crowd.

I want to know what makes you tick
I want to be the one that makes you sick

"These fuckers can write a hook," Darian shouted to Caleb. Lucius glared at them.

Won't you be mine, baby?
I've been waiting all this time
Won't you be mine, baby?
I've been waiting all the time

By the time the song ended, there were about as many hormonal screams for James Potter as there had been for Tom.

"We are the Marauders!" he shouted into the mic, smiling broadly. "Thank you, and Lily, one more thing—" he grabbed the mic, holding on as Remus tried to drag him away—"Lily Evans, I fucking love you!"

"Jesus Christ," a girl next to Lucius remarked as Sirius threw James over his shoulder, carrying him off the stage. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I want to fuck that guy straight into the floor."

"He's hot, isn't he?" her friend replied. "I just wanna mess him up, you know?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Lucius muttered under his breath, turning back to Thor. "Who's next?"

"It's that House of Black group," Thor said, glancing down at his phone screen for the lineup. "You really think it's Black's brother?"

"I mean, I guess it could be—"

Lucius stopped, silenced, as he caught a glimpse of platinum blonde hair come into view.

"That isn't," he said breathlessly, and then gaped. "No way," he gasped. "Thor, tell me I'm hallucinating—"

"What the fuck?" Tom yelled, reaching out to grip Lucius' arm. "Is that Bella?"

The room seemed to collectively gasp as Bellatrix, Andromeda, and Narcissa Black all sauntered onto the stage—followed by a skinny loping man with long black hair that Lucius assumed was Regulus Black—and waved to the crowd, each woman dressed in a set of impeccably fit black jeans and shod in studded stiletto heels. Narcissa, whose blonde hair fell in a sleek wave down her back, tossed the crowd a broad smile as she reached for the microphone, her crimson nails bright against the metal as she curled her fingers around it. She looked cool, calm, confident; she looked hot, and as Andromeda took to the keyboard and Bellatrix picked up a guitar—slinging it over her
bra-less shoulders and tossing her hair back to blow Tom a kiss—Narcissa looked like a wet dream brought to life, her scarlet lips curling up in an expectant smile.

She looked like a fucking goddess and it took every ounce of matter Lucius possessed not to fall to his knees and worship her.

"Well, I suppose all those years of 'don't touch my goddamn drums' didn't do Regulus any good," Sirius commented sullenly as the Marauders joined them against the wall.

"Shut up," Lucius attempted inaudibly as Narcissa opened her mouth to speak.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we are the noble and most ancient House of Black," she murmured into the mic, smiling genially at the crowd. "And this song," she continued, looking around the room, "is for a new friend of mine." She looked up from her guitar, scanning the back wall. "Lucius Malfoy, are you in here?"

Lucius’ heart stopped as her eyes met his, the smile broadening.

"Lucius, sweetie," Narcissa purred, winking at him. "This one's for you."

"Huh," Tom said, frowning with confusion as he looked at Lucius. "Won her over, did you?"

"Um," Lucius said hesitantly. "Well—"

You think you have the right to call me baby
But you're wrong, honey, you're wrong
You think that no means maybe
But you're wrong, honey, you're wrong

"That's a no," Thor said flatly as Narcissa continued to croon into the mic, making a spectacle of her performance.

Come on over, pretty boy
I've got a thing or two to say
Your pants are on so tight
They might be messing with your brain
Take a look, baby, take stock
But put your hand back on your—"

"Oh my god," Remus yelled, cackling madly at Lucius' expense. "What a PR nightmare!"

Come on over, pretty baby
And I'll send you on your way

"Holy hell, what did you do to her, Malfoy?" James asked, barely managing to suppress his laughter. "Christ, every woman in here looks like she wants to throw you in a river."

"Shut up, Potter," Lucius growled, but beside him, Tom's expression stiffened.

"Lucius," he muttered. "This is decidedly not good."

"It's nothing," Lucius said quickly. "It's—it's no big deal, it's just—"

You said I couldn't write a song
But you're wrong, honey, you're wrong
You told me that I don't belong
But you're wrong, honey, you're wrong

"This," Darian said, "is terrible for you, Malfoy."

"They're all fucking singing along!" Caleb said, pointing to the crowd. "Fuck, they love this—"

Walk away, babe, I said no
Walk away, baby, go home
Walk away, babe, I said no
Walk away, baby, go home

By the time Narcissa had reached the bridge, every single person in the bar was singing along, including the Marauders. Lucius reached out, smacking James in the abdomen.

"Could you not?" he demanded brusquely. "I'm right here."

"What?" James asked, coughing at the impact. "It's fucking catchy, okay?"

"This is bullshit," Lucius seethed, shoving through the crowd and disappearing into the street.

Lucius leaned against the wall in the alley, scowling as he brought the freshly lit cigarette to his lips.

"Smoking kills," he heard from behind him and whipped around, feeling a renewed rush of fury at the sound of her voice. "You really shouldn't smoke," Narcissa informed him, tilting her head and smirking at him.

"What do you want?" he muttered, raising the cigarette to his lips. "Haven't you done enough damage for one night?"

"Not quite," she said, reaching out to take the cigarette from his hand and putting it out on the street, crushing it under the ball of her stilettoed foot. "You missed the encore performance, you know."

Lucius shook his head, seething. "You know, I get that this was all a joke to you," he spat furiously. "I get that you wanted to make me look bad, but this is my life," he growled. "This competition is fucking huge for me, so I really don't need you to show up and drag me through the mud just to prove a fucking point—"

"I didn't do it to prove a point," Narcissa informed him, crossing her arms over her chest. "Give me your jacket," she suggested, shivering. "It's freezing out here."

"No," Lucius retorted furiously. " Fucking freeze, then, or go inside—"

"I'm not trying to fuck with you," Narcissa informed him. "But Andromeda wanted to play, even if she wouldn't admit it—and Tom never gives Bella any credit, so—"

"So what?" Lucius demanded. "This is all some kind of revenge act?"

"How utterly fucking patronizing of you," Narcissa commented sharply. "We wanted to perform, so we did." She shrugged. "This happened to be the first song I wrote, and I felt you deserved a dedication. After all, since songwriting is so difficult," she added mockingly, "I figured I should credit my sources."
She shivered a second time and he shook his head, taking off his leather jacket and throwing it at her with a grimace. "You didn't have to do this," he said again, watching her wrap it around her shoulders. "Look, I actually want to be a musician, okay? I need to be taken seriously, and that can't happen if you turn everyone in that bar against me—"

"Fine," she said, the line of her crimson mouth tightening. "I'm sorry, okay? I won't fuck with you again."

Lucius opened his mouth, ready to argue, but wilted at the look of sincerity on her face.

"Be sure that you don't," he said firmly. "And anyway," he added, "I wasn't—I didn't—"

He broke off, and Narcissa waited expectantly. "Yes?"

"If you aren't interested in me, that's fine," Lucius told her stiffly. "Yesterday, I didn't—I wasn't trying to pressure you. I mean, I was," he conceded, cringing, "but I didn't mean it. I was just—" he paused. "I got carried away, and I'm sorry."

Narcissa paused for a moment and then nodded, biting her lip. "Fine," she conceded. "We're even, then."

"Yeah, we are," Lucius sighed, and then smirked at her, unable to prevent himself. "I mean, at least you called me pretty, right?"

She shrugged.

"You're really fucking pretty," she said apathetically. "I'm not a liar."

He felt himself smile and tried to fight it; Narcissa sighed, sliding his jacket from her shoulders and taking a step towards him, holding it out for him.

"Here," she offered. "Thanks."

He reached out, taking it from her. "Yeah," he said, forcing a swallow as their hands met through the fabric. "It's—you know. No problem."

She nodded, turning to reenter the club but pausing after a step, pivoting back to face him as he toyed with what to say.

"Lucius," she said slowly, "I just—"

"The hook was really catchy," he blurted out, unsure what had come over him. "The 'walk away' bridge," he clarified, suddenly fidgeting with his hands. "It was really good. You're—" he paused, clearing his throat. "You're really good at this."

A smile tugged at the corners of her lovely mouth, and he barely registered the fact that her lips were brushing his until he felt her fingers digging into the back of his neck, pulling him closer. He dropped his hands, letting the jacket fall to the ground as he rested them carefully on her hips, scarcely believing he was touching her; and then—just as suddenly—she was gone, the smell of her gardenia perfume lingering in the air between them.

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**Battle of the Bands: Night Two**

"Potter," a redheaded girl was pleading with James backstage. "Do not profess your love to me..."
onstage, okay? I get it," she added. "Super nice of you and all that, it's just—"

"Ugh, is this about Snivellus?" Sirius asked. "Lils," he groaned. "Come on."

"His name is Severus," the girl sighed exasperatedly, "and he really doesn't appreciate it, okay? And Potter, for the hundredth time, it's not going to happen—"

"For your information, Evans, I really think you're warming up to me," James sniffed. "But Remus has already made me promise not to sing anything from my Lily discography, so—"

"Discography?" Peter chimed in, making a face. "Prongs, please."

"Yes, listen to Pete," the girl pleaded. "Okay?"

"Fine," James said, groaning. "But you know I love you, right?"

"Yes," the girl said. "It sounds familiar."

"Don't forget," James said, leaning against the wall and looking down at her. "I respect you, Evans, but I'm also—"

"In love with me," the girl supplied briskly, turning to leave. "Noted," she called over her shoulder, waving.

"I'd die for you, Evans," James yelled after her. "Super casual, though, we can definitely take it slow at first, I can wait—"

"Wow," Lucius said, shaking his head. "You need help, Potter."

"Says you, Mr Pants Too Tight," James retorted, scowling. He pulled at his chambray shirt, tugging impatiently at the collar. "I hate going first," he muttered.

"As you should," Tom said, smirking. "There'll be no coasting off our momentum tonight, Potter."

"Marauders, are you ready?" Minerva called, gesturing to James. "Potter, you need to be out in twenty seconds—"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming," James sighed. "Moony, where's my—"

"Here," Remus said, handing him his pitch pipe. "You good, Prongs?"

"He's fine," Sirius said, throwing one arm over each bandmate. "We're good, right?"

"Potter!" Minerva yelled. "Potter, get out there, now—"

"Break a leg," Tom murmured, flicking the back of James' head and smiling as he scowled, running a hand through his hair.

"Leaky Cauldron, my homies," James shouted into the mic, suddenly conjuring his signature manic energy as he came onto the stage. "Do you solemnly swear that you're up to no good?"

"YES," the crowd yelled back as Sirius flung his shirt off, hitting Remus with it.

"Alright—this song is called—fuck, we never named this song—okay, well, here we go—"

The lights go down
The fire starts
Let loose the crown
Rip out the hearts

Their song of choice for the evening had leaned ever so slightly more edgy than usual, and while James' voice had nothing on Tom's growling rasp, he carried the mood almost expertly.

Everything starts, here, now, tonight
Everything starts, me, you, all right

It was a jumper of an anthem, with a considerably well-timed drop.

We are rebels
Vigilantes
We are running in the night
We are rising
From the ashes
We are here to start a fight

"Ugh," Tom sniffed. "Juvenile."

Bare your teeth
It's time to go
Claws hit the ground
The demons know

Everything starts, here, now, tonight
Everything starts, me, you, all right

"Of course Black takes a drum solo," Thor complained. "When do I get one?"

"When people evolve any interest in drumming," Darian replied, smirking.

The song ended with a bass rip from Remus and then the Marauders were met with cheers, James' face suddenly back to its smarmy triumphant self.

"Thank you Leaky Cauldron! And Lily Evans, I will fucking love you forever!"

"Holy shit," someone drawled. "He's certainly got it bad, doesn't he?"

Lucius whipped around, catching her voice. "Narcissa," he said breathlessly, turning to face her; she wore a tight black dress with her hair loose down her back, her lips a deep berry-red. "When are you—"

"We're after the Prewett twins," she supplied. "Two bands after you."

"Ah," Lucius acknowledged, clearing his throat just as Tom came over, frowning at Narcissa.

"Where's Bellatrix?" he demanded. "She was supposed to meet me half an hour ago, but she—"

"She had to fix a problem with the equipment," Narcissa supplied coolly. "Our equipment," she added, smirking. "Not yours, for once."

Tom made a face, pulling at his collar. "I can't breathe, Lucius," he said. "My throat's all coated and sticky, and I can't—"
"You're fine," Lucius assured him, gripping his arm. " Seriously. We're about to go on—"

"Death Eaters," Minerva called. "You're on in fifteen."

"See?" Lucius said, gesturing. "Tom, get out there—"

Tom turned, muttering under his breath, and Lucius glanced at Narcissa before following.

"Hey," he said to her, "so—"

"Don't fuck up," she cut in simply and turned, disappearing into the crowd of musicians backstage. It was considerably less than he had hoped for; but, he reminded himself, about what he should have expected.

"Cool," Lucius sighed at her back, striding onto the stage.

"Leaky Cauldron," Tom called into the mic, "we are the Death Eaters, and this song is called Suicide." He turned over his shoulder, gesturing to Thor to count them in.

Here we go, Lucius thought, inhaling deeply before striking the first chord.

The storms that I have weathered
Have turned my soul to black
I left my heart untethered
And you strapped me to the rack

I'm a deity unworshipped
I'm a prodigy untapped
I've loved you and I've suffered
I'm a man, a war, a map

I want you and I hate you
You break me down inside
I hate you and I want you
Loving you is suicide

The crowd, Lucius noted, seemed to have forgiven him slightly; either that or they were too drawn in by Tom's voice to pay much attention to him.

You're the devil on my shoulder
You're the burden on my back
I left my soul bare for the taking
And you ran me off the track

Tom stepped back after the bridge, sweeping an arm out to feature Lucius. The guitar solo was clean, precise, and only slightly ornamental—Lucius, at least, had a habit of keeping his shirt on, unlike Sirius motherfucking pectorals Black—but he hadn't been able to resist when he'd caught the hint of blonde that meant Narcissa was watching backstage. He finished the riff out with a flourish and felt a rush of adrenaline as he garnered cheers from the crowd, finally feeling himself again as they disembarked the stage.

"Not bad, Lucius," Tom rasped hoarsely, clapping him on the back.

Lucius frowned. "You okay?" he asked. "Your voice—"
Tom shrugged. "Early to bed," he prescribed flippantly.

"It's already midnight," Thor reminded him.

"Well then get me some fucking tea, Thorfinn," Tom sniped back.

The Prewett twins played a mostly acoustic set of utter snoozefest; Lucius' eyes nearly glazed over, watching Dumbledore himself nearly fall asleep in the corner.

Then it was time for the House of Black, and Lucius couldn't help but stare.

"Alright, lovers," Narcissa said, all poised and primed and fucking heartbreak in a little black dress. "This one's called Stardust."

"Wonder if it's about you?" Darian asked, leaning over to laugh in Lucius' ear.

"Doubtful," he managed, though he couldn't help holding his breath.

Here's looking at you, kid  
Here's to the shots we'll take tonight  
Here's to dancing on the table  
Here's to knowing it's not right

I came to dance and I'm dancing  
I came to make mistakes and lie  
I'm young, babe, and I'm foolish  
I've got stardust in my eyes

"Well, I have to say, I'd have thought Bella might come up with something slightly more tasteful," Tom croaked, making a face. "What is this, some kind of gossamer-winged manic pixie teen anthem?"

"They love it, though," Thor pointed out, gesturing around the club. "People are singing along."

"Yes, they do, and more importantly—stop talking, Tom," Lucius instructed sharply, tearing his gaze away from Narcissa to frown steadily at him. "You don't sound good."

Tom gave him an irritated glare but shrugged, returning his attention to the band on stage.

I'm gonna take you with me  
We're gonna live like kings tonight  
I'm gonna kiss you in the moonlight  
Don't give a damn what's wrong or right

"Well, it's a little generic, but at least she hasn't emasculated you in any way," James remarked, materializing out of nowhere to give Lucius an exaggerated nudge.

"Not yet," Sirius agreed. "Super catchy, though." He jutted his chin out at their guitarist. "Look at Pete," he crowed with amusement. "He's just been bobbing his head along, pretending not to love it."

I came to dance and I'm dancing  
I came to make mistakes and lie  
I'm young, babe, and I'm foolish  
I've got stardust in my eyes
"What?" Peter asked, catching their eyes on him. "It's a good song, okay?"

"You have no taste," Tom forced out grittily, and Lucius glanced sharply at him.

"Fuck, Riddle, losing your voice?" James taunted. "I guess Sirius' voodoo doll is finally paying off, then."

"Hey," Sirius said sharply. "I only use that thing for good."

"A voodoo doll for good?" Remus echoed, arching a brow. "What are you doing, taking him out on picnics?"

"I'm making sure he gets enough sleep," Sirius replied, rolling his eyes. "Duh."

Tom flipped them both the finger.

On stage, the set wrapped up with Narcissa taking the mic in hand to smile beatifically at the crowd. "Thank you and goodnight!" she called, giving the audience a coquettish curtsy that was both incredibly adorable and strikingly irreverent. Lucius looked up, hoping to catch her eye, but she ignored him, throwing an arm around Andromeda and Regulus and traipsing off the stage with them.

"Good to see your love affair continues to progress swimmingly," Darian commented. "You sure you're not down for taking up with Caleb and me?"

"Fuck off, Mulciber," Lucius growled.

"Could be worse," James said to him, pausing to wave at the redheaded girl in the crowd. "Hey, Evans," he yelled, blowing her a kiss. "You forgive me?"

"Jesus, Potter, go away," she shouted back, promptly turning her back on him.

"Why do you put yourself through this?" Lucius asked him, scowling. "I mean, I don't give a shit whether your heart gets stomped on or not, frankly, but it's embarrassing, Potter." He shifted stiffly. "I'm embarrassed for you."

James shrugged, consummately unfazed. "She's the worst," he said fondly, "and I love her."

Lucius rolled his eyes. "Yes, you've made that unsettlingly clear, but—"

"I love her," James repeated. "And it's not like my pride has ever done me any favors," he added, shrugging, "so why start nursing it now?" He sipped his beer, smiling faintly. "She'll come 'round."

Lucius threw his hands in the air, resigned. "If you say so," he muttered skeptically, but as James turned to speak to Sirius, Lucius caught the redheaded girl's tentative glance over her shoulder, her eyes landing on James with an unsuccessfully suppressed smile before she quickly turned back to the stage.

"Hey," Narcissa said, finding him alone in the back room. "Long night, huh?"

Lucius turned, battling the unsteady motion in his stomach as he watched her approach. "Hey," he offered, hoping the word left his tongue as coolly as he intended. "They almost done in there?"

"Yeah," she confirmed. "Two more bands and then we're doing a final soundcheck for tomorrow."
"Got it," he said, fidgeting with his thumbs. "Thanks."

She toyed with the silver chain around her neck, biding her time as she stood in the doorway. "What did you think of our song today?"

He glanced up sharply. "Why do you care?"

She shrugged. "Don't know," she admitted, and she looked like she really didn't. "Guess I'm just curious what you think, that's all."

"Oh," he said, and bit his lip. "Well, I mean, it was good," he offered uncertainly, but her blue eyes sparkled, catching the hesitation in his voice.

"You're lying," she said flatly, stepping further inside. "You didn't like it?"

Lucius hesitated. "It was a little . . . shallow," he admitted. "Sort of, um. Mainstream?"

Narcissa's gaze hardened. "And that's bad why, exactly?"

"Well, it's just—you just started," Lucius pointed out, "and you're already selling out."

She frowned.

"Okay, hold on," she said quickly, taking another step towards him. "I'm not selling out. I just wanted to write something with, you know," she shrugged, "more mass appeal, I guess."

"Yeah," Lucius agreed drily. "And we in the music industry refer to that very common impulse by its true name," he added, "which is the aforementioned term 'selling out'—"

"This is a competition for record labels, isn't it?" Narcissa countered. "There's an aspect of marketability involved—"

"An aspect, sure," Lucius cut in. "But is this really the kind of music you want to make?" Her expression stiffened warningly and he held up his hands, instantly backtracking as he caught the same look in her eye that had led to whiskey in his face two nights prior. "Look, I'm trying to help you, okay?" he said. "I'm just saying—"

"Do you really think any record label wants to sell the pretentious shit that Tom writes?" Narcissa countered furiously. "It's totally inauthentic. It's whiny and self-aggrandizing—"

"Okay, look, all I'm saying is that maybe if you treated songwriting seriously instead of just throwing snotty rhymes together, I might like your work more," Lucius retorted, feeling a brush of indignation at her criticism. "At least the song you wrote about me was real," he added, aware that he was snarling a little. "This one just made you sound like some unremarkable bimbo, which we both know you aren't—"

"What the fuck do you know, Lucius Malfoy?" she growled back, her white teeth flashing against the dark red of her lips. "Maybe you don't have a clue what I am—"

"Maybe I don't," he agreed, stepping towards her. "Or maybe I do," he taunted, backing her against the wall, "and you fucking hate that, don't you?"

"Gonna tell me my dress belongs on the floor, Malfoy?" she asked, glaring up at him. "Or what," she continued sarcastically, "are you going to tell me your shirt is made of boyfriend material?"

"If you want me to kiss you, just ask, princess," Lucius reminded her, gritting his teeth as his hips
met hers; he hoped she didn't notice his hands shaking as he pressed them to the wall on either side of her. "Don't pretend you didn't come back here to find me."

"If you want to kiss me, you should learn to ask," she countered angrily, staring up at him. "Last I checked, I was the one who—"

He cut her off, reaching out to slam the door shut just as he bent his lips to hers, furiously capturing whatever taunt had been about to leave her tongue. He kissed her with a poorly managed desperation—it seemed, despite his best efforts, that he had very little choice in the matter—and eventually he gave in, his tongue flicking hungrily across her lip as he pressed himself against her.

To his surprise, her fingers dropped to the button of his jeans, pulling insistently at them; he stopped, pulling away, and tried to focus on her face.

"Narcissa," he rasped hesitantly, "are—are you sure you want to—"

She answered with a swift tug at the button, dragging the zipper down as she kept her eyes on his. "Lucius," she said simply, stealing a kiss before grabbing his hand, slipping it under the fabric of her dress to drag it up against her thigh. "Don't make me ask twice," she murmured, and he wasted no time in picking her up, slamming her against the wall as he drew her legs over his hips.

"This doesn't mean anything," she told him, her head falling back against the wall as he slipped inside her, stifling a groan. "This," she panted, "this is just—because you're—"

"Pretty?" he supplied, gritting his teeth as he shifted his hands under her, digging into the curve of her arse.

"Yes," she said, taking his jaw in one hand and pressing a merciless kiss to his lips. "You're so fucking pretty," she muttered into his mouth, and he took her breath into his lungs, certain he would lose himself in her.

"Fuck, finally," Thor said, rising to his feet as Lucius strode in, attempting to formulate his hair into something passably presentable. "Where've you been?"

"Nowhere," Lucius said quickly, trying not to watch Narcissa as she rejoined her sisters near the bar. "What's going on?"

"Just wanted to check on the details for tomorrow," Thor said, somewhat anxiously. "I'm worried about the song choice, Lucius," he admitted. "If Tom's voice is anything close to what it is now, we're not going to be able to pull it off—"

"Bella, please," they heard Andromeda say, promptly interrupted. "Can we not do this right now?"

"Do what?" Bella replied sharply, with a considerable lack of innocence that indicated she knew precisely what she was doing. "I'm just saying that Ted here should probably find something else to do other than hanging around with people that are, you know," she said flippantly, "better and more talented—"

"Bellatrix, I didn't mean to bother you," Ted said neutrally. "I was just asking Andy if she might want to—"

"I know what you were asking Andromeda, and the answer is no," Bella sniffed. "Do you really think she has any interest in a fucking bartender? She's a Black, for god's sake, you're just here for the entertainment and free drinks while she looks for someone better—"
"That's not true," Andromeda cut in weakly, but it appeared that the damage had been done; Ted straightened, grimacing.

"Like I said, Bellatrix," he said, clearing his throat. "I didn't mean to bother you." His gaze slipped to Andromeda. "Or you," he offered softly. "Apologies," he murmured. "I hadn't realized I was so mistaken."

"Ted," Andromeda said, her lip trembling. "I—it wasn't—"

"What do we owe you, Ted?" Bella asked, holding up the drink in her hand. "Twenty, I'm guessing? Here," she said carelessly, dropping a handful of bills in his hand. "Keep the change."

It was an obvious dismissal; Ted stared at the money in his palm, forcing a swallow.

"Thanks," he mumbled, and tucked it in his pocket. Narcissa, Lucius noted, watched silently from the side, obviously torn as she glanced between her elder sisters. "I'll, um—just see you some other time," Ted said, and then chewed his lip. "Andromeda," he added with a nod, quietly backing away and heading for the bar without looking over his shoulder.

Andromeda looked devastated, staring blankly into nothing for a moment; Narcissa stepped forward, settling a hand on her shoulder.

"Bella," Narcissa said tentatively, glancing at her eldest sister. "Was that really necessary?"

"Yes, Cissy, it was," Bella said tartly, not looking up. "Are we ready to go, then?"

Narcissa caught Lucius' eye for a moment, looking warily thoughtful before turning back to nod at her sister. "Yes," she said simply, arranging her face as she looked down at Bellatrix. "Let's go."

Lucius marveled for a moment, admiring the sudden determination in her expression; it occurred to him with an unexpectedly thunderous strike of recognition that he could no longer imagine looking at anyone again without seeing her.

He fished around in his pocket, searching for his phone and fumbling to write down the sudden onslaught of thoughts that had entered his mind the moment she had gone.

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**Battle of the Bands: Night Three**

"Tom definitely can't sing," Thor said, panicking as he rushed in from the back room. "He can barely make a sound—and there is no fucking way we can do the song we had planned for today —"

"No, we certainly cannot," Darian agreed. "Lucius' voice is fine, but it's no 'bedroom yowl' or whatever it is Tom's got going for him—"

"We'll do something else, then," Lucius said, trying not to panic. "We'll, uh—we'll do a different song, or, um—"

"We can't do any of Tom's songs," Caleb pointed out. "You can't pull any of them off, Malfoy."

"Fine, we'll do something else," Lucius said anxiously, pressing his fingers to his temple. "Fuck, I should have known this would happen, and I—"
"Ladies and gentlemen, we are the House of Black!" he heard Narcissa announce, and he stopped, pausing to let the sound of her voice flood his system. "We're going to do things a little bit differently tonight—"

"Do you have any material?" Darian asked, poking Lucius sharply in the ribs. "Is there anything we can—"

"Shh," Lucius said, holding up a hand as Narcissa continued.

"I may be the singer in the band, but my sister is the real talent in the family," Narcissa continued. "She wrote this one, and I think it's beautiful—so we're going to take things down a notch tonight."

"Where's Bella?" Caleb asked, frowning as he watched. "And Regulus?"

"Looks like they're doing an acoustic set," Thor commented. "No way they'll win with that, right?"

"Doubtful," Darian said skeptically.

"I don't think that's the point," Lucius murmured, watching Narcissa pick up her guitar and take a seat opposite Andromeda at the keyboard.

"So anyway," Narcissa went on, turning to glance reassuringly at her sister before looking out into the crowd. "Ted, if you're listening—" she struck a chord on her guitar, smiling. "Andy wants to say she's sorry."

Narcissa strummed a soft chord, letting Andromeda begin a delicate melody as she opened her mouth to sing.

Today I told myself that I'd sit down and write a song
I have a lot of words I want to say to you
But they're all jumbled up and sitting in a paper cup
So let's agree that we agree that I'm a mess for you

Narcissa's voice was sweeter than Lucius had heard it; better, in a way, and wholly irresistible.

I want you to know
That if you stay or if you go
I'd still have felt it so
So unnatural
But I thank you for the time
And it was fun, and you're divine
And if this is all I get, then it'll be enough

"This might be the best they've sounded," James commented, once again appearing out of nowhere to rest his chin on Lucius' shoulder. "Don't you think?"

"Go away, Potter," Lucius mumbled, unable to take his eyes from Narcissa's bent head.

I'm not a girl with riches and I'm not a girl who wishes
I'm just a girl who coaxes chaos into rhymes
You're a blessing, you're a curse
You are wonderment dispersed
And I have never been the type to pine

Narcissa looked up, meeting his eye backstage for a moment, and smiled briefly.
"Well," James remarked contentedly. "Look at that, Malfoy."

"Potter, I'll kill you," Lucius warned, not looking at him.

"I know," James sighed brightly.

_But I want you to know_
_That if you stay or if you go_
_I'd still have felt it so_
_So unnatural_
_And I thank you for the time_
_And it was fun, and you're divine_
_And if this is all I get, then it'll be enough_

Narcissa finished on a slow strum and then the room promptly broke out in applause, erupting in fervent cheers. Andromeda rose slowly to her feet, bowing her head slightly as Narcissa gestured to her, silently lauding her sister. In the audience, Lucius caught a glimpse of Bellatrix standing off to the side with Tom, a small smile on her face as she watched.

"Well, this will be fun to follow," Remus remarked. "Ready, Prongs?"

"Ready, Moony. Ready, Pads?"

"Ready, Prongs. Rea- "

"MARAUDERS," Minerva yelled. "GET ON STAGE—"

"For the record, I'm ready too," Peter informed nervously.

"Don't fuck up, Potter," Lucius called after them, watching James shake out his jitters. James turned over his shoulder, grinning back.

"I always do, Malfoy," he said spiritedly, and then jogged quickly on stage.

"Leaky Cauldron, we are the Marauders!" he yelled, and was met with a boisterous shout of cheers. "Whoever cleverly slipped the underwear in my pocket—you should know I'm very flattered," James said, once again tipping his imaginary hat, "but unfortunately, my attentions are unwavering. Lily Evans, you horrible brute, this one is for you."

"Oh, Potter," the girl sighed from the audience.

James lowered his head, smiling to himself. "Ready?" he called over his shoulder. "One, two, one two three four—"

_Ain't got wisdom or wit_
_But I've got courage and more_
_Ain't cunning or quick, babe_
_But you're making me roar_

_My soul is a wolf_
_My body's a lion_
_You say it's just pride, babe_
_I say it's defiance_
_Tell me you're in, girl_
_Say you're down for the hunt_
"He's really got charisma, doesn't he?" Tom rasped, barely audible as he joined Lucius backstage. "That fucker."

"Hey, Tom," Lucius sighed. "Any ideas?"

Tom shrugged. "I don't know," he whispered hoarsely. "Sincerity seems to be the theme of the evening, though," he noted impassively.

Lucius made a face. "Seems that way," he agreed, watching the crowd join in with James.

"If you're kissing the wrong guy
Make it me tonight
If you're kissing on me, babe
I'll make your bad ideas right"

"For fuck's sake," Darian said. "Why is all their shit so unbelievably catchy?"

"We don't have time to worry about that, seeing as we're up next," Thor reminded him, gripping Lucius by the shoulders. "Malfoy, do we have a plan here?"

Lucius took a deep breath, exhaling with an impossible slowness as Tom shrugged, gesturing in an evasive 'go ahead' motion.

"Yeah," Lucius sighed, pulling out his phone. "How quickly can you learn this?"

Darian leaned over, squinting at it. "Consider it learnt," he declared, pulling Caleb into a headlock. "Got it, Avery?"

"Got it," Caleb confirmed, wrestling himself free. "We're doing this?"

"Yeah," Lucius said nervously. "Just, um—it's pretty repetitive, so—"

"You open," Thor instructed. "Start alone, and then Caleb can come in, and then—"

"It's that easy?" Lucius asked. "You're sure?"

"Yep," Darian confirmed. "We're good. After all," he added, throwing an arm gleefully around Tom's shoulders, "contrary to popular opinion, we're a band, not a solo act." He shrugged. "We've played together a million times. This'll just be another fun jam sesh."

"Well," Lucius said, trying to force himself free of his unyielding nerves. "I guess we're doing this, then."

Lucius reached for the mic, smiling tentatively.

"So, as you can see, I'm not Tom Riddle," he said, and there was a spattering of laughter. "But we are the Death Eaters, and due to the tragic loss of our lead singer's yowl, we'll be performing a new song tonight." He looked down, trying not to fiddle with the pick in his fingers. "This song is called Star Signs," he said slowly, and looked up, catching Narcissa's eye where she stood at the back wall. "And I wrote it for you."

He cleared his throat, counting them off—*in time*, for once—and opened his mouth, preparing
himself for the uncomfortable vulnerability of truth.

I'm sick, darling, I'm lovesick
I'm ill, sweetheart, ill-timed
I'm poor, love, poor intentioned
But we're stars, baby, star signs

Narcissa's eyes widened; beside her, Andromeda was smiling, reaching down to squeeze her fingers. Lucius forced himself not to look away, despite the dryness that leapt into his throat as Caleb started to play.

Sixteen bars of perfection
That hair, that voice, those eyes
Tell me you felt the collision
Tell me you saw the sun rise

Darian's instrumental entry was smooth, unencumbered; Lucius let out a breath, settling into the song.

I'm sick, darling, I'm lovesick
I'm ill, sweetheart, ill-timed
I'm poor, love, poor intentioned
But we're stars, baby, star signs

I couldn't dream you any better
I couldn't write you in a song
I want to feel you like the weather
I want to hear you say I'm not wrong

At the key change, Lucius held his breath; he watched the smile pull at Narcissa's lips before turning over his shoulder, directing the tempo adjustment for the bridge.

It's written in the sky
I was meant to love you at first sight

He looked up again, but by then she was gone; behind him, the background instrumentals faded to nothing, leaving Lucius' voice stripped bare again on the darkened stage.

I'm sick, darling, I'm lovesick
I'm ill, sweetheart, ill-timed
I'm poor, love, poor intentioned
But we're stars, baby, star signs

He finished the song with a breath that escaped into silence; and then, all at once, there was a rush of applause.

"Thank you," he said shakily, reaching for the mic. "Thank you—we're the Death Eaters, and—"

His voice died as Andromeda shrugged apologetically, gesturing to the vacancy beside her.

"Thank you," Lucius said a final time, and then he turned stiffly, walking off stage without stopping.

Aftermath
She was standing backstage, a smile on her face.

"Hey, pretty boy," she said. "You write that song all by yourself?"

Lucius faltered, stumbling to a halt. "Hey," he said breathlessly, looking around in confusion. "I thought you'd—"

"Left?" she supplied, and shrugged. "Nah."

"Oh," he said, his heart thudding recklessly in his chest. "Did you, um—" he swallowed. "Did you like it?"

"Depends," she said slowly, taking a step towards him. "Was it authentic?"

"Authentic?" he asked, frowning, and she smirked at him.

"Yeah," she replied, shrugging. "I mean, if you just wanted to write a commercially viable love song, I'm told that's what the industry calls 'selling out.'"

"What?" he said, aghast. "You think that—"

"No, don't worry," she assured him, taking a final step to bring her chest to his. "I just want to hear you say you mean it," she whispered, tilting her chin up to meet his eye.

"I do mean it," Lucius assured her. "I really, really mean it."

"Good," she murmured, brushing her lips against his. "Anything else you need to say?" she asked, the words ghosting across his skin.

He smiled, reaching up to tangle his fingers in her hair.

"If you want me to kiss you, princess," he said, sliding his nose along hers, "just ask."

"And the winner of the Battle of the Bands is—" Horace paused. "Drumroll please!"

"Great," Lucius muttered. "Draw it out."

Narcissa gave him a little shove. "Hush," she murmured, leaning in as he kissed her cheek.

"The winner is, to no great surprise . . . the Marauders!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Tom croaked soundlessly, shaking his head. "Those cocksuckers?"

"Wait, for real?" James asked, blinking vacantly as Remus' mouth dropped open, his eyes wide. "But—but we—but they—"

"Potter," Lucius said, giving him a shove. "Get up there, would you?"

"OH MY GOD," Sirius declared at the top of his lungs. "MOONY, QUICK, MAKE OUT WITH ME—"

"Okay," Remus agreed without hesitation, wrapping one arm around Sirius' neck and kissing him firmly. Caleb and Darian applauded quietly behind them as James stumbled forward, accepting the microphone from Horace.
"Holy shit, um," James mumbled into the mic, "I—uh, this is an honor, and—"

"Mr Potter," Dumbledore said, stepping forward on the stage. "In addition to being named the victor of the Battle of the Bands, I would like to formally invite the Marauders to join my record label."

"Wait, you want us to join The Order?" James echoed vacantly, looking considerably like he was about to faint. "Oh, okay, well—"

"Potter," Lucius snapped. "Get it together!"

"Right," James said, accepting Dumbledore's hand and then Horace's, turning back to the crowd. "Well, um, thank you to everyone for listening, for supporting us, and for, uh—" he paused, grinning. "And Lily Evans, if you're still here, I still fucking love you!" he yelled into the mic, running back to knock Sirius and Remus apart with a loud rip of suction, gathering his idiot friends into a loud, huddled embrace.

"He's hopeless," Lucius sighed, and then turned to Narcissa, processing his thoughts. "So, are you upset?"

"Upset?" she asked, blinking up at him before shaking her head. "About not winning? Hardly. This was only my first one," she reminded him, smirking slightly. "I'm going to beat the shit out of you next time."

"Next time?" Lucius asked wryly. "You think you're going to beat me next year?"

"Well, if I don't get a record deal before then, obviously," she said, giving him a wink. "Race you to immortal fame?"

Lucius laughed, wrapping her in his arms. "Sure," he agreed. "Race you there."

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**Epilogue**

or, *Unnecessary End Scene*

or, *Everyone Lives Happily Ever After*

"Long night," Narcissa yawned, turning to look up at him. "Take me home?"

"Of course," Lucius said, sliding his arm around her shoulders. "Andromeda," he said, gesturing for her attention. "Need a ride?"

"No, I'm good," she replied. She looked up, catching Ted's eye behind the bar; he waved at her, smiling. "I'm going to wait for Ted," she explained, returning his smile. "He's just cleaning up."

"Fine by me," Lucius said, looking around. "Where's everyone else?"

"Caleb and Darian are fucking somewhere in a broom closet, I'm sure," Thor called, saluting him from afar. "I'll go make sure there's no property damage."

"Ah, the Rotten Gays," Sirius sighed dreamily, wandering in with his arm slung around Remus' waist. "Hard not to admire their style."

"Is it, though?" Lucius countered drily, making a face before looking around. "Where's Tom?"
"With Bella, I expect," Andromeda supplied. "She paused their love affair for a moment to tell me she was proud of me before disappearing," she added, shrugging. "Apparently she and Tom are writing songs for his next endeavor or something."

"Or something," James agreed, chuckling. "Well, this was the best night ever," he commented, glancing around the empty bar. "I mean, really, only one thing would have made it any bet-"

"Potter!" someone yelled. Lucius turned, catching sight of the redheaded girl bursting suddenly through the doors. "Potter, I—"

She paused, registering the crowd of people around the room. "Oh, cool," she remarked uncertainly, flustered. "I see you're still here, then."

"As are all of my many friends and rivals," James commented unnecessarily, offering her a curt bow. "You needed something, Evans?"

"Well," she began uncomfortably. "Sort of."

Narcissa let out a brief snort of laughter, pulling Lucius back down in his chair and falling with him. "This should be good," she murmured in his ear, and he shook his head in somewhat affectionate resignation, letting her settle herself in his lap.

"I broke up with Severus," the girl—Lily Evans, as it were—explained carefully, parsing out her words. "It just—um. It wasn't working out."

There was a pause as the Marauders all paused to process this information.

"Moony," Sirius whispered, poking Remus. "Moony, is this really happening?"

"Shush," Remus hissed, clapping a hand over his mouth.

James, for his part, merely arched a brow; suspiciously coolly, Lucius thought, all things considered. "Oh really, Evans?" James drawled slowly. "So now that I'm an award winning musician, I'm suddenly not the worst person on earth anymore?"

"Oh—you won?" she asked, confused; she looked around the room, her gaze settling on Lucius. "I thought for sure that guy was going to—well, whatever," she said, shrugging as she turned back to James. "The thing is, Potter—"

"Yes, Evans?" he asked innocently. "What is it?"

She hesitated, chewing her lip.

"You really are the worst person I've ever met," she admitted slowly. "But also, I want to kiss you so badly that I think I might die."

A smile twitched across James' overearnest mouth.

"Well, we wouldn't want that, Evans," he said, taking a step towards her. "Granted," he conceded loudly, "I would write you a brilliant eulogy, obviously—"

"Obviously," Sirius agreed, his mouth muffled behind Remus' hand. "With poetry?"

"So much poetry," Remus supplied, nodding. "That fucker can rhyme."

"I can rhyme," James agreed, grinning again at Lily. "I have to assume that's what's drawn you in,
"eh, Evans?"

"God, I might hate you," Lily groaned. "I really might." She sighed loudly, deflating. "This is a very confusing feeling."

"We understand," Remus told her kindly. "We feel the same way about him."

"So, if I'm hearing this right, you might hate me," James remarked, stepping forward to take one of her hands in his. "But there's also a chance you might not?"

"Hey Andy," Ted said, jogging over to her. "Horace just cut me loose, so are you ready to—"

"Ted, I'm totally in love with you, but I'm watching something," Andromeda said, holding a finger to his lips.

"Mmm," he acknowledged as he placed his hands on her hips, smiling down at the top of her head. Lily, meanwhile, shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, still looking expectantly at James.

"So, um," she said, cringing slightly before sighing again. "Potter," she burst out, taking hold of his shoulders, "would you just fucking kiss me, please?"

"See, she knows how to ask," Lucius whispered, brushing his lips against Narcissa's neck and promptly growling as she elbowed him.

"Well, hold on," James said thoughtfully. "I need to compose an ode to the moment first—"

"Potter!" Lily half-shouted. "For fuck's sake—"

But whatever else she had planned to shout was silenced by James' kiss; he took her in his arms with a certain ballroom grandness, sweeping her off her feet and then falling with her to the floor, promptly letting her roll him onto his back as she straddled him on the ground.

"This got gross really fast," Sirius remarked, staring at them. "Talk about an escalation."

"Pizza?" Narcissa chimed in. "I can have Regulus run and get some."

"Ah, that narrow-hipped plague," Remus sighed fondly. "What happened to him?"

"Honestly, he might be with Caleb and Darian," Narcissa said, frowning. "I hope not? Or I hope so. I can't decide," she sighed, shaking her head. "Let's just agree not to ask questions."

"We really need to leave before this gets any worse," Lucius muttered.

. . . and they all lived happily ever after.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Drunk History up next! Thanks for reading!
Drunk History: The Voldemort Wars, Part II

Pairing: None

Universe: Post-Hogwarts

Rating: M for language

Summary: Part II of two episodes of Drunk History: The Voldemort Wars. A reminder that if you have never seen the show Drunk History (which is indeed a real show; I'm creative, but not that creative), here is the actual synopsis: In each episode, an inebriated narrator, who is joined by host [in this case, Lee Jordan], struggles to recount an event from history, while actors enact the narrator's anecdotes and also lip sync the dialogue.

[The scene opens to a classroom in the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where Harry Potter sits at a desk with Hermione Granger. She is drumming her fingers irritably against the desk, glancing questioningly around the room.]

Hermione: "I don't understand the premise of this exercise."

Harry: [sighs] "We're just going to have one or two drinks—"

[Lee coughs loudly.]

Harry: "—and talk about the war, that's all."

Hermione: [slowly, with a furrowed brow] "I just don't see why alcohol is a prerequisite for discussing something that was such a significant part of our lives."

Harry: "Yes, I know, but—"

Hermione: "The war was catastrophic, Harry. So many lives lost, all those people hurt and tortured and killed—" [She sighs mournfully.] "Not to mention the irreparable damage to the entire construct of the wizarding world, really -

Lee: "WHICH IS WHY WE NEED ALCOHOL, GRANGER."

Harry: [nods] "What he said."

Hermione: [groans] "Yes, but—"

Harry: "Don't forget, Hermione, not everybody likes history as much as you do."

Hermione: [sniffing disdainfully] "I doubt that's true. Hogwarts, a History is an international bestseller!"

Lee: "Yes, for house-training dragons."
Harry: "What?"

Lee: [shrugs] "According to Hagrid."

Hermione: "Regardless—"

Harry: [interrupting] "Would you just have a drink, Hermione?" [He stares imploringly at her.] For me?"

Hermione: "Oh, don't give me that look, Harry."

Harry: "Remember all those times you were ready to die for me?"

Hermione: "Yes, I do, and I still would, but—"

Harry: "And now all I'm asking is that you have, you know. A shot." [He shrugs.] "Two shots, max."

Hermione: [exhales slowly] "Okay, Harry. For you." [She picks up a shot glass and fills it with Ogden's, resignedly clinking her glass against Harry's and then tossing it back, making a face.] "Ugh. How many of these?"

Harry: [innocently] "Oh, just a few."

Lee: [in a loud whisper] "This is going to be amazing."

[Fifteen minutes later.]

Harry: "Madame Pince, Madame Hooch, Professor McGonagall."

Hermione: [groans] "This game? Really?"

Lee: "Excellent. I love this game."

Harry: "I mean, why not?"

Hermione: [sighs] "Marry McGonagall, make love to Pince, kill Hooch."

Lee: "It's 'fuck,' Hermione, don't make it weird."

Hermione: "I want to be clear that I would be very tender with her."

Harry: "Tender?"

Hermione: "Yes, tender."

Lee: "Really? Because I would absolutely rail—"


Harry: "Oof." [frowns] "Um, marry Charlie, fuck Bill, and kill Percy."

Hermione: "You have that all wrong."

Harry: [startled] "What?"

Hermione: "If anything, you'd want to marry Percy, wouldn't you? He has the highest earning
potential, and in the event of classically matrimonial qualities—like child-rearing, for example—Charlie would be a consummate disaster. And you'd have to live in Romania, which is fine for a one night stand—preferable, in fact—"

Lee: [suspiciously] "You seem awfully certain about that."

Harry: "Hermione, are you sure you understand the game?"

Hermione: [ignoring them both] "I'm just saying, Harry, that I think you should reconsider your choices before the opportunity actually presents itself."

Harry: "Yes, sure, Hermione, I will carefully rethink it before I'm forced to live a doomsday scenario where I have to murder one of my best friend's brothers."

Hermione: [shrugs] "That's all I'm saying."

[Fifteen minutes later.]

Hermione: "Fuck Luna, marry Ginny, kill Neville."

Harry: "Fuck Luna? Really? Not make love to her?"

Hermione: [shrugs] "She can take it."

Harry: "Fine. And as for marrying Ginny—"

Hermione: "Well, if you're not going to."

Lee: "Burn?"

Harry: "Nah. We broke up."

Lee: "Oh. Are you still with Ron, Hermione?"

Hermione: [sipping delicately] "Not physically, no."

Lee: "Emotionally?"

Hermione: "Not that either."

Lee: "So... you're single?"

Hermione: "Metaphorically."

Harry: "Not literally?"

Hermione: "Well, that too."

Lee: "Wait, so... you're both single?"

Hermione: "Spiritually? Yes."

Harry: "Why?"

Lee: "No reason. One second."

[Camera cuts to Lee walking into the hallway. He closes the door behind him and screams]
“YAAAAAAAS” into the empty corridor before returning to the classroom.

Lee: "Where were we?"

[Fifteen minutes later.]

Hermione: "Fuck Oliver Wood, marry Viktor Krum, and kill Pansy Parkinson."

Harry: "Did I give you those names?"

Hermione: "No." [shrugs] "Just saying."

Harry: "I think I might fuck Wood too." [Pauses.] "What do you think that means?"

Lee: "That Oliver's going to have to dismount his fucking broom for ten minutes, that's what."

Hermione: "Okay, um—my turn?"

Harry: "Yep."

Hermione: "Hm." [She pauses, thinking, and hiccups.] "Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, and—"

[She cuts off, pursing her lips.] "And me."

Harry: [blinks] "You?"

Hermione: "Me."

Harry: "Physically?"

Hermione: "If you want."

Lee: [breathlessly] "Oh my god, it's happening—"

Harry: "Or just spiritually?"

Hermione: "Up to you."

Harry: "Hm." [Pauses, thinking.] "I'm nervous."

Lee: [in a loud whisper] "It's escalating so quickly, I can't—"

Hermione: "Physically nervous?"

Harry: "Kind of. My hands are kind of sweating."

Hermione: "I'll let you think about it, then."

Harry: "I appreciate that."

Lee: [letting out a breath] "Oh, COME ON—"

Hermione: "Is it cold in here?"

Harry: "It's a little chilly."

Lee: "You know what would help?"
Sorting Hat: "Ravenclaw!"

Hermione: "Really?"

Sorting Hat: "Just kidding." [cackles] "Gryffindor."

Hermione: "Want another drink?"

Sorting Hat: "Yes, please."

[She holds up her glass so that it is even with her forehead; the Sorting Hat takes a jubilant sip from her straw.]

Sorting Hat: "Good year. Fine-bodied."

Lee: "We're going to have to send you to meetings."

Sorting Hat: "Ugh. Don't be such a Hufflepuff."

Lee: "Excuse me?"

Sorting Hat: [unsteadily] "Gryffindor!"

Hermione: [thoughtfully] "Lee, are we friends?"

Lee: "Oh god."

Hermione: "Like, real friends? Not just friends-of-friends, you know?"

Lee: "We've gone too far. Potter, get her another drink."

Harry: "Did you just call me Potter?"

Lee: "Have you changed it?"

Harry: "But what if we push her and she goes from casual insecurity to complete shame spiral?"

Lee: "Shame spiral?"

Harry: "Yeah. Like, for me, it's when I go from thinking about how I nearly killed Draco Malfoy to thinking about the time I made a fool of myself at the Yule Ball, and then from there I think about that time I tried to ask Fleur Delacour to go with me and she looked at me like I was a sea slug—"

Hermione: [interrupting] "That wasn't you, Harry. That was Ron."

Harry: "Oh thank god. It seemed so vivid in my memory."

Hermione: [kindly] "He can be a very apt storyteller."

[Harry hands Hermione a drink. She taps it with her wand, transforming the tumbler of whiskey into an elaborate appletini, which she then lifts to her mouth with both hands.]}

Harry: "How did you—"

Hermione: "Transfiguration, bitch!"
Lee: "Oh no." [He looks down at his own drink, transfiguring himself a larger glass.] "Better."

[Fifteen minutes later.]

Harry: "Hermione. I decided something."

Hermione: [squinting at him] "Yes?"

[Lee leans forward expectantly.]

Harry: "I think I would also enjoy killing Pansy Parkinson."

[Lee sits back, disappointed.]

Hermione: "Right?"

Harry: "Yes. And as for you—"

[Lee leans forward again.]

Hermione: "Yes?"

Harry: [holds his drink close to his face, trying to close his mouth around his straw and failing throughout a process that lasts approximately thirty seconds] "You have brown hair."

Hermione: "I do, right?"

[They laugh. Lee slams his head into the desk. Hermione levitates the hat from her head to Harry's, smiling vacantly.]

Harry: "I'm so glad you agreed to do this with me."

Sorting Hat: "That's true. He means that."

Hermione: [nodding] "You know, I was resistant at first, but I think I'm excited to talk about Voldemort's numerous crimes against humanity. I think it will bring a lot of noteworthy attention to the stigmas within the wizarding world, and—"

Sorting Hat: [interrupting] "He meant the drinking part."

Hermione: "Oh." [She blushes.]

Sorting Hat: [loudly] "Now he's thinking about quidditch."

Lee: "DUMB!"

Hermione: "Seriously?"

Sorting Hat: "Wait—now he's thinking about why it's called a 'Golden Snitch'—"

Harry: "It sounds like snatch, right?"

Hermione: [nods thoughtfully] "That's true."

Sorting Hat: "Now he's picturing you naked."

Hermione: "Is he?"
Harry: "Only for a minute."

Sorting Hat: "He's lying. He's still thinking about it."

Hermione: "Is it good, then?"

Sorting Hat: "I mean, I'm a hat, so I really don't have an opinion. It seems anatomically proportionate, I guess, though he might be wrong about the size of your breasts—"

Hermione: [interrups] "Not me. I meant his thoughts."

Sorting Hat: "What?" [Pauses conspicuously.] "Sorry. I got distracted."

Harry: [taking a loud sip] "Okay, so. Hermione. I have a question."

Hermione: "32C."

Harry: "Not that."

Sorting Hat: "For the record, he was definitely wrong."

Lee: "SHHHH!"

Sorting Hat: [sniffing impatiently] "Pipe down, Jordan."

Hermione: [loudly] "What is it, Harry?"

Harry: "So like, my question here is . . . I'm the Chosen One."

Hermione: [pauses] "That's not a question."

[Harry laughs, hiccups, and then slides to the floor, curling up under a desk.]

Hermione: [smiling vacantly] "He'll be back. It's fine." [She climbs under the desk, joining him, and both disappear from camera view.]

Lee: "Guys?"

[There is a pause, and then a muffled smattering of giggles.]

Lee: [sighs] "I guess we should start, then."

[Scene opens to the Sorting Hat sitting on the desk with a large appletini.]

Sorting Hat: "Hello, I'm the Sorting Hat, and today we'll be talking about the second Voldemort War."

[Lee storms into view as more giggles become audible from beneath the desk.]

Lee: "NO, NO, NO—"

[Scene reopens with Harry and Hermione sitting at two adjacent desks.]

Harry: "Hello, I'm Hermione Granger—"

Hermione: "—and I'm Harry Potter—"
In unison: "And today—"

Lee: [interrupts] "STOP!"

Harry: "What? I'm Harry Granger—"

Hermione: "And I'm Hermione Potter, and today—"

Lee: "For fuck's sake."

Harry: "Is it my voice? Is my voice wrong?"

Hermione: [pitching her voice very low] "Hello, I'm Hermione Granger—"

Harry: [in a disturbing falsetto] "—and I'm Harry Potter—"

Lee: "I'M LEE JORDAN AND THIS SHAM OF A CAREER IS DRUNK HISTORY."

[Scene opens to where Gilderoy Lockhart is wearing a thin white sheet over his head, wandering mournfully around a set painted to look like the Albanian forest.]

Harry voiceover: "So, this whole thing starts with Tom Riddle's horcruxes."

Hermione voiceover: "A horcrux being, of course, a container within which he imprisoned the severed bits of his soul, the first of which was created by Herpo the Foul in—"

Harry voiceover: "Hermione, drink this."

Hermione voiceover: "Okay!"

[Gilderoy pauses as a muffled sound of slurping through a straw is heard in the narration.]

Harry voiceover: "Anyway, so, since his soul kept him from actually dying when his killing curse failed, Tom was basically a ghost, swooping around possessing snakes and shit—"

[Gilderoy, in accordance with the narration, gleefully swoops.]

Hermione voiceover: "Not that it went well, because animals weren't really strong enough to hold him and have incredibly shortened lifespans when possessed. Did you know that the common garden snake can only accommodate an environment containing—"

Harry voiceover: [interrupting] "Tom was waiting for his Death Eaters to try to find him, but most of them were busy denying any connection with him to avoid Azkaban—like Lucius Malfoy—"

[Cormac McLaggen struts onto the set in a platinum blond wig.]

Hermione voiceover: "While the other Death Eaters were put in Azkaban for their crimes, like Bellatrix Lestrange—"

[Marcus Belby appears wearing a long black wig, clawing at his face behind a series of painted bars as someone—presumably Seamus Finnegan—stands behind him in black robes and a skeleton mask.]

Hermione voiceover: "She's a cunt, by the way."

Harry voiceover: "Anyway, for eleven years, Tom Riddle floated around in Albania being almost
entirely useless, and in the meantime, the wizarding world thought it was safe again."

Hermione voiceover: "Not to mention that they had a new hero—a boy named Harry Potter, who didn't even know he was a wizard."

[Scene cuts to Harry and Hermione, who are sitting cross-legged on the floor.]

Harry: "Hey Lee, who's playing me?"

Lee: "Oh, um. I don't know."

[He looks away guiltily; it is clear that he is lying.]

Hermione: "You don't know?"

Lee: "Er, well—"

Harry: "I'm not going to be happy with your casting choice, am I?"

[The scene shifts to Theo Nott dressed as Harry Potter, an elaborate scar drawn across his forehead with a pair of taped-up glasses and a decidedly un-Harry-like smirk.]

Lee voiceover: [hurriedly] "Let's cross that bridge when we get to it."

Harry voiceover: [sighs] "Anyway—"

Hermione voiceover: "So Harry was sent to live with his Muggle aunt and uncle, Petunia and Vernon Dursley—"

[Camera cuts to Harry, who shudders so violently he spills his drink.]

Hermione: "You good?"

Harry: [choking] "I'm good."

[Scene cuts back to the Dursley house.]

[Editor's cut:]

Vernon: "Is this a plot to get the house?"

Lee: [sighing] "I don't want your house, Mr Dursley."

Vernon: "That's precisely what you would say, though, wouldn't you!"

Lee: "Mr Dursley, I'm a wizard. If I wanted a house, I could build one right now, right on top of this one!"

Vernon: "In this economy?" [sniffs affectedly] "You'd be a fool."

Lee: "The point is, I just need the house for a couple of hours so I can bring in some actors to play your family, and—"

Vernon: "Actors?" [scoffs] "Crooks, the lot of them."

Lee: [testily] "Be that as it may, I—"
Vernon: "Who's to say they're not after the house?"

Lee: "THIS IS A NIGHTMARE HOUSE! NOBODY WANTS IT!"

Vernon: "Do you think I'm an idiot? I know reverse psychology when I see it."

Lee: "Well, then you're as dumb as you are stupid if you think I'm going to—"

Dudley: [entering the room] "What's going on?"

Vernon: "They're after the house, Dudders!"

Dudley: [shrugging] "I doubt that. This is a shit house."

Vernon: "Hush, Duddypie, they don't know that—remember the ginger-haired bloke who spent forty minutes asking me about my garden hose—"

Dudley: "I keep telling you, you were talking about the wrong one."

Lee: [groans, then interrupts] "Hey, want to be in a reality show?"

Vernon: [suspiciously] "What are the benefits?"

Lee: "None."

Vernon: "What's it pay?"

Lee: "Nothing."

Vernon: "Who'll see it?"

Lee: "Nobody."

[A brief pause falls over them, and then Vernon's eyes narrow.]

Vernon: "Deal."

Lee voiceover: "Why don't we just skip over most of this?"

Harry voiceover: "Yes, please."

Hermione voiceover: [rushed] "The Dursleys are dicks, and Harry hates them, but because his mother had died to save him, he was protected by her blood. Dumbledore always feared Tom might come back, and so he thought keeping him under a protective blood enchantment was the best thing for him. But the Dursleys refused to tell him what he was, and they kept the truth about his parents from him."

[Vernon Dursley storms into the living room to yell inaudibly at Theo, dressed as Harry. Theo looks up for a moment, rolls his eyes, and then dead-eyes the camera, pursing his lips.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "Can you make at least the tiniest effort to get into character, please?"

Theo: "Fine." [He clears his throat.] "I'm Harry Potter. I love quidditch and long walks by the ocean, I have a weakness for women who look like my mother and a ceaseless erection for life-threatening situations, I'm—" [he pauses, making a face] "a nice person—""
Lee: [rubbing his temple] "I think we're good."

Hermione voiceover: "But, of course, Harry turns eleven, and so he eventually shows up to attend Hogwarts."

Harry voiceover: "Which is where I meet my two best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger."

[Luna Lovegood reprises her role as Dumbledore, smiling warmly at where Theo Nott sits in the Great Hall beside Ron Weasley and Blaise Zabini. Blaise is wearing a red wig, and Ron is wearing a curly brown wig and a sweater that looks several sizes too small for him.]

[Editor's cut:
Ron: "I just don't really understand why I have to play Hermione."

Theo: [innocently] "What's confusing about it? You're one of her best friends, aren't you?"

Ron: "Yes, but wouldn't I be better at, say, playing myself?"

Blaise: [loudly] "I'm insulted."

Ron: "How are you insulted?"

Blaise: "You don't think I can play you?"

Ron: "I didn't say that. Though now that you mention it, the answer is, in fact, a resounding no—"

Theo: "Weasley, this is extremely unprofessional."

Ron: [sighing] "At least Kreacher isn't playing me."

Hermione voiceover: "It's also where you meet your nemesis, Draco Malfoy."

Harry voiceover: "Right. [pauses thoughtfully] "I wonder who's playing him?"

Lee voiceover: [hurriedly] "I really wouldn't worry about these things."

[The camera shifts as Draco Malfoy himself struts into view in his Hogwarts uniform, flanked by Seamus and Dean, costumed now as Crabbe and Goyle.]

[Editor's cut:
Ron: "Wait, why's Malfoy here?"

Draco: [scoffing] "As if anyone else would play me, Weasley."

Ron: [turns angrily to Theo] "I thought you said nobody would be playing themselves!"

Theo: [eyeing his fingernails] "No. I said you weren't qualified to play Ron Weasley specifically."

Ron: "I AM Ron Weasley!"

Blaise: [toying with his red wig] "Allegedly."

Theo: [shrugging] "Whatever."]
Harry voiceover: "So anyway, while in Albania, Tom found Quirinus Quirrell, who was a Hogwarts Muggle Studies professor on sabbatical at the time, and was later called back to be the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor."

Hermione voiceover: "Not a great one, mind you. [She pauses.] Though, not the worst, right?"

[Scene cuts to where Hermione's head is in Harry's lap, drinking out of what looks like a looped straw of her own design that is aimed directly from her beverage at her lips.]

Harry: "No, not the worst. Not great, though."

Hermione: "I mean, he was possessed, basically."

Harry: "Yeah, which is almost not his fault."

Hermione: "He didn't try to kill you of his own volition, unlike Lockhart, or Crouch—"

Lee: "Oi! Spoiler alert!"

[Hermione shrugs, taking a long, gurgling sip from her straw.]

Harry: "Anyway—"

[Scene cuts back to Gilderoy underneath his white sheet, colliding with Seamus Finnegan wearing a turban as Quirinus Quirrell.]

Hermione voiceover: "So Tom latches onto Quirrell's body and comes back to Hogwarts with him, and he somehow finds out about the Philosopher's Stone, believing he can use it to bring himself back."

Harry voiceover: "Which, by the way, I still don't understand."

[Scene cuts to Harry and Hermione. Hermione slowly rocks back and forth, trying to roll onto her stomach, and eventually manages it. She squints up at Harry and then reaches up, poking his cheek.]

Hermione: "What?"

Harry: "So, Tom just needed a Death Eater to give him a body, right? What's he doing looking for the Philosopher's Stone? And then Dumbledore has it moved, right?"

Hermione: "Oh, yes. Dumbledore has the stone moved from its vault at Gringotts to Hogwarts."

[Scene cuts to Luna directing Seamus. Both are wearing overlarge beards—Luna's white and Seamus' a salt-and-pepper grey—and Seamus trips on his as he accepts a package from Dean, who is dressed rather moodily as a Gringotts goblin.]

Harry voiceover: "Right. But why not leave it in Gringotts? It's not like it was all that likely to get stolen there, was it?"

Hermione voiceover: "I don't think Gringotts is fully theft-proof."

[There is a pause. Luna blinks owlishly at the camera.]

Harry voiceover: "...true."
Hermione voiceover: "Though, in fairness, Hogwarts is a bit oversold as a place of safety, too. And Azkaban, now that I think about it—"

Lee voiceover: "Can we try to tell this story in some kind of chronological order, please?"

Hermione voiceover: "Right. So, Tom presumably orders Quirrell to drink unicorn blood so that he can continue to sustain having two souls in his body—"

Harry voiceover: "And Hagrid catches onto this—and I guess he would tell Dumbledore, wouldn't he?"

(Scene cuts back to Harry and Hermione.)

Hermione: [slowly] "I don't know, actually."

[They look at each other for a moment, blanking.]

Lee: "Anyone up for a bit of a field trip?"

(Scene reopens on Harry and Hermione in Minerva's office. Harry is sprawled on his back across her desk, and Minerva is pursing her lips in disapproval.)

Minerva: "What is this?"

Hermione: "It's— [she stumbles slightly] "History, Professor." [She hiccups loudly.]

Minerva: "Jordan!"

Lee: [sheepishly] "Yes?"

Minerva: "Fetch me a drink." [She takes a seat at her desk, touching her hair.] "And bring me my hat."

[ Fifteen minutes later, Minerva is wearing the Sorting Hat and sunglasses, drinking a margarita. Hermione is curled in a ball at her feet.]

Minerva: "Where were we?"

[Harry, who is laying across the desk, sits up slowly.]

Harry: "We wanted to know why Dumbledore didn't do anything if he knew Quirrell was possessed by Voldemort."

Minerva: [chokes on her drink] "OH REALLY—" [She turns, knocking on Albus' portrait frame.] "Did you hear that, Albus? The children are wanting an explanation."

Hermione: [matter-of-factly] "We're not children anymore. We have orgasms now."

Lee: [curiously] "With each other?"

Harry: "What?"

Lee: "What?"

Albus, via his portrait: "I—sorry, what was that? Sorry, sorry, being called away—"
Minerva: "ALBUS, YOU CUNTING WHORE!"

Albus: [yelling to someone out of sight] "YES, YES, I'M COMING—"

Sorting Hat: [announcing to the room] "She's thinking about setting fire to his portrait."

Lee: "That sounds right."

Harry: "Didn't you notice something off about Quirrell, Professor McGonagall?"

[Minerva pauses as Hermione sits up to look questioningly at her.]

Minerva: "Listen up you shits, this is a hell of a job. Things slip through the cracks."

Hermione: [shrugs] "Fair."

Harry: "Well, let's see. Where were we?"

Minerva: "Albus was being a total cocoon of fuckery."

Hermione: "He meant in the story."

Minerva: [sipping loudly] "I said what I said, Miss Granger."

[Scene cuts back to Hogwarts, where Theo, Blaise, and Ron reappear on set, standing opposite Draco. Seamus, still in Hagrid's costume, is taking them through the Forbidden Forest.]

Harry voiceover: "Anyway, we all got detention for, I don't know, something stupid and entirely Malfoy's fault—"

Hermione voiceover: "Wait, did you tell the troll story?"

Harry voiceover: "Oh, yeah. Ron knocked out a troll."

[The actors momentarily look up. Draco rolls his eyes and holds a hand out as if to say 'proceed,' and then the scene shifts to the bathroom, where Theo, Blaise, and Ron are standing with Seamus, who is now dressed as a troll.]

Hermione voiceover: "Using a spell he couldn't do until I corrected him, I might add."

Harry voiceover: "I have to assume there were a lot of things he couldn't do until you corrected him, Hermione."

[Theo smirks knowingly at Ron, who scowls.]

Hermione voiceover: "That's true. He really was disastrous at his classes."

Minerva voiceover: "Oh, Miss Granger, you poor misguided little fool."

Lee voiceover: "Anyway. The troll?"

Harry voiceover: "Right, so. The troll. Quirrell set a troll loose in the dungeons hoping to distract people so he could steal the stone, but I thought it was Snape trying to steal it—which to be honest was the first of many times, and I was later right, though also horribly wrong—"

Lee voiceover: "OI! SPOILERS!"
Hermione voiceover: "Lee, this isn't really—"

Lee voiceover: "SPOILERS!"

Harry voiceover: "Can we skip ahead?"

Minerva voiceover: "I wish you would."

[On screen, Blaise hastily slaps Seamus across the face and then they run into a recreation of the third floor corridor at the time of the Philosopher's Stone's safekeeping. They are encountered with Hagrid's dog Fang, who wears a harness with two stuffed dogs fastened on either side of him and is drooling profusely onto the floor.]

Hermione voiceover: "Dumbledore had the teachers place seven enchantments and creatures to guard the stone. One was the troll, and one was Fluffy, Hagrid's three-headed dog—"

[Fang slobbers fondly all over the front of Ron's shirt.]

Hermione voiceover: "One was Professor Sprout's web of Devil's Snare—"

[Theo, Blaise, and Ron run past where Neville is holding a small house plant.]

[Editor's cut:]

Neville: "This really isn't authentic, you know—"

Lee: "Look at me, Longbottom. Do I look like authenticity is my primary goal?"

Neville: [hesitantly] "No—"

Lee: "Do I look like authenticity is even on my list of goals?"

Neville: "Yes?"

Lee: "Don't fuck with me, Neville."

Neville: [deflatedly] "No."

Lee: "Just hold the plant, Longbottom."

Neville: "Totally. Totes mcgotes."

Lee: "Don't do that."

Neville: "Yep, I heard it too."

Hermione voiceover: "And McGonagall did a life-sized board of Wizard's Chess—"

[Blaise, in a flying leap, knocks over the pieces of a standard chess board.]

Hermione voiceover: "Flitwick did a flying key thing, and Snape did a logic puzzle with a series of potions—"

Harry voiceover: "Funny how all these tasks were so well-suited to our combined talents as eleven year old children. It's almost like it was intentionally set up for us to get through it as a group."

Minerva voiceover: "Did you hear that, Albus? It's almost like it was intentional—"
Albus voiceover: "Can't hear you, Minnie, I'm busy!"

[Scene cuts to where Theo and Gilderoy—wearing clothes backwards as though he is, indeed, within Quirrell's body—are facing off, staring menacingly at each other.]

Harry voiceover: "Point is, Tom doesn't get the stone."

Hermione voiceover: "He also learns that Harry can't touch him—"

[Theo grabs onto Gilderoy's face as Gilderoy dramatically falls to the ground, screaming soundlessly.]

Hermione voiceover: "—and Quirrell dies, leaving Tom without a body again."

[Scene cuts back to Harry and Hermione, who are now back in their classroom and lying on the floor with Lee.]

Harry: "You know something, Hermione?"

Hermione: [turning her head] "Hm?"

[Lee sits up expectantly.]

Harry: "Do you ever think about how much we've been through, and how we've done so much for each other and know each other so well—"

[Lee excitedly brings his hands to his mouth, glancing between them.]

Harry: "—and then think wait, why didn't we just shoot Voldemort and then worry about the horcruxes later? I mean he wandered around useless for a good fourteen years, right?"

Hermione: "I actually think about that all the time."

[Lee falls back against the floor, sighing deeply.]

Harry: [shrugs] "Well, why cry over spilled soup."

Hermione: "Spoiled milk?"

Harry: "No thanks, I'm good. Anyway—"

[Scene cuts to Cormac as Lucius, who is slipping a diary into the cauldron of Seamus dressed as Ginny Weasley.]

Harry voiceover: "Nothing really happens second year."

[Ron, dressed as Hermione, sits up from where he has been laying frozen on a hospital bed, and Blaise slams the door of a Ford Anglia shut as he dusts fake spiders from his shoulders.]

Hermione voiceover: "Not third year, either."

[Dean, once again in a leather jacket as Sirius Black, shakes his head at the camera and walks off set.]

Harry voiceover: "It took Tom a really long time to get his shit together, I guess."

Hermione voiceover: "Apparently he was in the Albanian forest for two years until Peter Pettigrew..."
showed up, and then they cobbled together the means to make him some kind of rudimentary body so that he could travel—"

Harry voiceover: "—and so that he could continue murdering people, like the caretaker of his father's family home."

[Gilderoy wears a hooded black coat and shakily aims his wand at Seamus Finnegan, who once again dies with aplomb.]

Harry voiceover: "He tortures Bertha Jorkins to learn about the Tri-Wizard tournament, and discovers through her that one of his followers, Barty Crouch Jr, is still alive, so they go and get him."

[Gilderoy and Kreacher, who is now playing Peter Pettigrew, walk onstage with Dudley Dursley as Barty Crouch.]

[Editor's cut:]

Dudley: "What? I've caught the acting bug."

Lee: "I really don't even care anymore."

Hermione voiceover: "Barty Crouch then captures the Auror Alastor Moody—who had been assigned to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts that year—in order to get access to Harry. He also manipulates the Tri-Wizard Cup to choose Harry as one of the champions, despite the fact that Harry was underage, and underprepared, and, frankly, fully underqualified—"

Harry voiceover: "Thanks, Hermione, they've got it—"

Hermione voiceover: "I mean you were brilliant, of course—"

[Ron in his Hermione costume grimaces as he pats Theo's costumed shoulder.]

Hermione voiceover: "—but still, you were fourteen, and you had yet to do any of your own homework!"

Harry voiceover: [indifferently] "Brilliance takes different forms, Hermione."

[Theo's smirk broadens.]

Hermione voiceover: "Either way, you'd think there'd be an easier way to get to Harry, but with Hogwarts and the Dursleys' having such powerful enchantments, Tom thought getting Harry alone by making the cup into a portkey would be the best way. Unfortunately, in a moment of what is admittedly brilliant sportsmanship—"

Harry voiceover: "Thanks for that."

Hermione voiceover: "You're welcome—so, Harry and Cedric Diggory, who was the actual Hogwarts champion, take the portkey at the exact same time, transporting both of them."

Harry voiceover: "Yeah. And so Tom's there, and Cedric's like 'who the fuck are you, bitch'—"

[Seamus as Cedric mouths off to Gilderoy.]

Harry voiceover: "—and Tom's like 'bitch, I'm Voldemort'—which, you'd think would go without saying, but you'd be wrong, unfortunately—"
Hermione voiceover: "And he gets killed, which is sad."

Harry voiceover: "You don't look sad."

[Scene cuts to Harry and Hermione, who is smiling vacantly.]

Harry: "Why are you smiling?"

Hermione: "I'm not smiling."

Harry: "Yes you are."

Hermione: "Fine. I was just remembering a joke the Sorting Hat told me."

Harry: "Which was?"

Hermione: "What's better than roses on your piano?"

Lee: [interrupting] "SO, anyway, a very solemn death occurs—"

Harry: "Right." [He takes a long, pensive sip.] "So."

[Scene cuts back to Gilderoy, who is barefoot and wearing a noseless prosthetic and throwing his hands in the air victoriously.]

Hermione voiceover: "Tom uses this really fucked up spell to grow himself a new fucked up body—that Bellatrix Lestrange probably has sex with, because she's a cunt—"

Harry voiceover: "Not that we're biased."

Hermione voiceover: "—and he does it using the bone of his father, the flesh of his servant, and the blood of his enemy."

Harry voiceover: "Is it pathetic that Tom Riddle's enemy was a fourteen year old boy? Yes."

Hermione voiceover: "Couldn't he have used Dumbledore's blood or something?"

Harry voiceover: "Evidently not."

Hermione voiceover: "I mean, Dumbledore was equally careless with his life, wasn't he? I mean, trying on that ring—"

Lee voiceover: "SPOILER!"

Hermione voiceover: "Whatever."

Harry voiceover: "So yeah, Tom calls back his Death Eaters and is like 'bros, you fuckers hoe'd out on me with this shit'—"

[Gilderoy berates Cormac, wagging a finger in his face.]

Hermione voiceover: "That's sexist, Harry."

Harry voiceover: [sighs] "Fine. But he definitely said something about the 'stench of guilt,' which is something I'm positive I've heard Molly Weasley say—"

Hermione voiceover: "That's probably true."
Harry voiceover: "Anyway, this is what actually begins the second Voldemort war."

Lee voiceover: "Are you fucking kidding me?"

[Scene cuts back to them.]

Harry: [innocently] "What?"

Lee: "You haven't even gotten into the actual war yet?"

Hermione: "It's called being thorough, Lee."

Lee: [indignantly] "Can we be something called 'done' any time soon?"

Harry: "Fine. Skipping ahead—"

[Scene cuts to Luna wearing a blindfold and shoving Theo out of the way.]

Harry voiceover: "Dumbledore works out that I'm able to see into Voldemort's mind and starts to suspect there's a connection between Tom and me, so he decides that avoiding me entirely is the safest course of action."

Hermione voiceover: "A ridiculous course of action, and one which ultimately gets Sirius killed, of course."

Harry voiceover: [interrupting] "Hey, watch it. I'm going to name my son after Albus Dumbledore."

Hermione voiceover: "I want to be very clear that you shouldn't."

[Ron as Hermione rebukes Theo as Harry.]

Harry voiceover: "HE SAID SO MANY WISE THINGS, HERMIONE!"

Hermione voiceover: "I've said wise things! Are you planning to name your kid after me, too?"

Harry voiceover: "You?" [scoffs quietly] "Nobody knows how to pronounce Hermione."

Hermione voiceover: "Hey! Viktor learned."

Harry voiceover: "I mean, sort of."

Hermione voiceover: "Anyway, Tom tries to keep quiet about his return. He breaks his followers out of Azkaban—" [Marcus as Bellatrix bursts onto the set] "—but he takes advantage of the fact that nobody is listening to Harry. Largely because they don't want to believe him, of course, but also because he was blazing through puberty like an angsting lunatic—"

Harry voiceover: "It was a dark year. A lot of all caps, you know?"

Hermione voiceover: [flatly] "I was there. I remember."

Harry voiceover: "Anyway, Tom was really obsessed with the prophecy that was made about my birth. For whatever reason, he thought that would help him figure out how to get kill me—or maybe he thought it was like his horoscope and it would just like, help, somehow—"

[Gilderoy shrugs appealingly at the camera.]
Harry voiceover: "—so his first attempt is to have Lucius Malfoy put Sturgis Podmore under the Imperius curse after he figures out that the Order of the Phoenix has been taking turns guarding the Department of Mysteries."

[Cormac McLaggen raises his wand to Seamus Finnegan's forehead.]

Hermione voiceover: "—which ultimately fails."

[Cormac pouts.]

Hermione voiceover: "He tries again later with an Unspeakable named Broderick Bode, but he was all fucked up after that fails—which is how Tom learns that only people who are included in the prophecy are physically able to retrieve it."

Harry voiceover: "Meanwhile, back at Hogwarts—"

[Scene shifts to Hogwarts where Theo, Blaise, and Ron are joined by Ginny, Neville, and Luna, who is now dressed as herself.]

[Editor's cut:

Ron: "Wait a minute—who are you supposed to be?"

Ginny: "I'm Ginny Weasley."

Ron: "I know, but—"

Ginny: "Theo said I would be best suited for the part, so I agreed."

Ron: [to Theo] "Nott, what the fuck?"

Theo: "What? She is. She's a natural Ginny Weasley."

Ginny: "Thank you, Theo."

Theo: "You're welcome."

Ron: "Shouldn't casting be Lee's decision?"

Theo: [to Lee] "Lee?"

Lee: "I don't care."

Theo: [to Ron] "See?"

Luna: "If it helps, you really are capturing Hermione quite nicely, Ron."

Ron: "I KNOW THAT, BUT THAT'S NOT THE POINT!"

Hermione voiceover: "Dolores Umbridge is assigned to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, but she does a shit job of it. Probably because she's in some kind of competition with Bellatrix Lestrange for 'Cunt of the Year'—"

Harry voiceover: "Which she wins. That year."

Hermione voiceover: "Yeah, she sweeps it."
Harry voiceover: "So then Ron, Hermione, and I start a group called Dumbledore's Army, where I started teaching people defensive spells."

Hermione voiceover: "Unsurprisingly, that didn't sit well with a few people."

[Draco joins the others on screen, crossing his arms over his chest.]

Harry voiceover: "Ugh. Speaking of cunts—"

[Theo mouths this happily to Draco, darting away as Draco reaches out to backhand him in the stomach.]

Hermione voiceover: "Don't dwell on it, Harry."

Harry voiceover: [sighs] "Fine."

[Theo and Draco exchange a narrow-eyed glare and then turn towards the camera.]

Harry voiceover: [muttering] "But for the record, Malfoy is definitely in the running for 'Cunt of the Year' that year."

[Theo slaps a medal reading 'Third Place Cunt of the Year' on Draco's forehead. Scene cuts to a set of the Department of Ministries.]

Hermione voiceover: "So, since Dumbledore never explained that Tom could actually manipulate the visions he shared with Harry, Tom is able to trick him into going after Sirius—who was never in danger at all. No thanks to Kreacher for his part in this charade, of course—"

[Theo pins a 'Fourth Place Cunt of the Year' medal to Kreacher's rag and pats his head.]

Harry voiceover: "Look, I'll admit it. Tom manipulated me into showing up. So, I guess we could rearrange the 'Cunt of the Year' awards."

Hermione voiceover: "Anyway, Ginny, Neville, and Luna come with us to the Department of Mysteries, where we end up dueling the Death Eaters."

[Theo, Blaise, Ron, and the others face off against Cormac, Marcus, and Seamus and Dean, who are now wearing Death Eater masks.]

Harry voiceover: "This is how the war becomes public. Especially after Dumbledore shows up, because then he and Tom duel."

[Gilderoy and Luna stand opposite each other, wands raised. Lee sighs, walks onto set, and fastens the missing beard back onto Luna's face before walking out of sight.]

[Scene cuts back to Harry and Hermione. They are re-joined by the Sorting Hat, with whom Harry is now sharing an elaborate Bloody Mary.]

Harry: "We got to do a lot of great 'I told you so's after that."

Hermione: [frowning] "No we didn't."

Harry: [smugly] "Maybe you didn't."

[Scene cuts to Theo flicking Seamus Finnegan's forehead and strutting away.]
Hermione voiceover: "So, by that point, it's open war."

[Seamus, dressed as a Dementor, pounces on an unsuspecting Dean.]

Harry voiceover: "The Dementors side with Tom, plus werewolves and giants and other creatures—not to mention that Muggles are then killed for fun, and a good amount of infrastructure is totally ruined—"

Hermione voiceover: "And as this is happening, Draco Malfoy becomes a Death Eater."

[Editor's cut:

Draco: "Can we possibly, um—gloss over this?"

Lee: "You mean your part in killing Dumbledore and thus launching the war into a motherfucking clustercunt of chaos?"

Draco: "Yeah, that's what I meant."

Lee: "Uh. Well—"

Draco: "Is that a yes?"

Lee: "It's definitely not a yes."

Draco: "So . . . it's a no?"

Lee: "Yes."

Draco: "Yes?"

Lee: "Don't confuse me, Malfoy, I will break your kneecaps!"

]"

Harry voiceover: "Unbeknownst to either side, Severus Snape had been acting as a double agent ever since the death of my mother, Lily Potter. He'd been in love with her and was distraught by her loss, so he was loyal to Dumbledore while feigning loyalty to Tom—which nobody knew, of course, which was disastrous on literally one hundred levels—"

Hermione voiceover: [interrupting] "I just want to be clear that if you take anything away from this, it's that communication is a legitimately crucial factor. Like, really."

[Grawp thunders on set as Severus Snape.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "NOTT!"

Theo: [sipping tea] "What?"

]"

[In the new scene, Grawp is replaced by Fleur Delacour, who is wearing a greasy black wig and dragging her robes on the ground.]

[Editor's cut:

Lee: "NOTT, FOR FUCK'S SAKE—"

Fleur: "What ees the matter, Lee?"
Theo: "Yeah, Lee, what's wrong?"

Lee: [groaning wearily] "I have to lie down."

Harry voiceover: "So, Snape agrees to help Draco, having already agreed to kill Dumbledore, who had tried on one of the cursed horcruxes—"

Hermione voiceover: "His finest moment, obviously."

[Cuts to Albus' portrait, who is scowling.]

Harry voiceover: "But nobody knows this, of course—"

Hermione voiceover: "—so the Order no longer trusts Snape."

Harry voiceover: "Oh, and by the way, Malfoy pussies out on killing Dumbledore—"

Hermione voiceover: "—after stealing all his murder ideas from me, too!"

[Theo pins a 'Pussy of the Year' medal to Draco's forehead.]

[Editor's cut:

Draco: "So this is glossing over it, I guess?"

Theo: "I mean . . . it kind of is."

Draco: "I will stab you."

Theo: "You don't have the balls."

Draco: "I'm holding the knife right now."

Theo: "He says, unconvincingly."

Scene cuts back to Harry and Hermione.]

Harry: "And shortly after that, we go on the run to start destroying his horcruxes. Which, to be honest, involved a lot of somewhat mundane alone time."

Lee: [sits up] "Between the two of you?"

Hermione: [sipping loudly through a straw] "Yep."

[There's a moment of silence.]

Lee: "So . . . did you guys ever—"

Harry: [sitting up, as though he is having an epiphany] "Hey, Hermione—I just realized something about you."

Lee: "Oh my god, what?!"

Hermione: "Yes, Harry?"

Harry: "I should have you do my haircuts again. You're really precise."
Hermione: [*blushing*] "Thank you, Harry. You make pretty good stew."

Harry: "Thank you."

Lee: [*collapsing on the ground*] "UGH, "YOU'RE SO PURE, I CAN'T—"

Harry: "Okay, so, we obviously couldn't go back to Hogwarts with Dumbledore dead—"

Hermione: [*nodding*] "Yeah, and we decided fuck 'em, the others'll be fine." [*She shrugs.*]

Harry: [*pauses, frowning*] "There was that whole thing about—"

[He cuts off, staring at Hermione. Her eyes widen and she rapidly shakes her head, as if to warn him not to mention something.]

Lee: [*suspiciously*] "What is it?"

Harry: "Well, there's these things called Deathly Hal-"

Hermione: [*interrupting*] "We kissed, Lee. That's what he's not telling you. He gave me a big ol' tongue-y kiss, right in my facemouth."

Harry: [*murmuring to Hermione*] "We kissed? That's your method of distraction? There's no way a kiss is enough to dera-"

Lee: "OH MY GOD, TELL ME EVERYTHING."

Harry: [*sitting back*] "Huh. I stand corrected."

Hermione: "Anyway, there's a year of destroying horcruxes and absolutely nothing else, and then the reign of Voldemort culminates in the Battle of Hogwarts on May 2nd, 1998."

[Scene cuts to Battle of Hogwarts, where Theo is facing off against Gilderoy.]

Harry voiceover: "There was a piece of Tom Riddle's soul in me, though. You forgot that bit, Hermione."

[Theo looks up at the camera, confused.]

Hermione voiceover: "Oh yeah. Harry dies for a bit."

Harry voiceover: "Oh my god, I did!"

Hermione voiceover: "Right?"

Harry voiceover: "Super casual, though. Moving on—"

[Theo throws his hands in the air.]

Hermione voiceover: "Oh, wait—and Neville kills the snake, right?"

[Neville stands over a small garden snake, hesitantly holding the Sword of Gryffindor.]

[Editor's cut:]

Neville: "Listen, Lee, I feel you on the authenticity thing, but—"
Lee: "You don't have to actually kill the snake, Neville."

Neville: [exhales deeply] "Oh thank god."

Harry voiceover: "Yeah, and I trick Voldemort with my breathtaking knowledge about wand lore, which has to be the first time in my life I actually outsmart anyone with, you know, logic—"

Hermione voiceover: "True. Personally, I had never been more attracted to you."

Harry voiceover: "Wait. You hadn't?"

[Scene cuts to Harry and Hermione.]

Hermione: "Well, no. I mean, you'd just defeated the most notorious evil wizard of all time without even casting an Avada—"

Harry: "Yeah, but—not even when I caught my first Snitch? Or, like—when I fought a dragon?"

Hermione: [tilts her head thoughtfully] "I guess those times too."

[Lee leans forward slowly.]

Hermione: "Why? Were you ever attracted to me?"

Harry: [scoffs] "Of course. Yule Ball? Bill and Fleur's wedding? Plus when you announced that you'd figured out Lupin was a werewolf, or when you faced down Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries—and all the times we were alone together, you know—"

[Lee's eyes are now comically wide.]

Hermione: "Huh. And you never wanted to act on it?"

Harry: "Well, I did want to."

Hermione: "Oh."

Harry: "Yep." [They pause.] "So, anyway—"

[Lee falls off his desk.]

Harry: "Well, in any case, the death of Tom Riddle was the end of the Second Voldemort War."

[Scene cuts to where Theo is staring at the camera, confused. Lee comes on set, says something in Gilderoy's ear, and then Gilderoy promptly staggers backwards, beginning a ten minute scene in which he reenacts the death of Lord Voldemort, including a montage of slow motion camera angles and softly lit portraiture.]"}

Harry: "So, uh, that's it, I guess." [He shrugs.] "All is well or whatever."

Hermione: "Right. Yeah, so that's it."

Harry: "Yep. That's the end."

Lee: [from the floor] "Are you kidding me?"

Hermione: [to Harry] "Should we go home, then?"
Lee: [lifting his head to glare at her] "ARE YOU KIDDING ME?"

Harry: "Yeah, we probably should. We're really drunk."

Hermione: "Yeah. To be honest, I can't really feel my face."

Harry: "Cool." [He stumbles to his feet, straightens, and then holds a hand out for Hermione.] "You good?"

Lee: [letting his head fall back] "OH MY GOD, NO—"

Hermione: [taking his hand to rise to her feet] "I'm good." [They turn.] "Bye, Lee!"

Harry: "See you later, my dude." [He aims a set of finger guns at Lee and pivots slowly.]

Lee: [muffled into his hands] "I'M DEAD. I'M DYING. I'VE DIED, AND I'M A GHOST—"

[Harry and Hermione exit the classroom. On the other side of the door they pause, looking at each other.]

Harry: "So . . . that was weird, right?"

Hermione: "Eh, kinda."

Lee, from the other side of the door: "THIS SHIP IS GOING TO KILL ME!"

Harry: "By the way, to answer your question, I'd fuck you."

Hermione: [affectionately] "Aw, Harry."

[They pause.]

Hermione: "Want to make out?"

Harry: [pleasantly surprised] "Yes, actually."

[Hermione turns and kisses him; Harry sways slightly and then leans against the wall, kissing her back with fervor.]

Lee, from the other side of the door: "THIS SHOW IS OVER! IT'S CANCELLED!"

[Harry and Hermione pause, pulling away for a moment to frown thoughtfully at each other.]

Harry: "Should we tell him?"

Hermione: [thinks for a moment, then shrugs] "Nah."

[She leans forward, kissing him again as the scene blacks out.]

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Coming up next: four Disney-themed one shots (Rook, Beast, Wonderland, and Valour, probably in that order). I'm thinking one a week for the next four weeks, if the
muse cooperates. The Amortentia queue is inhumanly long at this point so consider that whole hiatus thing I tried to do temporarily abandoned. Thanks again for reading!
Rook

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rook

Pairing: Nottgrass (Theo Nott x Daphne Greengrass), background Dramione (Draco Malfoy x Hermione Granger)

Universe: Disney AU (Aladdin)

Rating: T for language

Summary: The first of four one shots based on Disney plots; this one is born from a desire to watch Theo Nott be sassy, and has the added bonus of a requested Theomione bromance. Very AU, but with Potterverse magic.

Daphne Greengrass' hand in marriage isn't something to be given away; it's something to be won via magical tournament, much to her utter dismay, as she fights to keep her kingdom out of the hands of her father's corrupt royal advisor. Theo Nott may be a thief and a street rat, but he knows what he wants when he sees it—and he's not above playing (or stealing) a prince to do it.

"You're talking about me like I'm some kind of prize to be won," Daphne said to her father, not bothering to conceal the frustration she felt as she paced the throne room in agitation. "I'm a person, Father, not some—" she paused, sputtering. "Some pretty calf to be sold at auction—"

"Daphne, please," her father sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "You must see reason, darling—"

"I'm not the unreasonable one," Daphne insisted, pausing to scoff. "I don't even see why it's necessary that I be married to inherit the throne! You're not," she pointed out brusquely, and King Viridian grimaced, shaking his head.

"The kingdom isn't exactly stable right now, Daphne," he reminded her. "Lord Voldemort has only been gone for a few years, and we've only just rebuilt from the damage. Once the crown passes to you, as it soon might," he added sadly, pulling witheringly at his beard, "I'm afraid a queen without a husband isn't going to reassure our allies, however capable you may be."

"Well, it's our allies who should adjust, then," Daphne sniffed. At the sound of a small throat-clearing cough, she and her father turned to the royal advisor, Tom, who was sitting in the corner with his fingers steepled placidly at his lips. "Yes?" she demanded impatiently, and he smirked at her.

"Princess Daphne, I'm afraid that pointing out the existence of archaic prejudices is not particularly beneficial to your cause," Tom judged slowly, rising to his feet. "I'm sure we can arrive at an alternative—don't you think?"

"Like what?" Daphne retorted. "You both leaving me to live my life undisturbed, perhaps?"

"Daphne," her father cautioned, shaking his head. "I really don't think—"
"If you don't mind, Your Majesty," Tom ventured gently, and King Viridian waved a hand ambiguously, gesturing for him to proceed. "Princess Daphne," Tom began, turning towards her, "I do have one idea I should think you would find mildly stomachable, if you're willing to hear it."

Daphne fought the urge to sulk. "Yes?"

"You could simply marry me," Tom suggested casually, and Daphne balked, her eyes widening in disbelief at the suggestion. "I would be more than happy to advise you as your husband—"

"You mean that you'd be happy to have access to my throne!" Daphne corrected, flinging the accusation at him from across the room as her father slowly shook his head, pursing his lips in disapproval. "Don't think I can't see that you covet my father's position, Tom," she warned. "If I'm ever so unlucky as to lose his counsel, I assure you, I'd be thrilled to be free of yours."

Tom's blue eyes flashed angrily, enraged, and then quickly cooled as he forced a cutting smile. "Perhaps the idea of matrimony is simply too stressful for you at the moment, Your Highness," he ventured. "It seems you scarcely know what you're saying."

Daphne opened her mouth to argue, but was cut off by her father.

"I appreciate your effort to soothe the situation, Tom, but the fact remains that Daphne's marriage is a highly political situation," Viridian remarked, rising to step between them. "You're a fine match, Tom, and as royal advisor you'd certainly be an acceptable choice, but"—at that, Daphne noted Tom's eyes flashed warningly a second time—"there's far more to gain through her marriage to a noble, or a neighboring prince."

"You say that as if my life and my will are no more than a game to you, Father," Daphne noted bitterly. "Am I just another pawn for you to play with?"

Her father fixed her with an unbending glare. "You are a princess, Daphne," Viridian said firmly, "and with the privilege of power comes the responsibility of tradition. You will be married for the good of the kingdom, as I was—"

"But you were married for love!" Daphne protested, and Viridian held up a hand, frowning.

"I married for politics," he corrected sharply. "I loved your mother, yes, but love was an unimportant detail in the wider complexities of match." He paused, sighing. "Truly, Daphne, I regret that I cannot afford you the same luxury," he began, "but the fact is, now that you are of age—"

"I won't be given away," Daphne interrupted, crossing her arms over her chest and digging her heels in as the conversation began to feel like a loss. "I refuse."

"Perhaps if you're won, then," Tom suggested unhelpfully, and Daphne and Viridian both turned to stare at him. "In a competition, perhaps, or a tournament—"

"Won?" Daphne repeated, her temper flaring again. "Surely you're not serious, Tom!"

"A dueling tournament, you mean?" Viridian asked, and Tom nodded.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said. "You could invite all those of qualifying noble birth, princes from allied nations—"

"What?" Daphne cut in furiously, but nobody was listening to her.
"A rather strategic move, diplomatically," Viridian commented, humming to himself. "But what about allegations of favoritism?"

"Perhaps anonymity, to keep things fair?" Tom proposed. "With the winner unveiled at the end?"

"How is any of this fair?" Daphne shouted at her father, but King Viridian was nodding to himself, clearly already convinced.

"I must begin preparations immediately," Viridian determined, striding out of the throne room and heading towards his study. "Tom, if you would please—"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Tom agreed, flashing Daphne a knowing smirk as the king swept past her, beckoning for Tom to follow. She bristled, taking a calculated side-step to block the royal advisor's exit.

"My father may not be able to see how unduly you've influenced him, but I assure you, I can," she warned in a low voice, glaring up at him. "I don't trust you, Tom, and I'm not going to let you kee-
"

"Actually," Tom cut in crisply, "it seems you don't have much of a choice, Princess." He smiled at her, his teeth flashing against the line of his mouth. "Oh, and by the way," he murmured, leaning in to speak in her ear, "you haven't even begun to see 'undue influence.'"

With that, Tom strode out of the throne room, whistling to himself as he followed after her father. Daphne, angrier than ever, let out a growl, picking up one of her father's priceless crystal vases and considering how satisfying it would be to smash it against his many aged cartographic volumes when she paused at the sound of a soft sigh behind her.

"Don't take it out on the vase, Daph," Astoria said quietly. "It's Father you're angry with."

Her younger sister had quite the talent for overhearing things, Daphne lamented internally; she grudgingly set the vase down, pivoting to face her.

"Unfortunately, Father's not quite so easy to break," Daphne muttered. "It seems that thanks to Tom, I've gone from livestock to trophy."

"An improvement?" Astoria suggested, giving her a weak smile, and Daphne let out another groan of frustration, feeling helpless.

"I need to get away," she declared, beginning to pace the marble floor. "I need to get out of the castle."

Astoria flinched. "Again?" she asked softly, and Daphne grimaced.

"Yes, again," she said, trying to ignore the expression on her sister's face. "I don't see why it's such a bad thing, you know," she insisted defensively. "I'm out in the world, getting to know the people, and—"

"And putting the future queen's life at risk," Astoria reminded her sternly, giving her a fascinatingly maternal look of scolding. "Father wouldn't approve."

"Well, then, perfect," Daphne ruled, waving a hand. "Magnificent."

"Daphne," Astoria murmured warningly, but Daphne had made up her mind.
"Cover for me for the evening," she instructed, pacing back towards her sister. "I'll be back tonight, but just—" she shrugged. "Say I'm ill. Or, I don't know, concussed." She rolled her eyes. "As long as it hasn't disfigured me or cheapened my value, I'm sure Father will scarcely notice."

"Daphne," Astoria groaned, and she forced a smile.

"You're a good sister," Daphne said, with something she hoped was kindness. "Better than I deserve." She took a deep breath, preparing to head to the door, when Astoria suddenly reached out to grip her arm.

"Daphne," Astoria said a third time, gently. "Be careful."

Daphne nodded, indulging her, but wasted no time in slipping out the doors and through the castle wards, intent on getting as far away from her father and Tom as possible.

Theo Nott wandered slyly through the castle market, eyeing the hooded figure on the other side of the stalls and waiting for the signal from his partner—not that he knew what that signal was going to be. They'd bickered for nearly an hour about it, of course, but come to no real solution; though that was hardly anything new.

"I'm not going to wink at you, Theodore," Hermione had sniffed disdainfully. "Besides, what if there was simply something in my eye? It should be a hand signal, if anything—"

"Oh? And what sort of hand signal would seem natural?" Theo demanded. "Should I just wave to you, then?"

He mimicked a sweeping hand motion, pairing the arc of the gesture with a comically rounded mouth.

"You're being intentionally obtuse," Hermione informed him, pursing her lips. "It's absolutely maddening."

"You're maddening," Theo retorted, and she sighed.

"You've regressed," she commented. "You were more useful to me when we were children."

"And yet you're still here," he noted sagely, reaching out to flick the tip of her nose. She scowled, rubbing it.

"One day, I will come into an opulent fortune," she reminded him, as she often did, "and you can have absolutely none of it."

Theo scoffed. "If you come into a fortune, I will happily die of shock."

"Make that a promise," Hermione offered archly, "and let's shake on it."

"How about this," Theo offered, holding up his middle finger. "Would this suit you as a hand signal?"

Hermione, unsurprisingly, was not amused.

"I'm going to kill you in your sleep tonight," she informed him dispassionately, before pulling the hood over her head. She strode over to the vendors at the opposite end of the market stalls and left Theo to follow her motions with a grin, finding his own position near their mark.
The plan was simple, as ever; that was Hermione's expertise, the plans. She called it brilliance, of course, but as Theo frequently reminded her, he was actually the brilliant one; he was the dodger, the one in charge of setting the scene—the one who always had to get away. She just had to be light-fingered, and six years of thievery were plenty practice for dexterity; escapes, on the other hand, required a constant stream of reinvention.

"Genius," he usually reminded her, pointing to himself.

"Fool," she usually responded, not looking up.

Theo drew himself back to the present as he caught movement from where Hermione was standing. From across the stalls she raised a hand, as though she were innocently scratching her face; instead, she slid her middle finger up the side of her nose and Theo grimaced momentarily—reminding himself to tell her later that that was not, in fact, a clever hand signal—but launched into action, clearing his throat.

"Oh, my wondrous Wynona," Theo said loudly, swaying in the space between stalls and squinting at nothing as he stretched out for a phantom hand. "Been a hundred years, it has, and every one of them a lifeless slog of misery without you—oh, my Wynona," he continued, reaching out to toy with an elderly woman's hair, "cruel mistress though you may be, surely you would not have forsaken me?"

"Let go of me, you wretch," the woman squawked, hitting him with the side of her bag. Theo gave her a low bow, pressing on with the act.

"Save me, Wynona," Theo wailed, clutching his heart and falling to his knees. "I beseech you, come to my aid, that I may not be so utterly rebuked—"

Hermione, who had been gradually approaching, rolled her eyes. I have no idea what characters you're always creating, she enjoyed redundantly informing him, but they're all wildly inconsistent.


Obviously, Hermione echoed dubiously, notably unenthused.

"—Wynona, my love," Theo continued from his knees, reaching up towards the passing hands of irritated shoppers. "My iridescent jewel—my hope incarnate, my pitiless demon—that I would weep one thousand moons and still never see your face—"

I simply don't understand who Felix is, Hermione regularly persisted. Did he lose Wynona at war? Has she rejected him, or has she died? Frankly, I think Felix should give it up, she's clearly not interested—

Quiet, you woman, Theo would reply, which would engender a new rant altogether.

"—my angel, my pearl," Theo continued, laying on his back and grabbing at the robes of the many bewildered passersby. "Wynona, O Handmaiden of Ill-Fortune, with your bloodless complexion and your faithless eyes—"

"Can't someone get him out of here," the baker yelled, jabbing a finger at the nearby set of guards. "He's clearly one elephant short of a traveling circus—"

"Yeah, yeah," the guard grunted in response, making his way to Theo.

"Wynona, if ever you wish to join me, NOW WOULD BE THE TIME," Theo bellowed tragically,
and as he saw that Hermione had slipped next to the produce cart he promptly drew himself up, evading the grips of his would-be captors to jab his knife into the top of one's knee, shoving him headfirst into the other and knocking them both to the ground. "Alas," he wailed, "Wynona, why have you set upon me these heathens—"

"Hey!" the baker shouted, pointing at Hermione. "This one's a thief!"

Hermione, whose expandable bag was still open in her hand, took that as an appropriate signal to leave. She pulled her hooded cloak tight around her and threw some Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder on the ground, disappearing in its wake as one of the guards took off after her, coughing up a cloud of magical dust.

"Technically we're both thieves," Theo announced tangentially, ducking as the other guard made to throw a punch but stumbled, collapsing on his injured knee. "Have to eat to live, and have to steal to eat, I'm afraid," Theo continued, baiting him like a charging bull, "or else I suspect we might get along quite nicely—"

The guard grunted in pain and frustration, taking another wild swing and miss as Theo dodged the blow. "Get over here, you little—"

"Street rat?" Theo prompted, leaping behind a metalworker's stall and putting a few knives' distance between himself and the guard. "I think you'll find I'm larger than the average rat, and a fair bit cleverer, too—"

"Just as filthy," the guard snarled in response, knocking over one of the displays to reach for him and just missing Theo's collar as he slipped through the narrow alley, promptly disappearing from sight.

Theo looked over his shoulder, satisfied that the much larger guard hadn't been able to follow, and set himself on the path back to his and Hermione's hideout; his stomach growled in anticipation as he leapt atop one of the building's roofs, pausing to survey the remains of the scene below.

"Hey," the guard called, dragging the arm of a hooded figure, "got one of 'em—"

Theo paused, startled. He squinted down, eyeing the person he was quite certain was not Hermione, and was doubly certain was not himself.

"Let go of me," the figure protested; a woman, Theo noted, and a young one, by the sound of it. "I've done nothing wrong—"

"You know what we do to thieves, don't you?" the injured guard snarled at her. "Brand them, firstly, and then sever their fingers one by one—"

"I'm not a thief," the hooded woman protested, a hint of hysteria to her tone as she made a helpless motion towards the inner lining of her robe and then stopped, hesitating. "I haven't done anything, I'm just—I've only—"

"Ah, balls," Theo sighed, grimacing as one of the guards yanked the girl's arm from beneath her cloak, holding his knife to her wrist. "It seems I've made a mess."

"Let go of me," Daphne pleaded frantically, trying to take her hand back from the guard. "I already told you, you've got the wrong person—"

"Ah, Wynona," a man announced, suddenly materializing with a soft thud at her back. "There you
are, my vicious little dove."

"It's him," the bleeding guard yelled, pointing. "GET HIM—"

"Be ready to run," the man murmured in her ear, "in three—two—one—"

Daphne blinked. "Wha-"

But then there was an explosion, a cloud of smoke, and her arm was tugged halfway out of her body as the man took hold of her and then took off, slipping through an alley so narrow she wouldn't have seen it if she hadn't been forced to slide through it, stumbling in his wake. He pulled her up a series of platforms, nearly launched her onto a roof, and then dragged her in a rapid sprint across it, coming to an abrupt stop as they reached the building's ledge.

He turned sharply to face her. "Do you trust me?" he asked, panting. She looked up at his face for the first time, registering first the green of his eyes and then the devilish angle of the smile on his lips.

"Not at all," she huffed, and he grinned.

"Good," he said, nodding appreciatively. "You should never trust anything," he said sternly, "but unfortunately, that being said, right now you'll have to jump."

"Jump?" Daphne echoed, gazing skeptically at the distance to the next roof. "But—"

But before she could submit her opposition, he had leapt across first, landing in a low crouch and expertly leaping up, turning to face her. "Your turn," he called, beckoning, and she blinked, staring at him.

"I—I can't just—"

"You can," he told her evenly, "and you'll have to, as they'll be right behind you in a matter of moments."

She glanced over her shoulder, knowing he was right; she could still hear the guards shouting. "But—"

"Trust me," he called, holding out a hand. "I'll catch you."

"You won't," she protested, and he shrugged.

"Then you'll catch you," he amended, "but either way, you're going to make it."

Unfortunately, right or wrong—wrong being the likelier option—she didn't seem to have much choice. Daphne took a deep breath, steadying herself, and then retracted a few steps; she took a running leap and felt herself fly, landing unsteadily on the next roof and toppling into the stranger's arms.

"Oh, god," she muttered, using him to regain her footing.

"God's a bit formal," he offered, smirking. "Theo's fine."

She felt her brow furrow. "That was terrible," she remarked, and he shrugged.

"Terrible, dazzling, it's a thin line," he replied. "Ready?" he asked, holding out a hand expectantly. She eyed it, frowning.
"For what?"

"To keep running," he explained. "Little known fact," he added, "but the trick to a successful escape is to continually increase the distance between yourself and the people who want to maim you."

"Oh," she said faintly, "right," and then she put her hand in his, consenting to let him pull her across the rooftops until they'd made their way to the edge of Hogsmeade, finally stopping to rest as they leapt from the village walls down to a small clearing of trees.

"Sorry about that," the stranger called Theo offered as Daphne had leant over to catch her breath, careful that her hood was still covering the majority of her face. "Didn't mean to get you roped into my schemes."

"Your schemes?" Daphne echoed, and glanced up at him, frowning. "Were you the one that stole something, then?"

"Stealing, borrowing to sustain my life and livelihood without intention to return," he said, shrugging. "Potato, potato."

"Did you just say 'potato' twice?" Daphne asked, but he brushed past the remark, indifferent.

"Technically it was my friend you were mistaken for," he clarified, "but she's far less noble than I am. Truly," he added with an affectatious sniff, "there is no honor among thieves."

"You're a thief," she pointed out.

"Nobility, honor," he postulated, weighing the concepts in his hands and then proceeding to throw them out. "Vastly different."

"Potato, potato?" Daphne prompted drily, and he grinned.

"I like you," he decided, nodding once. "Do you have plans?"

"For what?" Daphne asked. "My future?"

"Your present," Theo corrected. "I'd like to know why a girl who can do magic decided to jump into the arms of a thief," he informed her slyly, his green eyes flashing as he tilted his head to consider her.

"What?" Daphne asked, feeling her eyes widen. "How did you know I could—"

"The first thing you did was let your hand twitch toward your pocket," he explained. "I haven't known a lot of witches, but I've found that's something they have in common. But," he continued, "you didn't take out your wand, which suggests to me that if you had, someone might have recognized you—which is something you don't want." He took a step closer, still watching for a reaction. "Am I close?"

She paused, considering her answer.


"You also don't know your way around the market, so you're probably well-born," he decided, and then suddenly took a step to close the distance between them, his hand floating up like he was considering resting it on her hip. "Have I stolen something valuable?" he asked curiously, tilting
his head to let his eyes trace the outline of her face beneath the cloak. "It certainly feels like I have."

She hesitated, wondering if he were dangerous.

"Someone will be missing me," Daphne warned slowly, removing herself from his grasp and trying not to panic. "I assure you, I'm not worth the trouble."

The corners of his lips nudged into a smile. "I doubt that very much," he began, winking, "but I suppose it's just as well I can't keep you," he determined, renewing the distance between them.

Daphne, feeling unsteady, pulled her cloak closer as she looked at him. He wasn't particularly conventionally handsome, she thought, watching the quickness of his motions; he was tall and lean with a loping stance, and there was a slight aura of undercaredness to him that was highlighted by the frantic quality of his motions, caught as he was in a constant state of fidgeting. He was poorly dressed, but clean, his dark hair washed and roguishly pulled back from his face, and there was a faint smell of linens and cedar that danced under her nose on a breeze. He had a smile that was both troubling and infectious, warming her from the inside out, and he was lively, and alive.

She liked his face. His eyes, especially.

"You—said you had a friend?" she offered haltingly, forcing herself to break from her reverie, and Theo nodded, as though he'd also just remembered.

"Ah, yes," he said, holding out a hand for her. "A little further this way—"

He led her to a makeshift camp a little further into the woods that bordered Hogsmeade village. It was a small, somewhat ordinary-looking tent, but as Theo pulled her inside she could see it was the size of one of the castle rooms, transforming from the doorway into a rather cozy hideaway.

"Holy teeth, Nott, I thought you'd died," a very small girl announced, stomping into view. "I also thought we agreed that you would abandon that idiotic Wynona act, but apparently that was endlessly foolish of me—"

"No, we did not agree on that," Theo retorted. "For the hundredth time, just because you don't understand Felix's predicament doesn't mean that I should have t-"

"Who's this?" the girl interrupted suddenly, pointing to Daphne with a frown. She had extremely curly brown hair that was pulled back in a messy knot, her arms crossed as she brandished a wooden spoon at Theo. "Theodore, what on earth have you done?"

"I've executed a rescue," Theo supplied without fanfare, gesturing to Daphne. "This is—" he paused, frowning. "I've no idea whatsoever who this is," he amended, announcing it, "but I like her, so she's staying for dinner."

"What?" Daphne asked, startled. "No, I couldn't possibly—"

"Eh, might as well," the girl remarked indifferently, descending a set of three steps to bring herself face to face with Daphne. "I stole an extra turnip, so, let's indulge, shall we? You can take this off," she added, gesturing up to the hood covering Daphne's head. "I'm Hermione," she added, as though this were an unimportant detail she'd thrown in as an afterthought. "I assume you're familiar with Theo."

"Only a little," Daphne said weakly. "Though he did save me from getting my fingers removed."
"Did he?" Hermione asked, turning to stare at him. "That's unusual."

"Unusual?" Theo scoffed. "I don't like your implication, Granger."

"Well then you won't like my facts, either, which are that you're hardly the rescuing type," Hermione returned matter-of-factly, brandishing the spoon at him again. "And you know I'm right."

"Oh, go roast a turnip," Theo sniffed affectionately, and Hermione used the spoon to whack him lightly across one cheek, promptly pivoting to return to what Daphne supposed must have been the tent equivalent of a kitchen. "Sorry," Theo offered, turning back to Daphne. "I'm her least favorite person on earth."

"I'm sure that's not true," Daphne offered kindly, and Theo shrugged.

"So, about you," he said tangentially. "Running away from something?"

Daphne hesitated. "Only temporarily," she admitted. "I, um—I'm having some trouble at home."

"Ah," Theo knowingly replied, nudging his chin to where Hermione had disappeared. "Yes, I can relate."

"I heard that!" Hermione shouted from the other room, and Theo flashed Daphne another wide grin.

"So, you two can't do magic, then?" Daphne asked, and Theo shook his head in confirmation. "But the darkness powder, and this tent," she catalogued, frowning. "If you're not a wizard, how do you have magi- oh," she realized, feeling herself flush. "You steal it, I presume."

His smile broadened.

"You're clever," Theo determined. "I enjoy it."

"You're teasing me," Daphne sighed, and he batted his lashes innocently. "I suppose I've just never met anyone who was—"

"A street rat?" Theo prompted. "Vermin? A veritable mongrel of rookery?"

"Rookery?"

"Rook," he explained, "as in to cheat, fleece, or swindle." He paused. "Also a bird known for gregariousness."

"Not quite that," Daphne admitted. "I was going to say 'free,' actually," she ventured uncertainly, feeling a quiet surge of envy. "I'm afraid I actually see your life as something of a privilege compared to mine."

Theo let a breath go by, and then—

"Spoken like someone who has plenty of food on the table," he replied, his tone steady, "but I wouldn't hold that against you."

Daphne looked down, instantly suffering a wave of shame. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "That was careless of me, and insensitive—"

He paused her, reaching out to brush her fingertips. "Perhaps we're merely from different worlds,"
he said slowly, looking oddly as though he wished to reassure her. "I should have given you a proper introduction."

To her surprise, she felt compelled to take his hand. "I'd like it if you showed me your world," she confessed quietly, and he smiled again, looking comforted at the thought.

"Hermione's right, you know," he said. "You can take your cloak off. I promise not to steal you," he added, "however much you might be worth."

"I'd, um, rather not," Daphne said hesitantly, self-consciously tugging it closer around her hair. "If you don't mind—"

"Dinner's ready," Hermione cut in, calling from the other room. Theo shrugged helplessly, pulling Daphne along behind him up the three intermezzo steps and into a room with a low table, gesturing to a bare spot on the floor.

"We don't usually entertain company," he explained apologetically, taking a seat beside her. "And, for the record, we do take turns with the cooking—"

"You're in luck, though, as mine's better," Hermione said flatly, dropping a couple of mismatched plates of stew onto the wooden table and then falling across from them with a weary groan. "Been awhile since I managed this much," she commented, appearing to be concealing a spare bit of pride. Theo nodded happily, ripping off a piece of crusty bread from a loaf Hermione had lain across a haggard tablecloth that Daphne suspected had been placed there for her benefit.

"Makes the day's subsequent struggle that much more worth it," Theo commented, tossing a piece of bread into his mouth and grinning at Daphne. "Not that it wasn't already, of course."

"This is delicious," Daphne remarked with surprise after raising a spoonful of food to her lips. She would have felt it quite wrong to partake in what was obviously a considerably rare meal, but they were both eyeing her so expectantly that she felt it would be worse to refuse. "You have quite a gift, Hermione."

"Thank you," Hermione replied briskly, looking pleased. "I know that, of course," she added, "but Theodore here could certainly do with some reminding—"

"I took her in, you know," Theo announced loudly, nudging Daphne and then making a face at Hermione. "And does she show any gratitude whatsoever?"

"Oh, please," Hermione sighed impatiently. "You were eleven, you didn't take me in—"

"We took each other in, then," Theo corrected himself, "but I showed you the art of the con, didn't I?"

"No, you're simply a lunatic," Hermione replied, "and I made that work to our advantage."

"So you're both orphans, then?" Daphne asked tentatively, and Theo and Hermione nodded in concert, exchanging somewhat fond glances.

"No idea who my parents are," Theo supplied, taking another bite. "Been on the street as long as I can remember."

"I, on the contrary, know perfectly well who my parents are," Hermione said, making a face. "Which is a very kind set of nobodies, unfortunately."
"Hm," Daphne said pleasantly, taking another bite; she glanced up to realize the other two were
eyeing her closely, both tapping their mouths in an absurdly identical motion that must have been
adapted after years of close quarters. "What?" she asked, and Theo reached out, resting a hand on
her shoulder.

"So," he prompted, nodding at her. "What's your story, then?"

Ah.

"Well," Daphne said slowly, "I'm—I have a very strict father," she explained. "He's—he's making
me do something I don't want to do."

"Parents," Hermione said, yawning. "Total control issues, the lot of them."

"My mother died a few years ago," Daphne continued. "And I'm going to inherit the—"

She paused, watching Theo and Hermione lean forward.

"—farm," she finished. The other two glanced skeptically at each other, clearly not buying it.

"Okay," Theo said uncertainly. "And I take it there are conditions to your inheritance?"

"Yes," Daphne admitted unhappily. "My father and his, er, crop advisor are forcing me to, um—"
she withered. "Well, they want me to get married," she confessed, feeling silly. "But it has to be
someone who has an equally important . . . farm."

Theo, Daphne noted, fell silent at that.

"Oh," Hermione remarked, her lips settling into a frown. "Well," she ventured, processing the
information over a bite of stew, "can't you just say no?"

"Unfortunately, I can't," Daphne lamented, shaking her head. "There's sort of no 'saying no' to my
father under any circumstances." She glanced at Theo, waiting for a reaction for him, but she didn't
get one; or, at least, not one she could determine. "In the end he's selling me off to the highest
bidder, I think," she concluded, "and I'll just have to hope it's someone who isn't completely
awful."

"Well, that is one thing we don't have to worry about, at least," Hermione declared, rising to her
feet with her empty bowl in hand. "I mean, we do have a hundred problems, but—"

"Ninety-nine," Theo corrected, tilting his head at Daphne and smirking. "An arranged marriage
isn't one."

Hermione shrugged her agreement, wandering into the kitchen; in her absence, Theo turned to
Daphne, eyeing her expectantly.

"So," he said. "Want to see something?"

She nodded, and he smiled, leaping to his feet and holding his hand out for hers. "Do you trust
me?"

She shook her head. "Not at all," she lied, accepting his proffered hand.

"Perfect," Theo pronounced definitively, pulling her up. "You're learning."
Theo still couldn't fully see her face, but he was already certain she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen in the presence of. There were certain glints of prettiness every now and then, of hazel eyes and richly dark auburn hair that spilled forward onto her cheek, but there were other things, too—intangibles, really, that he didn't know how to explain. The softness of her touch, the graceful angle of her shoulders; the way she smelled like jasmine and sandalwood, like things he'd seen before in shops that even he wouldn't deign to steal from, but also like summer breezes and fresh rain—like longing and comfort all at once.

Whoever she was, she was definitely beautiful, and she was without question the finest thing he'd ever held within the palms of his nimble thief's hands, her slender fingers lining his as he drew her along in the wake of a late autumn sunset.

He pulled her back in towards Hogsmeade, taking her between the darkened alleys and pulling her against his chest to keep her away from the crowds of other vagrants; he helped her up onto the roofs and then towards the highest point he could find—the castle in the distance.

"Wait," she said, squeezing his hand to pull him to an abrupt stop as she must have mapped their trajectory. "We—we can't go there."

"Why not?" Theo asked, confused. He turned to her, seeing genuine fear in her eyes as she looked at the castle spires. "We won't get caught, I promise—"

"It's not that," she said, pulling her hood closer around her face. "We just—I can't go there."

Theo turned to her, gently drawing a thumb over the line of her cheek. "Okay," he agreed, and she instantly relaxed, leaning in at his touch. "Are you—" he paused. "Do you live there?"

"No," she said stubbornly, in what was clearly a lie. "I told you, I have a farm."

He shook his head, helplessly amused. "Right," he agreed, and then settled himself onto the top of the thatched roof they'd been crossing, sitting above the village tavern and overlooking the town square. "Here, then?"

"Sure," she agreed, settling down beside him. She had an unmistakable grace about her, a care to her movements, and he shook his head again at the laughable concept that she'd ever even seen a farm before in her life, much less lived on one. She leaned back, her eyes on the setting sun. "It's beautiful up here," she murmured, and Theo glanced at her, wishing with an insuppressible wonder that he could see the profile of her face.

"You know," he said slowly, "I understand why you feel like you can't say no to your father." He paused, and she turned to him, giving him a rare glance of a portion of her wide hazel eyes. "At least, I think I do," he offered hastily, "but I also think you might have more to gain by finding a way to prove yourself."

He caught a grimace. "It's not that simple," she told him, reaching up to toy self-consciously with her hood.

"I'm sure it's not," Theo agreed. "But then, neither are you, right?"

He thought he might have been rewarded with a smile. "You know, it's a pity a man like you doesn't have a farm," she commented wistfully, and Theo wanted to laugh but felt instead a jolt in his chest; another tug of longing.

"I often say that myself," he agreed, and she nudged him, chuckling. "Tell me your name," he suggested, and she shook her head.
"I can't," she told him. He pouted.

"Tell me where you're from, then."

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"I saved your life."

"You saved my hand—"

"Still."

"No."

"Just tell me something about who you are," he begged. "Anything—"

She hesitated. "You don't understand," she protested. "I can't—"

"Why not? Nobody's listening," he pointed out, gesturing to the street of wandering villagers who hadn't the privilege of watching things above them, lacking both the time and compelling sense of wonderment. "And I wouldn't tell."

"I just can't," she said again, and Theo frowned.

"But—"

"You'd hate me," she interrupted, glancing down at her hands. "Really, Theo," she said softly, "just—" she bit her lip, toying with her fingers. "Please," she whispered tentatively. "Please don't make me—"

He leaned forward then, reaching out to cup his hand around the cheek he could only partially see and pulling her towards him, helplessly bringing her lips to his. She gasped slightly, going rigid for a moment, but then she slowly gave in, kissing him back with a careful sort of awe, full of fear and shock and wonder. Theo slid his hand back along her jaw, carefully bringing his fingers to her hair; he slipped his hand along the soft waves that fell around her shoulders and then nudged the hood back from her head, leaving her exposed for the first time.

His eyes fluttered open, desperate for a glance; he took in the sight of her, the dark richness of her hair shining like the aged mahogany of the woodworkers' shops in contrast to the ivory peerlessness of her skin, and he couldn't help admiring her, wondering if she were a painting brought to life.

A painting, in fact, that he'd seen before, he suddenly registered with confusion; a painting of a girl who wore a circlet of braided gold in her hair just like hers. A delicate crown of gold, just like the one beneath his fingers—just like—

Just like this one -

"Princess," he gasped, startled, yanking himself away and scrambling back on the roof. "You're—you're Princess Daphne—"

Her hazel eyes widened, her hand flying to her swollen lips and floating over the rosy petals of her
cheeks. "Theo," she ventured hoarsely, "please—I told you, I'm just—please—"

He stared at her, breathing hard. "You shouldn't have let me do that," he whispered, suddenly feeling wildly exposed for what he was; a shabby, inadequate street rat, and a hollow shell of a thief. "I—I thought you were wealthy, sure, and maybe a noble, but—"

"Theo," she said, blinking tears from her eyes. "I'm—I'm so sorry, but I couldn't—"

"It's the princess!" one of the guards shouted from below, pointing up at them. "Princess Daphne!"

A dozen sets of eyes swiveled to them and Daphne looked helplessly at Theo, tugging the hood back over her head. "Please get me out of here," she begged him, looking fearful, and he forced himself to nod, reaching for her hand and taking off at a run towards the castle.

He took her up to the castle walls, using a series of leaps between balconies and finishing with a climb up a lattice across the outside stone before pulling her up, setting her down lightly on the uneven floor of one of the castle's many balconies.

"There," he said stiffly, his face still unnervingly pale. "Your Highness," he added, pairing the awkward use of her title with a severely uncomfortable-looking bow that made Daphne want to scream.

"Theo," she pleaded, taking a step towards him. "Don't do this, please—"

"Do what?" he countered, forcing a false smile that made her long for his easy grin.

"Theo," she said again, letting the hood fall back as she reached for him. "Please, I—I'm sorry I lied to you," she whispered. "I know it was wrong, but if you could just try to understand—"

"Wait," he interrupted, blinking. "You think this is—about you?"

"Isn't it?" she asked, chewing her lip. "Are you angry?"

"No, I'm—of course I'm not angry!" he protested, furrowing his brow. "I'm just—I'm a street rat, Daph- Princess," he amended quickly, gesturing to himself. "And you—you could have been in real danger, and I just—"

"Theo," she sighed, taking his face in her hands until he'd quieted, helplessly meeting her eye. "Will you please just kiss me again, and tell me you'd keep me if you could?"

He stilled slightly at that, giving her a smile—one that was real this time, albeit more sad than the others. He leaned forward, his hands reaching up to twine between her fingers, and brushed his lips softly across hers.

"I'd keep you," he murmured, and then paused, kissing her again, "if I could."

She sighed, wishing she could stay there; wishing for a way to know how to stay in his arms, to keep Tom out, to change her father's mind; to be happy without being selfish, to love her kingdom without being a slave to its traditions.

In Theo's arms, she wished for impossible things.

They heard a sound behind them and Daphne jumped, inhaling sharply in alarm. "You should probably leave," she whispered to him, and he let out a breath, nodding slowly.
"Maybe someday, Princess," he suggested softly, taking a few steps back before regrettfully releasing her hand. "Give me that much?"

She nodded, knowing with an unbearable sadness that a hastily promised maybe was all it could ever be. "Maybe someday," she agreed, and then she quickly tore herself away without looking back, bounding down the stairs and resolutely hoping her father was not in the mood to shout.

"Have you heard about this?" Hermione asked, holding up a piece of parchment. "Apparently there's a tournament to win your princess's hand in marriage."

"What?" Theo demanded, grabbing it from her. "Give me that—"

"You can't enter," Hermione informed him lazily. "Have to be invited."

"Maybe you lost my invitation!" Theo retorted, glaring at her. "I have to enter," he added, scanning the page. "You heard her—she doesn't want to be won like this—"

"Why would you think she even wants to hear from you?" Hermione prompted, sitting up to look at him. "She knows where to find you, you know," she reminded him, "and it's been, what? A couple of weeks?"

"A month," Theo said grimly, and Hermione smirked.

"My point exactly," she informed him, lying back down with a yawn. "I think you built it up in your head, Theodore."

"No," Theo protested, shaking his head. "No, I didn't—it was real, Hermione, and she would want me there, I know it—"

"Two things, before you get ahead of yourself," Hermione interrupted. "One, your lack of title," she said primly, and Theo grimaced. "As a reminder, you're nobody."

"Thanks, I'd forgotten," Theo muttered. "And the second thing?"

"Your lack of ability," Hermione determined flatly. "You're not a wizard," she pressed, "and this is a magical tournament."

"I could learn," Theo insisted, still staring at the page. "I mean really, how hard can it be?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Not hard at all, I'm sure," she sighed. "Pick it up overnight, no problem, at the same market you can find that royal title you need—"

"Pick it up," Theo echoed suddenly, setting down the parchment to stare at her. "You mean . . . steal it?"

Hermione's face fell, realizing what she'd just done.

"Oh no," she groaned, and Theo's smile broadened.

"The tournament is happening, Daphne," King Viridian said blankly. "There's nothing you can do."

"But Father," Daphne protested, "I thought we agreed—"

"Now, now, Princess," Tom cut in silkily, smirking at her. "Surely you can't be surprised that after
a month's worth of planning, your father has chosen to proceed?"

"But we talked about this," Daphne said, throwing herself at her father's feet. "Father, you said you
would give me some time to come up with an alternative," she pleaded desperately, taking his
hand, "you agreed that I could have a say—"

"I changed my mind." Viridian replied, blinking slowly. "The entrants will be arriving tomorrow,
Daphne, and there will be no further delays."

"Father, please," Daphne protested, but as she looked at his face, she registered with a jolt that he
wasn't listening—that, in fact, he likely wasn't even hearing her. "You," she realized frantically,
struggling to her feet to round on Tom. "You did something to him—a curse," she guessed,
gasping, "an Imperius or something—it had to have been you—"

"I certainly did no such thing," Tom mused, turning slyly to Viridian. "Did I, Your Majesty?"

"No," Viridian replied dully, his expression unchanging. "You did not."

Daphne gritted her teeth, more convinced than ever; she reached for her wand, aiming it hastily at
Tom's chest. "This is a crime, Tom, and it's treason, at that—"

Tom arched a brow, watching her impassively. "Careful, Princess," he drawled in warning,
unfazed. "Or do you not have a sister to keep an eye on? A whole castle, in fact," he added,
gesturing around him, "of people you're sworn to protect?"

Daphne's fingers twitched on her wand, feeling herself go pale. "Leave them out of it."

"Oh, I'd be happy to," Tom assured her, cocking his head and smiling. "Believe me, Daphne, I'd
much prefer not having to expend my efforts harming people you care about—unless, of course,"
he added, inspecting his fingernails, "you give me a reason to."

He glanced up, smirking pointedly.

"I won't let you get away with this," Daphne said through gritted teeth, glaring furiously at Tom as
her father's eyes listlessly followed her motions, from the tip of her raised wand to her target. "I'll
tell everyone what you've done—"

"You can try, but I highly doubt anyone would believe your baseless accusations," Tom lamented
falsely, giving her a solemn pout. "Poor Princess Daphne," he murmured. "So insecure, so
paranoid." He took a step towards her and she shrank back, stumbling. "So in need of a husband's
guidance," he added, chuckling as he reached out to touch her cheek.

"Why are you doing this?" Daphne demanded, dodging his hand and ducking away, circling him
with her wand still raised. "Why do you even want this tournament?" she protested. "You haven't
entered as a participant—"

"I have my reasons," Tom said, shrugging. "The good of the kingdom, for one thing," he reminded
her, laughing again, "which seems to be more convincing a motive than ever, by the way—aren't
you simply proving, Daphne, how weak you are in the face of a more powerful threat?"

She glared at him, furious that he could be so smug. "You underestimate me, Tom."

"I actually sleep very well at night knowing that I estimate you perfectly, Daphne," Tom corrected,
giving her a cutting smile. "Do be careful," he warned, "that you don't underestimate me, Your
Highness."
Daphne glanced at her father, frowning with frustration as he stared vacantly back at her; she could see she’d lost the battle, but knew that in one way or another, Tom had done her the favor of declaring war.

"We'll see about that," Daphne muttered, lowering her wand and turning to stomp out of the room.

Hermione pulled the blindfold off the blond prince and took a step back, pulling at the ties at his wrists to test them.

"What the fuck," the prince spat, glaring between Theo and Hermione. "How did you get past my guards?"

"Quickly," Theo informed him. "And with truly remarkable dexterity."

"Who are you?" the prince demanded, frowning. "What is it you want? If this is about money, I assure you, my father will pay the ransom," he supplied, and then dropped his volume to mutter under his breath, "after he's had you both skinned alive, I'd wager—"

"This is not about money," Hermione cut in briskly. "Though we thank you exceedingly for the offer."

"What is it, then?" the prince demanded. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Well, no," Theo admitted. "But we know you're visiting to participate in the wizarding tournament."

"The tournament," the prince echoed, frowning. "Are you talking about the Daphne Games?"

"Is that what they're calling it?" Hermione asked, making a face. "Her father really doesn't have much tact, does he?"

"What does this have to do with Princess Daphne?" the prince pressed irritably, pulling at his ties. "I don't know her. I've met her—I don't know, twice, maybe," he grumbled. "My father told me I had to compete, so—"

"Here's the deal," Theo interrupted, crouching to meet the prince's eye. "I want to take your place in the tournament."

"What?" the prince asked, his face contorted in confusion. "But—why?"

"Well, there's more," Hermione muttered, and turned to Theo. "You should probably set out all your demands now, don't you think?"

"Are you telling me how to run this abduction now?" Theo countered, throwing his hands in the air. "I thought you said you wanted no part of this operation!"

"I'm just saying—"

"Excuse me," the prince cut in snottily, glaring between them. "Would someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?"

"I want you to let me impersonate you for the tournament," Theo said, and at Hermione's prodding, he rolled his eyes. "And I also want you to teach me how to win it."

The prince blinked vacantly at him. "You're joking."
"No, sadly, he isn't," Hermione said. "And believe me, I tried to point out how stupid this was, but he really isn't a particularly skilled listener."

"I'm a good learner, though," Theo insisted. "And I've seen duels. How hard can they be?"

The prince's eyes widened. "Pretty fucking hard," he suddenly shouted, looking infuriated as he renewed his struggle against his restraints. "How do you even know I'm good enough to help you win?"

"You sort of have a look to you," Theo said, waving a hand over him. "Sort of an 'if I don't win, I'll lose my shit' kind of an aura—"

"And we heard the villagers talking about you," Hermione continued. "They say you've never lost a duel."

"Well, I haven't," the prince sniffed obnoxiously, "but that doesn't mean I can teach you how to win."

"Say for purposes of experimentation that you can," Theo offered brightly. "Will you?"

"Or what?" the prince countered, glowering at him. "You'll kill me?"

"Actually, I'll keep you right in that chair and force you to listen to this one prattle on about nothing," Hermione said, gesturing roughly in reference to Theo. "A fate worse than death, I assure you."

The prince stared at them, blinking slowly.

"Listen," he announced pompously. "I'm Draco Malfoy, crown prince of—"

"Don't care," Theo cut in, and the prince—Draco—growled in irritation.

"I'm trying to tell you that I've been instructed to compete in this tournament, but that I don't really care for the thought of the marriage," Draco snapped. "It's bad diplomacy not to accept the invitation," he explained, "but I could certainly do without the betrothal."

"Why?" Hermione asked, making a face. "Needing to sow your wild oats, are you?"

"No," Draco retorted. "I'd just rather know my wife before I marry her. Is that a crime?"

"No, this is a crime," Hermione corrected him, gesturing to where he was tied to the chair.

"I'm aware of that!" Draco shouted, glaring at her.

Theo leaned towards Hermione. "What do you think?" he asked her. "Should we cut him loose?"

"Yes, you should fucking cut me loose," Draco said impatiently. "I just agreed to help you, didn't I?"

"We're having a private conversation," Hermione told him. "Please don't interrupt."

"Oh for fuck's sake—"

"I suppose we could," Hermione said, turning back to Theo. "If you think we can trust him."

"Well, he'll need his hands if he's going to teach me to duel," Theo said pointedly, and she nodded,
making a face. "So perhaps it's a necessity of sorts."

"Look, I'm bored, okay?" Draco said loudly, glancing between them. "This sounds fun, I guess, or—I don't know. More fun than having to marry some stuffy princess, at least—"

"Hey," Theo snapped, brandishing a finger at him. "Watch it."

"What are your names?" the prince asked, apparently sampling a different tactic. Theo and Hermione exchanged glances.

"Felix," said Theo.

"Wynona," Hermione supplied.

The prince scowled. "Those are not your names."

"To be honest, I really don't understand Wynona," Hermione admitted, and Theo shook his head at her.

"I keep telling you, she just is," he insisted, "and as for you—" He turned back to the prince. "What does it matter what our names are?"

"I'm simply trying to make sense of this," Draco retorted, sulking. "Let me guess," he added, jabbing his chin at Theo. "You want to be king?"

"Well, it wouldn't be the worst thing, but no," Theo corrected. "Actually, I'm in love with the princess."

"Love is a strong word," Hermione muttered, and Theo turned to her.

"I'M IN LOVE WITH THE PRINCESS," he repeated emphatically, and she made a face, shrugging him away.

"Oh," Draco said, blinking. "So, then you two aren't—"

"Us?" Hermione asked, gagging. "No. I've known him since I was eleven years old," she explained, "and he's the worst person I've ever met."

"That's true," Theo agreed.

"You're the second worst," Hermione said to Draco, and he leaned back, offended.

"I beg your pardon-"

"So you're in, then," Theo said, eyeing him. "You'll help me win the tournament so I can prove I'm worthy of Daphne?"

Draco hesitated a moment, thinking, and then glanced at Hermione. "You'll make sure he doesn't do anything stupid?"

"Excuse me?" Theo interrupted. "Do you know how many people she's set on fire? One," he answered himself, "but still, that should be plent-"

"Yeah, I'll be here," Hermione grunted in agreement, though Theo could tell she was secretly pleased at her inclusion. "Though, let's be clear, I can't make any promises about his sanity—"
"Well, deal," Draco said resignedly, looked back at Theo. "Let's make you a prince, then, shall we?"

"Perhaps if we simply told someone that Tom has Father under the Imperius curse," Astoria suggested, slowly pacing Daphne's bedroom. "If we had him arrested—"

"He's too powerful for that," Daphne grumbled. "We'd have to catch him by surprise—and as much as I hate to say it, I don't think we can."

Astoria threw her head back, sighing. "But if we just told people what he was up to—"

"He'd just put us under a curse," Daphne reminded her. "I think the best thing we can do is let him believe that we're obeying his orders." She flopped back on her bed, groaning. "And as for this idiotic tournament—"

"Maybe it's not such a bad thing," Astoria ventured gently. "Maybe whoever wins will help us get rid of him?"

"I don't need help," Daphne protested stubbornly. "I need our allies to believe I can rule on my own, that I'm powerful enough to—"

She paused, sitting up. "I need to prove to them that I don't need a husband," she realized, gasping. *I think you might have more to gain by finding a way to prove yourself,* she heard Theo murmur in her mind, and found that despite her doubt, he'd been right. "If I can prove that, then they'd have to listen to me."

"But the tournament—"

"Exactly!" Daphne exclaimed, rising to grip her sister's hands. "Don't you see? The tournament is exactly how I'll prove it!"

Astoria frowned. "But how—"

"I'll enter the tournament to win my own hand," Daphne explained, leaning forward to grasp her sister's face between her fingers. "It's so obvious—I'll just add a fake name to the list of competitors. They're all supposed to wear masks, anyway—Tom won't know any better, and Father obviously won't notice—"

"That's all well and good if you win, Daph, but what if you don't?" Astoria cut in worriedly. "What if you get hurt, or you get eliminated?"

Daphne paused, considering it, and then gathered her nerve. "I'll win," Daphne said flatly. "I'll win because I have to." She glanced up, meeting her sister's dark brown eyes. "Will you help me?" she asked desperately. "I can't do it without you."

Astoria sighed, teetering on the precipice of agreement. "You'll need robes," she warned. "And a cover, and a code name—"

For a moment Daphne thought, inexplicably, of Theo—wondered where he was for a moment, as she often did—and felt a rush of warmth; of certainty that he'd approve of her plan, even if Astoria didn't.

"What?" Astoria asked, catching the expression on her sister's face and nudging her. "What will you be?"
Daphne thought of Theo's face, of his easy grin, and borrowed his confidence.

"Rook," she said simply, and Astoria fell back with a sigh, settling beside her on the bed.

"Rook it is, then," she agreed, offering Daphne a tentative smile.

"So," Draco said, rubbing his temple. "Last minute warnings—"

"When in doubt, cast a Protego," Theo muttered. "I've got it. Plus I've got all night to practice—"

"No, you decidedly do not," Draco corrected, scoffing. "I have to attend the tournament ball this evening, and I'll be expected to have my wand."

"Ball?" Hermione echoed, making a face. "How horrifyingly archaic."

"Agreed," Draco said. "Want to go?"

Hermione leaned back, alarmed. "What?"

Draco shrugged. "Both of you," he clarified, nodding to Theo. "Scope out the competition. That's how these things go, really: celebration, then subsequent annihilation." He smirked, and Theo felt apprehensively queasy. "You'd have to pose as my guests, obviously—"

"Wait, a ball?" Theo interrupted, finally registering the topic at hand. "For Daphne?"

"Yes," Draco said. "There's three nights of them."

"She'll be there?" Theo asked numbly. "Daphne?"

"Yes," Draco sighed, "but—"

"Done," Theo pronounced, leaping to his feet. "We're in."

"You probably can't actually talk to her," Draco warned, but Theo shrugged.

"I disagree," he sniffed. "We're in."

Hermione made a sputtered sound of protest. "I'm not in," she argued. "If you think I own a gown, for one thing—"

"Easily taken care of," Draco determined briskly, gesturing for Theo to return his wand and then holding it above Hermione's head, hesitating for a moment. "What color?" he asked, and she blanched.

"Red," she said. "No, blue—no, wait, purple—"

"Periwinkle it is," Draco ruled, transfiguring her old stained shift into an elaborate floaty gown, the material clinging intimately to curves that Theo had not previously realized Hermione possessed. "That looks nice," Draco said, impressed. "You look—"

"Watch it," Hermione warned, narrowing her eyes, and Theo grinned.

"She loves compliments," he warned Draco. "Adores them. Handles them with impeccable grace, and—"

"Shut up," Hermione snapped without hesitation, but it fell a little flat, preoccupied as she was with
the finery she wore for the first time in her life. "Do we know who else is competing in the
tournament?"

"No," Draco said, shaking his head. "Looks like some kind of failsafe measure to be certain that
nobody wins by virtue of having the most money, or being the best looking." He nudged
Hermione, smirking. "Or I'd win by default, obviously—"

"So how are the competitors identified, then?" Hermione asked loudly, ignoring him to pick at an
invisible fleck of dust.

"We're ourselves during the balls, but we compete with code names," Draco supplied. "I'm"—he
paused—"you're, I mean," he amended, pointing at Theo, "Eagle."

"And the others?" Theo prompted, and Draco frowned, thinking.

"Phoenix, Griffin, Hawk, Rook, Vulture—"

"Wait—go back to Rook," Theo interrupted, turning to Hermione. "Rook?" he asked her, blinking.
"Is it just me, or—"

Hermione pursed her lips. "It's just you," she said reflexively, but he doubted she was listening; he
caught her eyeing her reflection in the mirror, helplessly running her hand across the silk of her
bodice and fighting a faintly girlish smile.

"Prince Draco," Daphne said politely, offering him a bow as he brushed his lips across her
knuckles. "Lovely to see you again."

"I imagine it is," Draco agreed, smirking at her. "Likewise, a pleasure."

Ugh, she thought, trying not to make a face. She shifted uncomfortably; the dark green silk of her
dress did little to aid the process of breathing, and the circlet of gold on her head seemed to weigh
more heavily than usual, woven through the complicated twist of her hair.

"Was the journey difficult?" she asked, forcing herself to make conversation.

"A bit," Draco said indifferently, waving a hand. "Was kidnapped for a bit," he added facetiously,
"but it was nothing I couldn't recover from."

"Hilarious," Daphne said grumpily, catching something from the corner of her eye. She turned
towards it, frowning, and thought she caught a hint of something familiar; a glimpse of a quick,
frantic movement, a narrow frame and a dark head of hair. She took a step against her will, drawn
after him—or what she thought had been him—but found that he had disappeared.

"Did you see that?" she asked, feeling her breath quicken. "Was there someone—"

"Hm?" Draco asked, and turned. Daphne caught a flash of what looked like periwinkle chiffon and
a flash of chestnut curls and paused again—was that—?

"You must be seeing things," Draco said quickly, stepping in front of where she was still staring,
the figures disappearing around the corner like phantoms from her memory. "Can I escort you for a
drink, Princess?"

Daphne felt her hope deflate, fizzling to nothing in her stomach. "Oh," she murmured, still staring
at where she thought she'd seen Theo. "Sure," she sighed, taking Draco's arm and forcing herself to
realize she'd only imagined it.

"You kidnapped a prince," Theo heard Draco drawl behind him, throwing an arm over his shoulder. "A rather talented one, I might add—and you learned some of the most competitive dueling techniques in a matter of days."

Theo said nothing, watching Daphne smile politely at a Scandinavian count.

"All for this girl," Draco mused. "And now," he continued, "you see her again, and yet—"

"She's not a girl," Theo cut in, shaking his head. "She's a princess." He glanced down at his hands. "She's a princess, and I'm just—I'm—"

"The only man in this room who really loves her, I suspect," Draco remarked, taking an indulgent sip from his wine glass. "Are you not planning to say hello? I was certain you'd have foolishly tried by now."

"I couldn't," Theo confessed, forcing a swallow. "Not like this. Not when she knows I'm only—" he grimaced, turning to Draco. "What if she doesn't want me?" he asked desperately, permitting a rare show of vulnerability that he was certain would be met with mockery.

Draco, to his surprise, considered the statement for a moment before turning, eyeing Hermione across the room; she awkwardly curtsied to a noble, her gaze traveling with panic back to where Draco and Theo were standing, and Draco chuckled, raising his glass.

"Then you'll have to want her enough for the both of you, I expect," Draco murmured, toasting Hermione from afar.

Daphne, dressed as Rook in a mask and hood that covered her hair, faced off against her first opponent, raising her wand from the opposite end of the platform. She glanced over at Astoria—who had unhappily agreed to assume her sister's form via Polyjuice Potion and was now quietly fidgeting in her seat between Tom and their father—and nodded once, firmly.

I can do this, Daphne told herself, passing the message along to her sister from behind her mask. Her hair was pulled back tightly and her chest bound, but she found that even with those adjustments the mobility from her dueling robes was far greater than it had been in the silk dress the night prior.

She could only hope she wouldn't suffer any false projections of Theo today. She suspected she wouldn't be much aided by the distraction.

Her opponent, Vulture—who couldn't fully hide his prominent brow—took a bow, angling his wand at her; he was considerably taller than she was, and Daphne wondered whether she should have procured herself some kind of magical lifts.

Her father rose, gesturing to them. "Challengers ready?" he prompted, and Daphne and Vulture both bowed. "You will disarm only," he warned, and they nodded. "On my wand," King Viridian announced, raising it. "One—two—three—"

Descendo, Daphne commanded silently, aiming her wand at the ground and watching it splinter and cave between them, prompting Vulture to slide down to the base of the now-parabolic platform. If she were going to make it through all the rounds of this tournament without getting caught, she had no time to waste; she abandoned her position and ran, hoping to catch Vulture
before he was able to regain his footing.

No such luck; he was quicker than she had given him credit for. He aimed his wand at her oncoming form and threw an expelling curse in her direction, forcing her to leap aside as he levitated himself back onto the platform.

"Deprimo," Vulture shouted, blasting a hole between them. Daphne, coughing up the dust of the splintered platform, quickly saw the opportunity provided by the blast and disillusioned herself, leaping over it and landing, with some unsteadiness, on the upper edge of his side of the platform. Vulture stared into the dust, aiming another blasting curse where she'd been, and Daphne smiled to herself, knowing she had him.

Expelliarmus, she commanded silently, careful to not let her voice be heard; Vulture's wand promptly spiraled out of his hold, landing in her outstretched hand. She quickly dispelled her disillusionment charm and raised Vulture's wand in the air, turning to smugly address her father.

"Rook is the winner," King Viridian announced, rising to his feet. On his right, Astoria leapt up in her seat, showering Daphne with applause and then, promptly remembering whose face she'd temporarily borrowed, dropping back with an amended grace.

Beside the king, Tom's eyes narrowed. Daphne dropped into a bow, hiding an insuppressible smile.

Theo faced off against Phoenix, panting unsteadily as he ducked the loud reductor curse from his first opponent.

Dueling is an art form, Draco had explained, drilling rhythm into Theo's movements. A spell for a spell, like a dance -

Theo dodged quickly, wincing as he felt his opponent's curse singe the side of his robe. He was breathing hard, exhausted and thoroughly out of his element, and was only now realizing that Draco had been right. Magic wasn't hard, that much was true; but dueling—at least the way Draco did it—was certainly no easy feat.

Theo threw a desperate disarming spell at Phoenix, hoping to get it over with; the other man dissipated the spell in one motion, shaking his head and raising his wand as he sensed Theo's weakness.

It had become clear that Theo was going to lose.

Theo was going to lose.

You kidnapped a prince, he heard Draco say, and you learned some of the most competitive dueling techniques in a matter of days, all for this girl -

All for nothing, Theo thought grimly, feeling endlessly foolish as he eyed Daphne's form through his mask as she hovered above him, dangling like the promise he could never reach. All of this, and I couldn't even look her in the eye -

Phoenix aimed another reductor curse and Theo rolled out of the way, narrowly missing it. Come on, he begged himself, prove yourself, prove you're good enough, prove you're more than—

He looked up, catching Hermione's face in the crowd. She was staring at him, wide-eyed with worry, her knuckles white as she gripped the arm of the hooded form of Draco beside her. "Come on, Felix," she yelled wildly, and Theo felt his spirits surge inexplicably at that, something
painfully obvious lodging itself in his brain.

He'd been going about this like Draco would. But he wasn't Draco at all, was he?

"Ah Wynona," he muttered to himself, grinning as he threw an arm up from the ground to release a thread of bright red sparks into the sky. "My violent delight," he mused, turning the sparks into flame and whipping the strand of it back, forming a wave of fire that circled upwards, drawing his opponent's attention above. "My savage cherub, my passionless darling, whom I treasure with relentless misery—"

"It doesn't make sense," Hermione shouted, but Theo smiled, staggering to his feet.

He trotted his way hastily across the stage, aiming an explosion at the distracted Phoenix's foot and watching the other man's head drop in alarm, blindly leaping out of the way. As Phoenix's arm flew out, flailing, Theo snatched the wand from his outstretched hand, raising it in the air with a yelp as Phoenix collided with the platform below, hissing in pain from the impact to his shoulder.

"Got it," Theo announced, watching Draco bury his face in his hands as the onlookers shook their heads, stunned.

"That's cheating," Phoenix spat from beneath him, but Theo shrugged.

"The rules only said to disarm, didn't they?" he prompted. "No rules on how."

"I—" Phoenix attempted, his brow furrowed beneath his mask. "But—you didn't—"

They both looked up, waiting for an official ruling; King Viridian paused for a moment, staring blankly at them, and then stood.

"Eagle wins the duel," he announced, and Theo raised his chin victoriously, preparing to dismount the stage.

"Hey," Phoenix ground out bitterly, holding out a hand as Theo tried to stride past him. "My wand?"

"You have to give it back," Theo heard Draco grunt incoherently, coughing the command into his palm. Theo sighed, indulging him.

"Here," he said, carelessly tossing it back to Phoenix and rejoining his two companions with a grin.

"Did you have fun?" Draco prompted irritably, glaring at him from beneath the cloak. "Was ruining my reputation worth the trouble?"

"Yes," Theo replied happily, "it was."

Distraction, and then a quick-fingered victory.

It was Theo's very favorite game.

Daphne rubbed at her shoulder beneath the fabric of her navy gown, making a face. She'd taken a hard fall during her second duel, and one that had nearly cost her the third—but she'd done it, and she was in the finals.

It had been an immensely successful day, though she had no idea how she was going to be expected to make it through another insufferable ball. One of the more self-aggrandizing nobles—a
man Daphne suspected she may have thoroughly bested at some point earlier that day—had yet to stop talking her ear off, and she wasn't feeling particularly thrilled with the way Tom was carrying on looking entirely too pleased, as though a weight were soon to be lifted.

She reached for a wine glass, watching Draco come into view. He had a familiar-looking brunette on his arm; Daphne frowned, trying to place her, before realizing that Draco did not look quite as haggard as the other people in the room. Perhaps he was the elusive Eagle, then, whom she was supposed to face tomorrow.

She tried to imagine being forced to marry Draco and had to fight not to make a face; though, he did remind her of Theo, a bit. Or, she corrected herself with a sigh, perhaps she was just seeing Theo everywhere she looked.

"Is it the wine that you find upsetting, Princess?" she heard in her ear. "I agree. Terrible year."

"Theo," she gasped in disbelief, turning, and he quickly pulled her into the shadows, his green eyes glinting as they settled on her face. "How did you—"

"No time," he interrupted, holding a finger to his lips in warning. "Do you trust me?"

"Not at all," she whispered, smiling, and he took her hand, pulling her along behind him until they came to an empty corridor, darting up one of the staircases to emerge onto a castle balcony.

"You've abducted me again," she panted when they arrived, trying to catch her breath and laughing. "What's with your affinity for high places?"

"A more worthy fall," he murmured in response, tucking a finger under her chin and smiling at her. "Are you enjoying the party?"

"Obviously not," Daphne said, shaking her head. "I've just escaped it, haven't I?" She rubbed at her shoulder absentmindedly, wincing, and Theo frowned.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, tracing the curve of her shoulder beneath his fingers. "Did I—"

"No, no, just—a long day, that's all," Daphne supplied, smiling weakly. "Rigorous activity, you know, watching people try to win me for a pet, or a decorative house plant."

"Ah, I would imagine so," Theo returned, giving her a teasing nod. "These farm owners, they must be exhausting—"

She rolled her eyes, taking a step towards him and resting her hands on his waist. "I missed you," Daphne sighed. "These nobles and princes—" she made a face. "They're horribly arrogant, and not a single one of them is capable of seeing me as anything other than property. To think one of them could be my future husband—" she shuddered, looking helplessly up at him.

"The princess said, in the arms of her thief," Theo joked, pulling her in closer. "If only they knew that the way to your heart was to be a penniless rogue," he murmured regretfully in her ear, his fingers following the line of her spine.

"Yes, a scoundrel," Daphne agreed, feeling light-headed as his hand crept up to the back of her neck, drawing her towards him. "The more deplorable the better."

He gave a little lamenting sigh of agreement, his nose gliding along the side of hers. "I hadn't heard from you," he commented, and she grimaced, nodding.
"I have some troubles," she admitted. "Some things that kept me away."

Theo leaned closer, brushing his lips against hers. "Tell me, Princess," he said quietly, and she fought a shiver, "were you free to choose, who would you have?"

She hesitated, battling the truth from escaping her tongue. "I'm not free," she reminded him, reaching up to run her fingers through his hair, "so it hardly seems worth mentioning."

"But if you were," Theo protested, and Daphne shook her head, taking his face between her hands.

"Please don't make me live a fantasy," she whispered. "I worry I'd never come back."

He seemed to understand that. He nodded somewhat sadly, and kissed her again; gentler this time, as if he also understood how close she was to breaking.

"What do you think of the last two competitors?" he asked, and she looked up at him, surprised.

"Have you been watching the tournament?"

Theo shrugged. "Something like that," he permitted, and cocked his head, waiting. "So," he said slowly, "what do you think of Rook and Eagle?"

She paused, thinking of whether she should tell him the truth; but then, deciding she couldn't chance anything, she merely shook her head, sighing.

"I think the right person will win," she said, and Theo nodded slowly, his hands tightening on her waist.

"Theo," she ventured, pulling back to look at him. "Would you keep me if you could?"

His smile flickered briefly. "I'd steal you if I could," he told her. "I've found recently that I don't care for giving things back."

She sighed. "But I do have to go back, don't I?"

His smile waned. "Maybe someday?" he asked her.

"Maybe someday," she whispered, resting her cheek against his shoulder.

The last round of the dueling tournament was not a duel at all; rather, it was a race through a labyrinthine hedge maze, and one that had been magically grown the night before.

"Why not a duel?" Theo had demanded, feeling irritable. "I'd just gotten the hang of them."

"Frankly, I'm relieved," Draco sighed. "I can finally stop worrying you'll simply steal all the wands and run."

"This is not about thievery or deceit," Theo reminded him, to which Hermione arched a brow.

"It isn't?" she drawled, and he made a face.

"Only circumstantially!" he snapped.

Theo—who had scarcely been able to breathe after seeing Daphne, much less capable of sleeping an entire night—was simultaneously exhausted and fidgety, shifting in place until King Viridian
had raised his wand, signaling for them to start.

Theo took off at a run, considering Draco's advice about blowing a fiery hole through the whole thing—"no," Draco had advised flatly, "do not do that"—before taking a sharp right turn, intent on reaching the cup.

If he'd gotten anything worth noting from his encounter with Daphne the night before, it had been that he needed more than ever to prove himself. She hadn't wanted to say it, but he knew that if things were different—if he could just prove he was good enough, even without a title -

He shook himself of his inadequacies, surprised at the lack of obstacles; he had expected to fight something, he thought as he turned the corner, or at least have to -

"Oh for fuck's sake," he said, careening to a stop as he encountered a frozen lake, nearly slipping on the ice. "What the hell happened to the maze?" he shouted, but to his dismay, the only response was his echo. He sighed, jogging back a few steps and then taking off at a run, using the levitation spell Draco had taught him for dueling to carry himself to the opposite end, landing in a forest clearing.

"Well," he sighed to himself, heading towards a narrow footpath that formed a bridge over a stream. "At least that wasn't too—"

He was cut off as the bridge promptly lifted itself from the ground, preventing his entry. Theo frowned, raising a foot to take a step, but then the bridge itself seemed to scoot backwards, dodging him.

"Okay, what's this?" Theo demanded, glaring at it. "How am I supposed to—"

He paused as a large cobra slithered out, stretching itself across the base of the bridge's entry.

"Is this your bridge?" Theo asked.

The cobra nodded.

"Does it help if I tell you I'm actually in love with the princess?" he asked, and the snake shook its head. "Why doesn't that help anyone?" Theo demanded at a growl, but at the snake's apparent lack of empathy, he sighed. "What is it I have to do?" he pressed, and the snake lazily aimed its tail at a bronze placard on the right side of the bridge.

Theo bent down, reading its contents aloud. "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three in the even- oh, for fuck's sake," he said again, glaring at the snake. "This riddle? Really?"

The snake appeared to shrug.

"It's man," Theo said. "A man, specifically, though applicable to all mankind—"

The snake slithered away, making a motion that appeared to say 'just go, you wizarding shit,' and Theo sprinted to the top, glancing out over the stream.

"There," he shouted to nobody in particular, feeling giddy at the sight as he located the trophy at the center of the maze. "I fou-"

He cut himself off as he realized that Rook was staring at the same point in what appeared to be a mirror image of his own bridge. Theo wasted no time in taking off running, following the path as it
led to the cup in the center of the maze.

"Hey," something that appeared to be a magical creature with mismatched parts interrupted lazily, holding out something that should have been a hand. "You're supposed to—"

"I DON'T HAVE TIME," Theo yelled, shoving it out of the way and then, for good measure, tossing a spell over his shoulder to create a barrier of separation, almost certainly burning down part of the maze.

"Hey," he yelled to Rook, seeing that his opponent was going to beat him by half a foot and aiming another poorly controlled curse—blasting, he guessed, though he wasn't entirely paying attention anymore—and watching the other man duck out of the way, unconsciously clutching his shoulder. "I need to—"

Theo stopped, catching a familiar motion in the way Rook carried his shoulder. Rook, he thought again, blinking, suddenly noticing things he'd missed before; the breadth of her shoulders, the angle of her stance, the grace of her movements—

"Wait," he called after Rook, chasing him—her—and tearing off his mask. "Wait, Daphne—"

She reached for the trophy, startled, retracting her hand as she saw him just in time for him to reach her. "Just," he panted, choking, "just let me explain—"

She tore off her mask with one hand, shaking her head. "I need to do this, Theo," she said flatly, and he nodded.

"Yes, I know," he began, taking her arm just as she took hold of the tournament cup. "But—"

There was a jolt, then, a pull, and some suction; and then, before Theo realized what was happening, he had suddenly hit the ground.

"Daphne," he croaked, coughing once as he struggled to sit up. "Where are w- "

She clapped a hand over his mouth, motioning for him to be quiet; Theo looked around, eyeing the graveyard and wondering when it would be appropriate to mention that this had been a rather morbid twist, all things considered—

"Well," a voice said, interrupting his thoughts. "What have we here?"

Daphne turned to Theo, her eyes wide. Hide, she mouthed, and he scrambled to duck behind a tombstone, waiting to see who would step out from the other side as Daphne's wand was silently ripped from her hand.

When he stepped out from the other side of the tombstone, Daphne couldn't help feeling endlessly stupid.

"You," Daphne spat, watching him catch her wand in his free hand. "I should have known—"

He looked surprised to see her for a moment, but quickly recovered.

"I suppose I should have known myself," Tom remarked lazily, arching a brow as his gaze flicked between her face and the discarded mask in her hand. "You did seem more palatable than usual, considering."

"What exactly was your plan?" Daphne demanded, eyeing the cauldron between them. "If you'd
killed the winner of the tournament, then—"

"You thought I planned to *kill* them? No," Tom said, scoffing, and then paused. "Well, yes," he amended, "but only after I'd used them first. You see, I'm a far greater opponent than you've even predicted, Daphne," he told her slyly. "I've been trapped in this worthless form—a laughable mimicry of what I once was, truly—but the winner of this tournament was going to provide me what I need to return to my true self." He tapped a finger against his mouth, looking endlessly pleased with himself. "With that final ingredient, I'd finally have the means to have the throne regardless of you or your father."

"But you have me instead," Daphne reminded bitterly. "So—"

Tom shrugged. "So nothing," he said. "All I need is the blood of my enemy, and you, as it turns out," he said, levitating her in the air and compelling her towards him, "are most *certainly* my enemy. Far more than anyone who might have simply been your betrothed," he added. "So I thank you sincerely for that."

"You can't do this," Daphne said furiously, struggling from her position mid-air. "It's one thing to make a foreign dignitary disappear, but you can't explain away my death—"

"Oh, but I won't have to, will I?" Tom prompted, smiling at her. "I assume Astoria has been in Polyjuice form while you've been competing in the duel, hasn't she?" Daphne struggled not to respond, but it was clear that Tom knew. "I'm sure I could compel her to carry on the ruse."

"She wouldn't," Daphne snarled.

"I said *compel her*, not ask nicely," Tom retorted, snapping at her before suddenly softening again. "I take it you didn't tell anyone else about your little plan, did you?" he mused, drawing her close enough to tuck a finger under her chin. "Sad, then, that there won't be anyone to disagree with my story."

"Don't do this, Tom," Daphne protested, trying to pull away from his touch. "You won't get away with it—"

"Ah, but I will," he countered, shaking his head as he set her down on the ground. "I will, because I have before. Aren't you curious, Daphne, who I am?" he asked, prowling a circle around her with his wand raised. "Who I *was*, I should say?"

His eyes flashed into something mean—something slanted and vicious and red—and she took a breath, realizing.

"You're Lord Voldemort," she gasped, and he smiled, offering her a bow.

"Yes, Princess Daphne," he said. "And it's about time you give me back my throne, don't you think?"

"Actually," Daphne heard Theo say behind her, his wand pointed at Tom's head. "I think it looks better on her."

The man who had called himself Lord Voldemort blinked, releasing Daphne to take a few steps towards Theo.

"Who are you?" he demanded incredulously, cocking his head in confusion. "You're not a prince, or a noble—"
"No, I'm not," Theo agreed, shrugging. "I find the titles burdensome."

Lord Voldemort paused, his face stiffening, before abruptly beginning to laugh, his wand rising to level with Theo's chest. "You're just a little street rat, aren't you?" he murmured, tutting softly. "You think you're going to defeat me, boy?"

"Well, I'm in love with the princess," Theo said, growing tired of having to repeat himself. "And I sort of already made a deal with myself that I'd win her hand, so—"

"You?" Lord Voldemort echoed dubiously. "You think a mask and a few flashy spells is enough to make yourself a prince?"

"I don't know," Theo countered. "Did you really think the 'blood of your enemy' was enough to make you a king?"

Behind Lord Voldemort, Theo watched Daphne slowly begin to move, bending to pick something up from the ground. Keep going, she mouthed frantically, and he forced himself to focus on Lord Voldemort, who looked more than a little infuriated by his taunts.

"I will kill you where you stand, street rat," Lord Voldemort hissed, prompting the roots of the cemetery's trees to bind themselves around Theo's ankles, holding him in place. "You think there's anything you can do to me?"

Daphne's fingers closed on a rock and she inched her way back to a standing position, carefully taking a step towards Lord Voldemort as Theo frantically tried to conjure a distraction.

"See, the thing is," Theo began, and then—nearly too late—felt an idea emerge; a distraction. His specialty. He turned to Lord Voldemort and smiled, beckoning to him. "Felix's deal isn't that Wynona is dead," Theo orated grandly. "It's more an issue of possession."

Lord Voldemort blinked.

"What?" he demanded. "Are you mad?"

"See, Wynona is possessed by evil spirits," Theo continued, "of which, frankly, I think Felix is one. It's a difficult relationship," he added. "Very complex. Many twists. Hermione doesn't quite understand it either—"

"Stop talking," Lord Voldemort interrupted furiously. "Who are these people?"

"Well, the irony of it is that Felix is himself somewhat of a demon," Theo pressed on, raising his volume. "A ghost, really. Yes, that's it," he concluded. "Felix is a ghost, right? And Wynona is alive, which you wouldn't expect—but, again, entirely possessed, as I mentioned, by evil spirits—"

"Shut up," Lord Voldemort roared, raising his wand. "Shut up, shut up, shut up—"

Daphne raised the rock in her right hand, holding it aloft in the same moment that Lord Voldemort slashed his wand through the air, aiming for Theo's chest; Theo forced himself to rocket backwards, falling with his feet still rooted to the ground to avoid the blow of Lord Voldemort's curse. He permitted himself one humiliating yelp of pain as he twisted around, just catching the sound of a dull thud before witnessing a collapse across from him—then the dust cleared and Daphne stood, triumphant, above the other wizard's unconscious form, her hair floating forward over her shoulders.

A moment passed in silence as Daphne and Theo slowly looked up to lock eyes, both trying to
process the scene before them.

"So," Daphne said eventually, breathing heavily as she brushed a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. "That's the deal with Wynona, huh?"

Theo stared at her. "Yeah," he croaked. "It's, um—pretty straightforward."

Daphne withdrew her wand from the heap that was Lord Voldemort's unmoving body, putting him in a full body-bind and then moving to release Theo from his hold, pausing to kneel at his feet.

"Hey," she said, watching him slowly struggle to sit up. "You know that the reason I didn't come see you isn't at all because you're not a prince, right?"

"Oh, totally," Theo lied weakly, forcing a smile. "I presume it was—"

"The evil royal advisor and Dark Lord in disguise who put my father under a curse?" she prompted, gesturing behind her. "Yeah. That was the more pressing issue." She stood, reaching a hand down to help him up. "I'd choose you, you know, if I could," she remarked. "If you want to think about it for when we go back. To hell with my father," she added, shrugging. "I just won a tournament and knocked out a bad guy with a rock. I think I've earned the right to marry whoever I want."

"Well, slow down, there, Princess," Theo murmured jokingly, letting her pull him to his feet. "I think being a royal might ruin my reputation," he pointed out, "but, I suppose for you, I'm willing to consider it."

Daphne smiled radiantly, tucking her hand in his. "Maybe someday?" she asked brightly.


"It's a shame this tournament was such a waste," Daphne murmured, sipping her wine as she surveyed the dancers at the final ball, nodding genially to some passing royals.

"Eh," Theo said, shrugging. "Not a total waste. A good day for thieving orphans," he determined, raising his glass to where Hermione was dancing with Draco and then turning to grin at Daphne. "And for warrior princesses like you."

"My father does seem grateful to have his brain back," Daphne said, glancing at where King Viridian was sitting beside Astoria, looking shaken but otherwise content. "I think he's going to gloss over the whole identity theft thing we both pulled."

"Think I'll have his approval?" Theo asked drily, and Daphne shook her head.

"Certainly not," she snorted, "but I do." She took a sip of wine, smiling. "And really, that's all I wanted."

"Really," Theo remarked, turning to her. "That's all you wanted?"

She lifted her hand, gesturing to where his fingers had interlaced with hers. "And this," she admitted, giving his hand a light squeeze.

"Such simple pleasures," Theo said, and then leaned towards her. "And to think," he murmured, "I could have shown you the world."

"The world?" Daphne echoed, glancing askance to admire his easy grin.
"I could take you wonder by wonder," he clarified innocently. "Over, sideways, and under—"

"Ah," she interrupted knowingly, shaking her head as he smirked at her. "I want that too, then," she murmured back, nudging him. "I want it all."

"You're a swindler, Princess," Theo teased. "A veritable rook."

Daphne smiled. "Potato, potato."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: born from a Theo request from jackwhitesgirl (thank you!) and a Theomione bromance suggestion from delaqour on Tumblr. This is obviously not the Dramione one shot, by the way (there will be another) and hopefully the upcoming Disney one shots won't be quite this long—but either way, hope you enjoyed!
She saw him first from the window of her bedroom where she was curled around a book, catching sight of movement on the lawn outside her family home. He was wearing a slate grey double-breasted suit, a silk handkerchief tucked in his pocket and his arm hooked complacently at an angle to accommodate the small, white-gloved hand resting against the dark material of his jacket.

"She looks happy, doesn't she?" Andromeda said from the doorway, joining Narcissa at the window seat. "If a little smug."

"Who is that?" Narcissa asked, eyeing the man on her eldest sister's arm. "Is that the doctor she's been seeing?"

"Yes," Andromeda confirmed. "Dr Tom Riddle. Whom I'd be happy to thoroughly hate," she added, sniffing, "except he seems pleasant enough. If a bit too handsome."

"Too handsome?" Narcissa echoed skeptically, watching below as the man glanced askance at her sister, smiling politely as Bellatrix spoke.

"Isn't he?" Andromeda said, nudging her. "He comes to see her every Saturday, always with every hair in place. Always immaculate. And his face—" she shrugged. "Let's just say I prefer a man with dimension."

"He has dimension," Narcissa pointed out, tilting her head towards the window. "Look," she teased, "a nose and everything."

Andromeda made a face. "Yes," she agreed with a smirk, "very clever, Cissy, but still." She perched at Narcissa's feet, letting out a somewhat burdened sigh. "I've missed you," she said quietly, reaching out to brush the tips of Narcissa's fingers. "It's very dreary when you're at school."

"Well, I'm home for good, it seems," Narcissa reminded her, having finished earlier that month. "I'll be around until Mother and Father try to pass me off to some dull tweed-wearing highborn."

Andromeda laughed, tucking a curl behind Narcissa's ear. "They're pushing Rodolphus Lestrange on me," she muttered, feigning a gag. "As if I can't tell by looking that he's an unutterably boorish
"Ah, and to think you're the second daughter," Narcissa said wryly. "Imagine the the barrel they'll be scraping by the time they get to the third."

Andromeda shuddered in agreement. "Sickening, really."

They fell silent, returning their attention to their eldest sister as she flirted outrageously with Dr Riddle, his mouth curled upwards in a small smile as Bellatrix reached out to rest her palm against his chest.

"He's beneath her," Andromeda commented, arching a brow. "A tradesman, really, albeit a fairly rich one—but he seems to have Mother and Father wrapped around his finger."

"Hm," Narcissa vacantly agreed, watching Bellatrix extend her hand, a coquettish smile blossoming to delight as he brushed his lips against her knuckles. "And Bella?"

"Besotted, as you can see," Andromeda grumbled, waving a hand at the scene out the window. "He seems to be fond enough of her," she added, shrugging, "if the frequency of his visits are any indication of his affection."

"Hm," Narcissa said again, and then glanced up, hearing a noise. "Are Sirius and Regulus here yet?"

"Ah, yes, they very likely are," Andromeda sighed, rising primly to her feet. "Marvelous," she added insincerely, "as an injection of their specific brand of nonsense would be ideal." She gestured, waiting for Narcissa to join her and then threading their arms together, heading towards the house's main staircase. "We're doing lunch soon, I believe, so they should be—"

"We're here," Sirius yelled, the sound of his voice echoing through the high ceilings of the manor house's entryway and then dissolving to a yawn as he stretched up, smacking his brother in the face. "Andy, why is nobody throwing rose petals?"

"Sirius, hush," Andromeda scolded him, sharing a conspiratorial glance with Narcissa and then slipping her arm free to give their cousin a hug, lightly swatting at his shoulder. "We have guests, you know," she reminded him, pretending to be stern.

"Oh, you mean the man-shaped coat Bella's wearing?" Regulus prompted, gesturing outside. "We've already met."

"She's quite taken with him, it appears," Sirius remarked grandly. "And what's not to like, really? He's got arms, legs, a face—"

"Stop," Andromeda warned, brandishing a finger at him even as she struggled to rein in her smile. "Be nice, children."

"Ah, speaking of children," Sirius remarked gleefully, turning to Narcissa. "The youngest Black darling hath returned!"

"He says, as though he is not himself a scarcely sprouted youth," Narcissa sniffed, but Sirius' retort was interrupted by the sound of the footman, Ted, delicately clearing his throat.

"Lady Andromeda, Lady Narcissa," Ted offered in greeting. He nodded respectfully to each of them, subsequently engaging the dance of protocol with Sirius and Regulus, before letting his gaze drift magnetically back to Andromeda. "Your mother is calling, so If you would follow me, please.
"Ted, were you not planning to fetch us as well?" Bellatrix interrupted snidely, walking into the entry hall with her arm looped in Dr Riddle's. "Is it time for lunch, then?"

"Forgive me, Lady Bellatrix," Ted offered quickly, tearing his gaze from Andromeda's face to offer an apologetic bow. "I was just coming outside to——"

"No matter," Dr Riddle interrupted, smoothly unfazed. "It's a beautiful day, and there's no need to rush. Is there, my lady?" he asked, gently patting Bellatrix's hand and then looking up, catching Narcissa's eye. "Ah," he remarked, pleasantly surprised. "You must be Narcissa."

"I am," Narcissa replied, turning towards him. "And you must be Dr Riddle, then."

"Call me Tom," he invited, offering her a smile. "A pleasure."

She tilted her head, suffering an unexpected thrill of something odd as their eyes met. "Quite," she managed, the word fleeing swiftly from her tongue.

He had been handsome from her window, but up close, he was something else entirely; he was a breathtaking exercise in symmetry, a study in meticulous arrangement, born of a craftsmanship so refined it was nearly celestial. The angle of his cheek, the shape of his mouth, the particular shade of his eyes were nearly inhuman, the patrician arch of his brow so artfully angled that it was difficult to look away—and as he inclined his head, acknowledging her response, she felt her breath hitch, sensing trouble in the very motion of his lips.

Bella frowned, glancing between them with a narrowed glance, before looking expectantly up at him. "Well," she prompted impatiently, gesturing forward. "Shall we?"

The moment of reverie broke, and Tom laughed.

"We shall," he murmured, flashing Narcissa a final parting smile before accompanying Bella to the dining room, the smell of amber and sandalwood carrying on a breeze that she was sure she'd only imagined.

"Narcissa," Druella said sharply. "Are you listening?"

"Hm?" Narcissa asked, startled. "Were you saying something, Mother?"

"Always got her head in the clouds, that one," Cygnus remarked, nudging Tom beside him and huffing in disapproval. "I keep telling Druella we ought to put her to work," he insisted. "Stamp the daydreaming right out of her, I say, or else she'll never find a husband."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Tom replied slowly, glancing across the table at Narcissa. "I find a thoughtful woman to be a rather refreshing rarity. After all," he added silkily, "is it such a flaw to dream?"

"Ah, no, I wouldn't say that, per se," Cygnus assured him, backtracking hurriedly. Narcissa noted that Tom looked quite unsurprised by this behavior, and even a bit smugly pleased at the sight of her father floundering for approval. "Obviously we treasure Cissy's, erm, more fanciful eccentricities——"

"No, we decidedly do not," Druella grumbled briskly, admonishing her husband before turning back to her daughter. "She needs to come join the rest of us on earth, where we concern ourselves
with things like putting food on the table. And as I was saying," Druella pressed, "I'll need you to
join me on my visit to Malfoy Manor next week."

"Yes, Mother, of course," Narcissa assured her, nodding as Ted offered her more tea. "Whatever
you need," she sighed, nodding politely to Ted in thanks and then stirring some lemon into her cup.

"Tea, Lady Andromeda?" Ted asked quietly, the inflection ever so noticeably more gentle when he
spoke her name. Andromeda turned over her shoulder to smile indulgently at him, nudging the cup
closer for him to pour.

"Narcissa, dear, if you could please try to be a bit more attentive when we visit," Druella sniffed
impatiently. "I've heard rumors that Abraxas is on the lookout for his son Lucius. Oh, and
Andromeda," she added absentmindedly, "you'll need to come as well. Rodolphus is expecting
you," she explained, looking pleased, and Andromeda promptly knocked over the tea that Ted had
poured her, spilling it into her lap.

"Oh," she exclaimed, leaping back. "Oh, Ted, I'm so sorry—"

"Nonsense, Lady Andromeda," he assured her quickly, fumbling for a cloth. "Here, let me—"

"Get away from her," Bellatrix snapped, glowering disapprovingly at him across the table.
"Haven't you done enough already?"

"Bella," Tom offered coaxingly, turning to glance at her. "Need we be quite so harsh? It was just a
simple mistake," he added, his gaze flicking testingly to Andromeda's. "Wasn't it?"

"Yes, of course," Andromeda said quickly, and Bella, whom Narcissa had never seen take very
kindly to criticism, promptly painted a rather insipid smile across her lips.

"Well, perhaps it was," she said brightly, leaning over to cover Tom's hand with hers. "I suppose
my expectations that my sister not be horrifyingly disfigured by the help overtook my more
agreeable nature."

"It wasn't his fault," Andromeda repeated, nodding reassuringly at Ted. "Really."

"Yes, so true," Sirius drawled. "After all, how could he have done it when it was Andy who was
unabashedly staring at his—"

He broke off, choking, as Andromeda slammed an elbow into his ribs.

"Father," Narcissa ventured, turning to him, "may I be excused?"

"Books again?" Cygnus groaned. "This one," he muttered, leaning conspiratorially towards Tom.
"Always reading, night and day—"

"An excellent quality, I think," Tom murmured back, smiling at her, and Cygnus nodded quickly.

"Oh yes, yes, quite—"

"I just thought it would be a nice day for a walk in the gardens," Narcissa clarified, feeling an itch
to be outside; something about the air in the dining room was stifling and stocked with discomfort,
not the least of which being the implication that she could be unwillingly betrothed within a week.
"And if we're all finished here—"

"Yes, fine, go," her father permitted flippantly, and Narcissa rose without hesitation, eager to leave
the odd feeling of displacement behind her.

"You were in quite a hurry to leave," Tom remarked quietly, and she turned, meeting his eye with a somewhat forced smile. "I hope that it wasn't that the company was lacking."

"Where's my sister?" Narcissa asked, aiming for nonchalance as she checked expectantly over his shoulder, and Tom smirked.

"We do, on occasion, separate," he informed her. "My visits are intended for the Black family as a unit, not for her specifically."

Narcissa grimaced. "I'm not sure she'd agree."

Tom shrugged. "Bellatrix is, like you, a woman of her own mind," he commented. "She is free to interpret my intentions as she wishes."

"Perhaps you should be clearer with her," Narcissa retorted, facing him. "I don't appreciate you suggesting that you might be—"

"I'm not suggesting anything," Tom assured her smoothly. "I'm simply making conversation." He turned, looking out over the gardens. "A lovely time of year for roses," he noted, and Narcissa made a face.

"You didn't come out here to talk to me about flowers," she said, and he passed her a knowing smirk, shrugging innocently. "What is your interest in my family, exactly?"

"What's not to like?" Tom prompted. "You're all very fine company."

"That's not true," Narcissa said bluntly. "My father's an unapologetic sycophant, and my mother's a social-climbing parasite."

"Are they?" Tom mused, chuckling to himself. "I hadn't noticed."

"Yes, you have," Narcissa pressed, furrowing her brow. "You're smarter than they are, and you know it. Do you simply enjoy toying with them?"

"Who says I'm toying with anyone?" Tom asked, mockingly affronted. "Or that I'm enjoying myself, for that matter?"

"You're a doctor," Narcissa reminded him. "You have no business with a house full of doddering aristocrats unless you have something to gain from them."

Not surprisingly, he paused, teasing out his answer.

"You're very blunt, you know," Tom commented eventually. "An interesting quality to have picked up in a house that you seem to think is full of duplicity, don't you think?"

"Do you feel it gives you power to speak in riddles?" Narcissa demanded, frowning at him. "I won't play your games, Tom."

He smiled again, the motion slow and calculated, before tipping his hat to her.

"I suspect you will, Miss Black," Tom replied, retreating a step. "And I suspect further still that you'll like them," he added, the smile twitching once before he turned on his heel, promptly carrying himself back to the house.
Narcissa watched him go, feeling a little shaken; there was something very unnerving about him, and the way he seemed entirely out of place with his surroundings. Oh, he certainly appeared to fit in nicely, she corrected herself, scowling at the memory of her father's unrepentant groveling; but in doing so, Tom only distinguished himself further. He seemed so distinctly separate from her mother's mindless pureblood gossip and her father's constant showboating that it only served to highlight the many ways in which he was actually quite foreign, and entirely unpredictable.

She paused her reverie, hearing something in the grass. She turned, startled, to find that a snake, perhaps ten feet long, had slithered right up to her feet, prompting her to freeze in alarm.

The first thing she noticed about the snake was that it wore a gold monocle over one eye.

The second thing she noticed was that the snake seemed to be trying to communicate with her, which she found deeply unsettling; nearly as unsettling, in fact, as a snake bearing a monocle in the first place. The creature, sensing her hesitation, drew itself up, cocking its head slightly, and then seemed to beckon with what might have been its chin in the direction of the gardens, luring her away.

"I'm sorry," Narcissa said, glancing around. "Are you—do you mean me?"

The snake nodded.

"Are you quite certain?" Narcissa pressed, and the snake seemed to give her a look of supreme impatience, nodding again.

"I just—I'm not sure that would be the best—"

She stopped, cutting off as the snake dove forward; she had expected a bite, fearing the worst, but it only curled itself around her feet, herding her in the direction it had pointed.

"Okay then," Narcissa said, taking a step. "If you insist, but I can't be gone long—"

She sighed, realizing she was talking to herself. "Nevermind," she said, gesturing ahead. "Carry on," she prompted, and the snake, despite not having the capacity to smile, seemed to nod with satisfaction, pleased that she was at long last following instructions as it led her to the large willow tree in the garden.

The snake paused, checking over its shoulder, and Narcissa noticed for the first time a small door at the base of the tree that she'd never seen before, the handle shining with a crisp finished brass.

"What's this?" Narcissa asked, and the snake gave her a look, as if to say what on earth does it look like?

"Well, I can see it's a door," Narcissa replied, and the snake made a gesture that seemed to suggest it wished her to be more observant. "Are you trying to tell me that you need me to open it for you?" I don't have any arms, the snake seemed to say, so yes, that would be somewhat of a necessity.

"Well, alright," Narcissa said. "There's no need to be so snide."

Isn't there? the snake seemed to retort, and Narcissa pursed her lips, reaching for the handle.

"Okay," she said. "I suppose once I've opened it, you'll just—"
But she never finished her sentence. By the time she'd touched a finger to the knob, Narcissa felt herself swept into a vacuum of something unknowable, the ground vanishing beneath her feet as she began to fall.

Narcissa opened her eyes to a flash of a white crescent and a set of two sapphires, blinking above her. She reached up, squinting, and they promptly disappeared, swept back in darkness.

"Hello?" she called groggily, attempting to sit up. "Mr, um," she paused hesitantly, "snake?"

"She's a 'miss,' actually," a familiar voice corrected her. "Her name is Nagini," the voice added. "Not that such a thing should concern you."

Narcissa lurched forward, realizing with a gasp who was speaking. "Tom," she said with a groan. "What are you—why are you—" she stopped, taking him in. "What are you wearing?" she asked, noting that the dapper suit he'd worn had been replaced by a loose-fitted black shirt which gaped around his chest, paired with a set of black trousers and boots.

"Tom?" he echoed blankly, eyeing his fingernails. "Whoever do you mean?"

"I mean you," she said impatiently, rising to her feet. "And how do you know the snake?"

"Everyone knows Nagini," Tom replied. "The more pressing question is how you came across her, I should think."

Narcissa sighed. "Tom," she began. "I hardly think this is—"

"You keep calling me that," Tom interrupted, his eyes flashing. "Who is it you think I am?"

"I—" Narcissa stopped, shaking her head in disbelief. "Who is it you think you are?"

Tom brightened, offering her a bow. "They call me the Cheshire Cat," he said, straightening. "And you are?"

"I'm Narcissa," she said, "and also, you're not a cat."

"Ah, she's observant," Tom mused to nobody in particular. "Magnificent. Narcissa, you said?"

"Yes, which you know," Narcissa reminded him. "As we met earlier this afternoon."

"Seems quite unlikely," Tom—or, as the case might have been, not-Tom—remarked, offering her a languid smile. "But if you say so."

"I do," Narcissa said, and then looked around, realizing for the first time that she was not remotely where she had been. "Where are we?"

"This is the place," Tom replied. "There is no place quite like this place anywhere near this place, so this must be the place."

"I—" she stopped. "That's not an answer," she said cautiously, and he shrugged.

"It is an answer," he replied. "And further, I don't see how it could possibly be wrong."

"Yes, but, I meant more in terms of location," she clarified, and he looked around.

"North," he replied ambiguously. "In a state of confusion, it seems," he added, eyeing the canopy
of trees above them, and Narcissa sighed, giving up on him.

"Where's my house?" Narcissa asked, looking around. "Where are the gardens I just came from?"

"Past," Tom replied evasively.

"I meant—" Narcissa groaned. "Location."

"Ah," he said. "I thought you were asking where it was within the linear confines of time," he clarified. "Which is, to say, past."

She paused, gaping at him. "You're mad," she deduced with certainty. Tom shrugged. "We're all mad here, darling," he assured her, offering her a sweeping bow.

"Be that as it may," she pressed, nudging past him, "I need to get back."

"I suppose that if Nagini led you in," Tom called after her as though the idea had just occurred to him, "she would be the one to lead you out." Narcissa paused, waiting. "Though, of course," Tom mused aloud, "you can always abandon that plan altogether and simply agree to meet the King."

"The King?" Narcissa repeated, turning back to face him. "What King?"

"The King," Tom answered loftily. "You really must listen better, you know."

"Well, why would I want to find this King, then?" Narcissa prompted, looking around. "And where'd that snake go?"

"Nagini had business to attend to, I'm sure," Tom informed her, "but I'm quite certain she's around here somewhere. Perhaps if you took this road?" he suggested, pointing to a narrow path she hadn't noticed until that moment. "Seems the best way, if you're really so intent on trading here for there."

"I am," Narcissa said, bristling. "Quite intent."

"Very well," Tom said, bowing again. "Don't hesitate to call if you need me."

"I'm sure I won't," Narcissa informed him. "You haven't been very helpful at all, Tom."

He cocked his head, frowning. "This Tom you speak of," he ventured. "Is he quite as handsome as I am?"

Narcissa hesitated, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of an honest answer, but eventually sighed in resignation. "Yes," she agreed crisply, and turned to leave. "Thank you for your help—"

"Oh, and Narcissa?" Tom called after her, and she turned, waiting expectantly. "Do be careful, will you? There's no telling what you'll find out here."

She fought a thrill of something frightening, and new; the second that day.

"What does that mean?" she demanded, and Tom the Cheshire Cat shrugged, stepping back into the trees.

"Only that it'd be a shame for you to lose yourself in here," he murmured, and the last thing she saw of him was the glow of his smile, the whites of his teeth flashing amidst the shadows.
The path through the forest led to a small clearing after about a mile of walking; Narcissa, feeling her shoes start to pinch, decided to take a rest, frowning as she looked around.

"Nagini?" she called, hoping the snake would appear. "I'm not sure if I offended you, but if you could come back, I would really appreciate it." She paused, waiting, but heard nothing. "Nagini?"

"Oh, she's not here," someone interrupted, and Narcissa turned, catching sight of Sirius approaching through the trees.

"Sirius," she exclaimed, running to throw her arms around his neck. "I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you! A first," she added under her breath, but Sirius had already disentangled himself from her grasp, taking a step back just as Regulus appeared beside him. "Regulus!"

"Who?" they asked in unison, glancing at each other. Narcissa noticed, then, that they were in matching bright red pantaloons; items she'd never seen them wear, and which she was confident Sirius would rather die than be seen in.

"I'm sorry," she stammered, taking a step back. "Who are you?"

"I am him," Sirius supplied, and Regulus nodded.

"And I am not," he agreed.

Narcissa rubbed her temple. "Have either of you seen Nagini?"

"Nagini is very busy," Sirius said, and paused. "Though she is a lover of riddles."

"Yes, she feasts upon discourse," Regulus said with a nod. "Perhaps if we share one?" he suggested, his grey eyes bright.

Narcissa, at a loss, offered them a shrug. "Please," she said, gesturing for them to continue.

"Have you heard the one about the walrus and the carpenter?" Sirius asked, perching at her feet as Regulus moved to do the same. "There was a walrus, and a carpenter—"

"Quite," Regulus agreed. "And they lured out a series of oysters, and then gorged themselves upon them."

"Well, thank you ever so for preserving the element of surprise," Sirius snapped, admonishing him. "Now where's the riddle?"

"Perhaps a different story, then," Narcissa suggested. "Any others?"

Sirius paused, and then brightened. "The death bridge!"

"The death bridge!" Regulus agreed. "The three brothers who cheat Death, only to be claimed by him in the end."

"Again," Sirius said exasperatedly, "you've destroyed the purpose of the tale."

"Tell me anyway," Narcissa urged. "What's the riddle?"

"Simple," Regulus told her. "How does one cheat death?"

"They don't," Narcissa replied. "Isn't that what you just said?"
"The King would disagree, I think," Sirius cut in. "Perhaps he could change your mind."

"I'm not here to see the King," Narcissa informed them. "I'm simply looking for Nagini to help me find my way home."

"I would think you'd enjoy meeting the King," Regulus told her. "He's very shiny."

"He's . . . shiny," Narcissa repeated slowly, shaking her head in disbelief. "Well, while that is certainly in my preferred qualities for a person—"

"Another riddle," Sirius blurted out, and Narcissa turned to him, her lips pressed together thinly as she waited.

"Sisters three, and closely tied
Legacy and blood abide
Each sister with a heart in hand
Three hearts that interrupt a plan—"

"I don't know the end of this one," Regulus interrupted, and Sirius clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Good," he said flatly, and continued.

"Sister eldest, power craves
Sister second, love will save
Sister last, a myst'ry still
What favor does each fortune fill?

Sisters beauty, sisters grace
Sharp of mind and fair of face
Glory rising, glory run
A sister who has favor won

Two sisters selfish, two will take
One sister will her triumph make
Sorrow each, abundance lost
Each sister made to pay the cost

You ask a riddle, I provide
When sisters three at last collide
Which sister will outlast the fight
To that which brings us all to night?"

Sirius concluded with a flourish, eyeing her expectantly.

"I don't know what any of that means," Narcissa said, grimacing, and Regulus muttered something incoherent behind Sirius' hand.

"What?" Sirius asked, retracting his palm.

"I bet the King will know," Regulus clarified, and then pointed across the clearing. "Or perhaps Nagini does."

"Nagini," Narcissa exclaimed, rising to her feet and catching sight of the snake as she slithered down the path. "Nagini, wait—"
She picked up her shoes, waving at Sirius and Regulus. "Bye Sirius, bye Regulus," she shouted over her shoulder, "have to run!"

The two looked at each other, shrugging as she went.

"What an oddity," Sirius remarked.

"Quite," Regulus agreed.

Narcissa stopped, wheezing slightly; she was almost certainly lost. She'd strayed from the path over the course of chasing Nagini and she'd been no match for the snake's unrelenting speed, having long since lost sight of her.

"She's a slippery little devil, isn't she?"

Narcissa turned, startled. "Oh, Tom," she sighed in relief, and he pursed his lips in displeasure at the reference. "Erm, I mean—cat."

"You've lost her again, I see," Cheshire Cat-Tom commented. "At this rate, it might be easier just to go see the King, don't you think?"

"I told you," Narcissa said, catching her breath, "I have no interest in the King."

"Why not?" he asked, stepping closer to her. She felt her breath catch; Tom was no less handsome here—regardless of what he called himself, or, for that matter, where they were—and the black fabric of his shirt gaped appealingly against the contours of his chest. "You can't tell me story time with Tweedledee and Tweedledum was a reasonable use of your time," he scoffed, the corners of his mouth poised in a dubious grimace. "Nothing but nonsense and impending doom with those two."

"They told me a very strange riddle," Narcissa explained, frowning as she struggled to recall the details. "It was about three sisters, but none of it made sense."

"Ah, well, sometimes a riddle is just a riddle," Tom told her, his gaze wandering perplexingly over the contours of her face before settling on her lips, then rising to meet her eyes. "Though, of course, sometimes a riddle is precisely the answer you need."

"That," Narcissa remarked, "is not helpful."

"I'm the Cheshire Cat, not the Helpful Cat," Tom reminded her. "He's busy today."

"There's a Helpful Cat here?" Narcissa asked, and Tom shrugged.

"He's really very dull," Tom assured her. "Terrible company."

"Ah," Narcissa permitted, sighing. "Though, I presume, helpful?"

"Provided you ask the right questions," Tom replied. "But that's very often the trouble, isn't it?"

"They should call you the Unhelpful Cat," Narcissa muttered under her breath, and Tom smiled beatifically.

"Better keep going," he advised, gesturing to the path that she could now see again from where they were sitting. "Wouldn't want you to stray too long."
An hour on the path took her directly to a small garden, set very much as her dining table had been for lunch. Narcissa cast a longing glance at the pastries and sighed, feeling her stomach start to rise up in protest.

"Oh," someone said behind her. "You're here."

Narcissa turned. "Andromeda," she exhaled in relief, but stopped, eyeing the elaborate headgear that her sister wore. "Andromeda?" she asked hopefully, but her sister blinked, not sparing any recognition.

"I've been expecting you," Andromeda remarked, gesturing to the table. "You're the one the King is waiting for, aren't you?"

"I don't think so," Narcissa replied gently. "Do you know who I am?"

Andromeda stopped, her posture going rigid. "This is all wrong," she determined, staring down at the table setting. "I'll have to change it," she declared, busying herself with rearranging the plates and cups. "Move that over there, would you—"

Narcissa, not sure what else to do, began shifting the plates. "Over here?" she asked, reaching out to touch one of the settings. Unlike the others—which were a rather gruesome shade of scarlet—this plate was white, with a fine silver filigree around the outside. There was a crack in the porcelain, Narcissa noted, but by and large, it was the finest setting on the table, lain out with evidence of care.

"No!" Andromeda shrieked, reaching up to steady her hat with one hand as she leaned over with the other, slapping Narcissa's hand away. "Don't touch that one," she warned sharply. "Never that one, do you understand?"

For a moment the hazy vacancy had fled from her eyes, replaced with a bolt of violent rage; but as Narcissa slowly nodded her assent, the distinct sense of dottiness had returned.

"Now," Andromeda instructed briskly, "I think that one is wrong." She pointed to another setting. "Swap those saucers, would you?"

"Andromeda," Narcissa began, speaking to her as she worked. "What are you—"

She stopped, realizing her sister was not responding.

"Andromeda?"

Nothing.

"Er," Narcissa said, "Miss, um—"

"Hatter," Tom supplied, suddenly materializing at Narcissa's side and gesturing to the very tall floral arrangement that Andromeda wore on her head, crowning a wide-brimmed hat. "As you can see."

Narcissa jumped, frowning at his appearance, and then turned back to her sister. "Miss Hatter?"

Andromeda looked up, owl-eyed, and pursed her lips impatiently. "Yes?"

"Why are we doing this?" Narcissa asked gently, gesturing to the table. "Are you hosting a party, Miss Hatter?"
"So many curiosities," Tom commented, leaning against a tree. "Everything would go much more smoothly if you would just pay a visit to the King, you know."

"Will you stop?" Narcissa groaned, turning to him. "I'm trying to talk to my—" she paused, grimacing. "My new friend."

"She's not your friend," Tom informed her. "What she is is a rather eternally unsatisfied party planner who's merely getting fingerprints all over the dishes."

"Nobody asked you," Narcissa retorted, and turned back to her sister. "Miss Hatter," she prompted again, and again, Andromeda froze, blinking. "Why have you prepared the table like this? Perhaps if I knew what your intended arrangement was," Narcissa continued, "I could help you be certain that you've—"

"He won't come until everything is right," Andromeda cut in mechanically. "Everything must be in place, but once I've arranged everything perfectly, he'll come."

"Who?" Narcissa pressed. "The King?"

Andromeda blinked, straightening, and cocked her head.

"I think that one's wrong," she said, pointing to a place setting beside the one with silver filigree. "Those two shouldn't be next to each other."

"Okay," Narcissa said, fighting her frustration and consenting to move one place setting to another. "Where should I—"

"Careful!" Andromeda shouted, lunging forward as Narcissa reached for a small porcelain tea cup. "You mustn't spill!"

"I—it's empty," Narcissa said, frowning, but Andromeda had snatched it from her hands, cradling it in her palms.

"Be careful," Andromeda whispered, not looking up, and Narcissa, lost for words, felt Tom's hand close around her shoulder, leading her out of the clearing.

"My goodness," Tom drawled. "You have a gift for losing your way, don't you?"

"What happened to Andromeda?" she asked. "Why is she like this here?"

"I don't know who you're referring to," Tom replied chipperly, "but who's to say she's not like this in any other 'here'?"

"She's—" Narcissa hesitated. "She's mad here—"

Tom nodded. "Yes, but as I said, we're all mad here."

"She changed all the settings except for one," Narcissa said. "Nothing was right except for one place setting. She got so angry when she thought I—"

She stopped, realizing. "When she told me not to spill the tea," she realized, and then turned, looking accusingly at Tom. "Is it Ted that's doing this to her? Is he driving her mad?"

"Did you ever consider," Tom suggested, "that perhaps she's not mad at all?"
Narcissa frowned. "But—the way she was acting—"

"Perhaps you simply mistake her true intentions for madness," Tom suggested. "Is it possible," he added, "that she knows precisely who she's waiting for, and that madness is only in the eye of the beholder?"

Narcissa opened her mouth and then closed it firmly before opening it again.

"You," she declared, "are infuriating."

Tom abruptly stopped walking, pivoting towards her and swiftly bringing his face so close to hers that she nearly gasped, the air sticking in the back of her throat and molting to an unswallowable dryness.

"I've upset you," he commented, searching her face and then leaning away, nodding as though something he'd seen in her eyes had assured him that his estimations were true. "Curiouser and curiouser," he remarked, turning to continue down the path.

Narcissa stared after him and then picked up speed, jogging slightly to catch up. "What's curious about that?" she demanded. "Of course you've upset me. You've done nothing but antagonize me with nonsense all day."

"Again, beholding is a rather inexact science," Tom said flippantly, scarcely sparing her a glance. "I find it rather distressing that your particular process of beholding unfairly renders me less desirable than I might otherwise be."

"Desirable," Narcissa echoed, letting the word settle intently on her tongue, and Tom glanced askance, smiling.

"Beholding again," he murmured, his teeth flashing. "I hope it leans in my favor this time."

She held her breath, realizing they'd stopped walking. "I," she began, frowning. "I don't know what that means," she lied, and Tom smiled.

"Down there," he suggested, pointing to a sparkling palace at the bottom of the hill's sloping path. "If Nagini is anywhere to be found, she's likely down there."

"Whose palace is that?" Narcissa asked, shading her eyes to look. "Is that the—"

She stopped, realizing he had disappeared.

"—King's?" she finished unnecessarily, but sighed, finding herself alone. "Well then," she continued to the empty air, setting her shoulders. "Off we go."

"Hello?" Narcissa called, nudging open the door to the palace. "Is anyone here?" She paused, looking around. "Uh - King?" she attempted, frowning. "Your Majesty?"

Nothing.

"Is anyone here?"

She heard a sound and kept walking, aiming herself at the noise. "Hello? Is anyone—"

"FINALLY," she heard, a high-pitched wail that carried from afar before seeming to manifest in a spirited yawn. "IS SHE HERE?"
Narcissa heard a low sound of slithering on the marble floor, leaping back as Nagini promptly traveled past her.

"Nagini," Narcissa exclaimed, following her. "Nagini, wait!"

She chased the monocled snake through an ornate ballroom and past a decorative series of doors to burst into the palace's labyrinthine gardens, chasing the snake as it dove through a series of rose bushes. Narcissa reached out, attempting to follow, but promptly cut herself on one of the thorns; she recoiled with a hiss of pain, eyeing her hand, and noticed that the pigment from the rose's scarlet petals seemed to have leaked onto her palm.

She squinted at the roses, leaning closer, and realized that they had been recently painted; which, despite not being entirely normal, she deduced was no key detail to her search for Nagini. She stepped away, looking around, and began trying to circumnavigate the maze, attempting to find her way through it at a run until her gaze snagged on a set of distinctly familiar figures in matching red pantaloons.

"Sirius?" Narcissa asked, screeching to a halt. "Regulus?"

Sirius froze, his grey eyes widening as he slowly brought a finger to his lips, warning her of something over her shoulder.

Narcissa frowned. "What are you—"

"WHERE IS SHE?" someone bellowed behind her, and Sirius and Regulus promptly dropped to the floor in a nearly comical approximation of reverence as Narcissa turned, catching the eye of her eldest sister. Bellatrix wore an ornate gown which boasted a jagged, faintly warlike pattern lined in red and black, her lips stained a vibrant shade of crimson that twisted into a grimace of displeasure.

"Who are you?" Bellatrix demanded, righting the crooked black diadem that had fallen forward on her head. "Have you come to steal my roses?"

"What? No," Narcissa said quickly, eyeing Sirius and Regulus where they lay on the ground. "What's going on?"

"I know a thief when I see one," Bellatrix sneered, taking a few terrifying strides closer. "Look," she added, reaching out to clamp her fingers around Narcissa's hand. "You've been caught red-handed!"

"I—that wasn't—" Narcissa pulled away, jerking her hand free. "These roses are freshly painted," she retorted impatiently. "You should really put up a sign!"

"What, and aid would-be thieves?" Bellatrix countered, looking inflamed with fury. "How very dare you even suggest such a thing!"

"I—who are you?" Narcissa stammered, looking around. "Is this the King's palace?"

At the mention of the King, Bellatrix scoffed once, twice, and then promptly convulsed in laughter; she paused, glaring expectantly at Sirius and Regulus, and then they, too, offered up a matching set of weakly conciliatory chuckles.

"The King," Bellatrix sniffed, "will arrive any day now. I am simply readying myself for his arrival," she explained, gesturing around the garden, "and making certain that he will be rightfully impressed by my expert cultivation."
"But none of this is real," Narcissa protested, gesturing to the paintbrush that was still held in Regulus' hand. "Why would this impress a King?"

Bellatrix stiffened, taken aback. "You're right," she said crisply, and then looked down. "OFF WITH HIS HEAD," she barked, pointing to Regulus, and Sirius leapt to his feet, taking Regulus' arms behind his back and wrestling him up to drag his heels along the garden's maze of grass.

"Wait," Narcissa said frantically, leaping forward to stop him. "That's—you can't—they were both —"

"OFF WITH HIS HEAD, THEN," Bellatrix shouted, pointing from Regulus to Sirius, and after a moment's pause, Regulus promptly twisted his brother into a headlock, attempting to force him into submission. Narcissa, bewildered, quickly stepped between them, forcing them apart and then holding them each at an arm's length, panting from the effort.

"You can't," she began, and took a breath, "simply behead people, Bellatrix—"

"Can't I?" Bellatrix asked, lurching forward to take Narcissa by the hem of her collar, coiling her hand in the fabric of her dress. "I'm the Queen, aren't I?"

"The Queen?" Narcissa choked out, ignoring the sounds of Regulus and Sirius battling behind her as she tried to free herself from Bella's clutches. "Are you the King's wife?"

Bellatrix's gaze hardened. "I am the Queen of Hearts," she specified, drawing her hand down to press it to Narcissa's chest, the heel of her hand digging into her pulse as if to cement her point. "He is the King."

"Of what?" Narcissa prompted impatiently, but Bella wasn't listening; her eyes had grown wide, fascination stirring in the darkened orbs of her eyes as she captured the feel of Narcissa's quickened blood, tunneling under the claws of her nails.

"I would have yours," Bellatrix murmured, eyeing her sister through batted lashes. "Will you give it to me?" she asked sweetly, and Narcissa wrenched herself free, taking several steps back and nearly colliding with Sirius and Regulus as they continued to grapple with each other on the ground.

"You can't have my heart, Bella," Narcissa protested, but then, at the dangerous spark of mania that flooded her sister's eyes, she hesitated. "I mean," she amended quickly, "Your Majesty, I can't —"

"I can have whatever I want," Bellatrix snarled, stomping towards her again. "I'll have your heart," she raged, and then faltered, considering the prospect with an unabashed hunger. "And when the King is mine," she continued, a faint look of unhinged delirium settling itself in her gaze, "I'll give it to him as a trophy, won't I?"

Narcissa's breath stuttered. "You wouldn't," she protested, and then paused, chewing her lip. "Would you?"

Bellatrix flashed her a malignant smile, her wild eyes traveling down to Sirius and Regulus on the ground. "UP," she commanded, and they leapt at her command, springing apart like a boisterous pair of weeds. "Never mind each other." Sirius and Regulus exchanged a glance and then looked back at their Queen, nodding numbly.

"Now," Bellatrix murmured, her tongue passing delightedly over her lips as she turned back to Narcissa. "OFF WITH HER HEAD!"
Narcissa looked up groggily, feeling the strain of the shackles at her wrists that held her forcefully upright against the wall. From the shadows, two sapphires blinked at her, a crescent moon below them, and she squinted into the darkness, feeling a leap of relief.

"Tom?" she murmured hoarsely, and then corrected herself. "Mr Cat?"

Tom stepped out of the darkness and into the dim light of a single flickering torch, his teeth flashing as he smiled at her. "Narcissa," he mused softly. "In trouble again, I see," he said, luxuriating against the bars of her cell—from the inside.

"How," she began, and swallowed, trying again. "How did you get here?"

Tom sighed, somewhat exasperated. "Can't you tell by now, Narcissa?" he prompted. "I'm magic," he explained, hopping in and out of her cell to prove it. "If you'd been paying attention," he added, materializing in front of her, "you'd have caught that quite a lot earlier."

She grimaced, wishing she could rub her temples; her wrists ached, and she let out a sigh of resignation.

"Can you help me?" Narcissa whispered to him, eyeing the dingy walls of her captivity. "My sister seems quite intent on cutting off my head."

"She does, doesn't she?" Tom asked, quietly amused. "You seem to have set her off quite stupendously."

"I don't know how," Narcissa grumbled. "I only mentioned that painting the roses was hardly going to fool a King."

"Which the King will surely thank you for," Tom informed her, nodding pointedly, and Narcissa shook her head.

"I don't care about what your King wants," she told him. "I just don't understand why she's taken something perfectly lovely and tried to pass it off as something else."

"Do you really not?" Tom prompted. "Perhaps what you deem lovely, the Queen of Hearts deems unfit for the King's eyes."

"But why should that matter?" Narcissa demanded. "He's only a King."

Tom chuckled. "Yes," he agreed. "He is."

Narcissa let out an exhausted sigh, suffering an angry twist from her aching shoulders. "So can you help me?" she asked again, eyeing him hopefully.

Tom shrugged, considering her. "I can't make your heart any less valuable," he commented neutrally. "Nor can I make the Queen want your head any less."

Narcissa groaned wearily. "Nevermind," she sighed. "Obviously you can't get me out of here."

"Oh, that I can do," Tom corrected, nodding once, "but there are rules. The King will be very angry if he hears I let you go without giving him a chance to meet you."

"Well," Narcissa prompted impatiently. "What can I do, then?"

Tom took a step closer, tilting his head to take in the duress on her face; his blue eyes traveled
slowly over the curve of her cheek, and she wondered—fancifully—if his touch that was not a touch could still be felt quite as gently as she'd imagined it. "I'll make a deal with you," he offered quietly. "I'll get you out of here, _if_," he warned emphatically, "you agree to see the King."

It was enough to make her want to scream.

"Why does everyone want me to see this King?" Narcissa demanded, making a face. "And _what_ is he even King of?"

"Everything," Tom supplied, and then cocked his head to the side, reconsidering. "Nothing," he amended.

"He's not much a King, then," Narcissa grumbled, and Tom took another step, slipping a finger under her chin to look at her.

"Help me help you," he murmured, sliding his thumb along her cheek. "Would it be so awful to have a King, Narcissa?"

"I don't wish to be ruled," she informed him bluntly, though she was unable to prevent her hips from meeting his of their own accord as his breath skated promisingly across her lips. "I don't submit to his authority," she forced out, trying not to focus on how close he was to her.

"No, you certainly don't," Tom agreed, a flash of longing appearing in his celestially blue eyes before softening to something distressingly warmer, touched with a hint of intimacy. "For me, then," he asked. "Will you?"

She watched him swallow, circling restraint. "For you?"

His mouth was so close to hers. An inch would do it; a breath, even, or less. "For me," he agreed.

She tilted her chin up, the whisper passing from her lips to his. "Why?"

She watched his shoulders tighten in agony as he let his hands fall to his side, preventing himself from reaching for her. "Why not?"

"That's not an answer," she told him, and he gave her another punishing smile.

"It _is_ an answer," he began, and she shook her head.

"Tell me," she beckoned. "Or I won't agree," she warned, and his unyielding smile wavered.

"If I tell you that I rather selfishly want to see you freed," he offered slowly, "will you hold it against me?"

"Better than telling me you wish to see me captive," she reminded him, and he nodded, the air snatched from her lungs as he abruptly leaned away, eyeing her wrists with a grim calculation.

He reached up, tentatively, and then drew his fingers along the inside of her forearm, making her shiver. "I never wished for you in chains," he commented. "Though I suspect they're of your own making."

"Mine?" Narcissa asked, feeling her brow furrow. "Why would I put _myself_ in chains?"

Tom shrugged. "Perhaps the truth is that you don't trust yourself out of them," he ventured, and then smiled again, the motion unfairly languid amidst the turmoil simmering in her stomach. "Shall we find out?" he asked, and then, as he reached out, the shackles on her wrist shattered in a
moment of deafening silence, falling to the earth below like dust and blowing away on a breeze, the scent of amber and sandalwood dissipating with them.

Narcissa lowered her arms, testing her autonomy with a wiggle of her fingers, and then she looked up, meeting his eye.

"Kiss me," she suggested, and the smile twitched at his lips. He took a step towards her, delicately resting his palms on her waist before stretching his fingers out one by one, swelling up towards her ribs and circling the span of her breath, the core of her held—coveted—between them.

"If I do," he said, "you'll see the King?"

She sighed, rolling her eyes. "Yes," she promised, "fine. Kiss me, and I'll see the King."

He smiled his cutting smile—the arch of it tauntingly laden with secrets—and then his sapphire eyes fell on hers, drinking her in. He pulled her closer, his fingers spreading possessively across the material of her dress and digging into the skin underneath to lay claim to the roots of her; he leaned down, bending to join them, and as her heart raged against the hollow of her chest and he—softly, rapturously, inescapably—whispered her name to the spare inches between them, she felt herself suspended in mindless oblivion.

And then, with the barest touch, she gasped.

His kiss was as torturously slow as his smile, sweet and overindulgent, an ache that settled weightily into her belly and then floated to nothing in her mind, filling her wordless throat with the vibration of his pulse beneath her fingers. Sound and sight ceased to exist in favor of touch and taste, insatiable craving that manifested in the deepened pressure of his lips against hers, inviting and haunting, a sensation she knew she would never fully rid from her soul. He pulled her closer—impossibly close—and she stumbled, losing her balance; he walked her backwards, pressing her against the stone wall, leaving her to stretch out against him.

She drew her fingers along the edge of his jaw, tearing through the roots of his hair, gripping the back of his neck; all a clumsy, primitive effort to have more of him, to be nearer, to banish the mockery of any space that wasn't contact. His teeth cut into her lip and she let her head hit the wall behind her, let his mouth travel over her lips and chin and jaw and down to the swell of her throat, turning taste into consumption, dalliance to devolution.

"Narcissa," he murmured roughly, and she brought her hands to his chest, slipping her fingers under the fabric; he slid his hands under her dress, grazing the length of her thigh.

Her heart raced—violent, frantic, mad.

We're all mad here, darling—

She tore his shirt open, using it to pull him towards her, rutted against his hips; he pulled back in surprise, licked his lips, and then she yanked him back, dragging a startled breath from him that was met with a gasp from her, his hand rising exhilaratingly to brush the stitched hem of her stocking. He paused, the tips of his fingers lingering at the precipice of silk and skin.

"You'd give me to him," she whispered. "You'd give me to the King?"

Tom looked up, dazed, to meet her eye.

"Haven't you been listening?" he said back, and she counted the seconds that she held her breath as he slowly lowered himself to his knees. "You could never be ruled by anyone."
She swallowed, her heart racing, as he gently parted her legs, taking the hem of her dress in hand and dragging it upwards, pausing at the clasps of her stockings to press his lips to the bare curve of her thigh. She whimpered, her lips parting of their own accord, and he looked up, not looking away as he leaned closer, his breath passing through the thin material beneath her garter.

The first time his tongue passed over her it was confident, but careful; there was a conscientious quality to it—an element of control—but it was cautious, like the first step of a dance. The second was aloft, a leap, his tongue alight, alarming; she shuddered, shook, his fingers spreading her apart, his mouth supple, soft, inviting. She lost her breath, caught it, let it run wild; he moved with her, faster, darting, directing her to a sense of loss, of phantom wonder. She ran her fingers through his hair, arching her back, losing track of the words that dribbled helplessly from her lips—yes, please, ohyes, yesyesmore, there, there, there, like that, Tom, want you like that, like this, want you, please, I want you I want you I want you—and letting him build her up; letting him break her down, tear her apart, make her a wreckage, an affliction, a ruin.

It washed over her, euphoric devastation, and she knew in a wash of calm where she was, where she'd been; exactly where she'd lost herself.

This, she knew, was the place.

This was wonderland.

He took her to a castle, kissed her hand; placed her in the center of a room with a ceiling like sky. I'll see you soon, he promised, and then he was gone, and she wandered towards a set of empty thrones, gilded and—celestial.

There was a sound of trumpeting from somewhere far away and then a slither on the ground, Nagini entering without greeting; Narcissa, feeling subject to whimsy in this strange land of madness, dropped to a curtsy, waiting expectantly. She watched his boots come into view first, then let her eyes travel slowly upwards as he materialized in his throne, the monocled green snake coiling itself tightly around the leg of the still-vacant chair.

A crown glinted from his head, unmistakable against the richness; Narcissa gasped, leaping up and then back, reeling from the sting of unexpected recognition.

"It's—you're—" she broke off in disbelief. "You're the King?"

Tom rose to his feet, the same smile spreading across his lips. "Bet you feel foolish now," he informed her, taking a step down from his throne to meet her where she knelt. "You could have agreed much sooner."

"You tricked me," she realized furiously, glaring at him.

"You trusted me more as a vanishing nobody," he reminded her. "I felt that since you found it necessary to make such an unrelenting fuss about it, I could at least do you the courtesy of playing along."

"But if you could have had me all along," she protested suspiciously, "then why would you lie?"

He waved a hand, coming to stand before her. "Having you is not the important thing," he informed her, with an effortless sort of certainty. "You had to come to me."

She was sure she'd spent too long there when the things he said began to make sense.
"So—are you Tom, then?" she asked, and he frowned, indicating otherwise.

"You keep calling me that," he said. "But I think I've made it quite clear that I'm the King."

"And the Cheshire Cat," she prompted hazily, and he nodded, shrugging.

"That too," he agreed. "But only those two, I'm afraid, and one of them was merely for convenience."

"But how did I get here?" she asked. "And why did you—"

She stopped, eyeing the vacant throne and then turning back to look at him, realizing slowly what he had offered her.

"Me?" she asked, and he took a step closer, gesturing her towards a looking glass that hung upon the wall.

"You," he agreed, his lips brushing the back of her neck as she looked into the hazy reflection in the glass, leaning helplessly towards it.

"Is that—" she frowned. "Am I—"

But she never finished her sentence. By the time she'd touched a finger to the mirror's gilded frame, Narcissa felt herself swept into a vacuum of something unknowable, the ground vanishing beneath her feet as she began to fall.

Narcissa opened her eyes to a flash of a white crescent and a set of two sapphires, blinking above her. She reached up, squinting, and they promptly disappeared, swept back in darkness.

She sat up with a gasp, struggling for breath.

"It's you," she managed, sighing with relief, and Tom turned over his shoulder, beckoning to someone in the room.

"She's awake," he said, and Andromeda hurried forward, taking her hand.

"Thank goodness," she breathed, pressing her lips to Narcissa's knuckles. "Cissy, we were so worried—"

Narcissa swallowed, her eyes flicking to Tom's. He met her gaze steadily, eyeing her like a subject.

Like a patient, she realized, and felt her lungs twist.

"Dr Riddle's been keeping an eye on you," Andromeda explained, stroking Narcissa's hair. "You've had a terrible fever."

"Have I?" Narcissa asked, her heart pounding as she gradually registered the sweat the she could feel clinging to her linens. "Then I've just been—"

"Here, in bed," Andromeda supplied reassuringly, stroking her cheek. "I told Mother I was certain you wouldn't want to go to the infirmary, but I was worried you were starting to get worse—"

"The whole time," Narcissa rasped, dazed with loss. "I've been here?"

"Yes, you have," Tom said, leaning over to check her pulse, pressing the cold stethoscope to her
chest. "Have you been hallucinating?" he asked her. "Fevers can sometimes have that effect," he clarified, turning to Andromeda. "But now that she's awake, I'm quite certain the worst of it is over."

"Thank goodness," Andromeda exhaled deeply, patting Narcissa's arm. "I'll just go inform Mother and Father, then—"

"Wait," Narcissa called after her, taking her hand. "Andy, I—"

"What is it?" Andromeda asked, leaning towards her. "Is everything okay?"

Narcissa forced herself upright, speaking in her sister's ear.

"Andy, if you love him," Narcissa whispered, feeling her breath quicken. "If you love him, Andromeda, tell him," she murmured urgently, watching her sister's cheeks drain of color. "You'll drive yourself mad if you don't."

Andromeda paused, letting the words sink in, and then nodded slowly, rising to her feet to stumble unsteadily towards the door. "I'll—I'll be back, then," she stammered, her dark eyes wide. "I'll—I'll just—"

She broke off, a smile slowly etching its way across her lips. "Thank you, Cissy," she whispered, blowing a kiss before turning through the doorway and heading swiftly through it.

"Well," Tom remarked, removing his stethoscope and tucking it into his bag as he looked on in Andromeda's absence. "I suppose now that you're awake, I won't need to keep such a close eye on you."

"I suppose not," Narcissa agreed, feeling inexplicably saddened at the thought. "I suppose, too, that I must have gone a bit mad while I was ill," she added, giving him an apologetic glance.

"Nonsense," Tom remarked, meeting her eye. "We're all mad here, darling."

She froze, the words chilling the air between them; he let the moment settle and then offered her a wink, briskly tipping his hat.

"Perhaps you do enjoy my games after all, Miss Black," he commented at a murmur, and then he turned, heading for the door.

"Tom," she said desperately, calling after him. "Was I—was any of it real?"

He gave her a slow smile; one that was achingly familiar.

"Why would it not be real?"

_Sometimes a riddle is just a riddle -_

"That's not an answer," she whispered.

_Though, of course, sometimes a Riddle is precisely what you need._

"It is an answer," he replied. "And further, I don't see how it could possibly be wrong," he remarked, aiming himself at the door.

"Tom," she called again, and he turned, tilting his head expectantly.
"It's mine, isn't it?" she asked. "The throne?"

His teeth flashed beneath his sapphire eyes.

"Get some rest, Narcissa," he murmured. "We have quite a lot of work to do."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Up next: *Beast*. Can't thank you enough for reading!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beast

Pairing: Jily (James Potter x Lily Evans), Wolfstar (Remus Lupin x Sirius Black)

Universe: Disney AU (Beauty and the Beast)

Rating: T for language, sexual references

Summary: The third of four one shots based on Disney plots. Not unpredictably, I was propositioned for a Beauty and the Beast story with Dramione, but decided that plot/pairing combination was overdone. Here's something a little different.

When a sinister plot leads to James Potter's disfigurement and traps him in Hogwarts Castle with only a talking menagerie for company, he's comfortably certain that all is lost. But the arrival of a certain defiant redhead means that whether he likes it or not, everything is about to change.

I.

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a handsome prince lived in a castle. As a child, he had all the riches he could want, and loyal friends and subjects both, but he was spoiled, selfish, and unkind, and for a time, this was to be his undoing; for he, in all his gloried splendor, could not imagine what forces might make him pay for his vanity.

To start: a rivalry, and an audience.

"What's this, Snivellus?" James asked, snatching the book from between Severus' fingers as Sirius Black snickered loudly, sidling up to Severus' left. "Still trying to unlock the secrets of the darkest arts, are you?"

Severus sighed. "Give it back, Potter," he muttered through gritted teeth, holding his hand out expectantly. James only laughed.

"One of these days you'll learn that you're not magical, Snivellus," James said brusquely, "you're just like the rest of us, only a bit less exquisitely groomed." He leaned over, grinning. "What do you think, Sirius?"

"I think," Sirius began loftily, "that Snivellus could do with less reading and more bathing."


"Or what?" James challenged. "You'll get grease on my shirt?"

Severus bit back a response, leaping sideways as the branch of a nearby tree suddenly brandished itself from nowhere, smacking James in the face and prompting the book to tumble from his hands as he let out a graceless yelp.
"Careful, Potter," Severus muttered, privately delighting in watching James rub furiously at his cheek, a solid red line already blooming from where the wayward tree branch had hit him. "Wouldn't want you to hurt your pretty face," Severus added boldly, promptly darting back as James took an imprecise swing at his stomach.

"Yeah, you'd better run," James muttered, scowling. "Come on, Sirius," he added, gesturing for the other boy to follow as they took off on the path back to the castle. "Watch yourself, Snivellus," he warned over his shoulder, and Severus grimaced.

"Watch for trees," he muttered under his breath, looking around for the book of ancient runes that the insufferable James Potter had dropped. Severus was sure the runes would eventually come to mean something if he just concentrated hard enough.

"Excuse me," a young man interrupted, holding out the book. "Did you drop this?"

"Oh," Severus said, reaching out for it. "Yes, thank you—"

"Not a problem," the man assured him, smiling broadly. It was not a particularly warm smile, Severus noted, but he found himself imperceptibly drawn to it anyway, a bit unsettled by the concept that a man as refined (and, frankly, unnaturally handsome) as this one had chosen to speak to him and not to James or Sirius. "Tell me, are you one of the students up at that Hogwarts boarding school?"

"Yes, sir," Severus confirmed unsteadily. "I'm in my first year."

"Ah, excellent," the man commented. "Are you diligent in your studies, Mr—?"


"Alliteration," the man noted. "Excellent."

"I suppose," Severus agreed, swallowing uncomfortably. "Well," he said awkwardly, "thank you, sir, for returning this—"

"Tom," the man supplied, interrupting. "I work just over there," he added, pointing to a shop in the village behind them. "Do let me know if I can ever help you find anything."

"What do you sell?" Severus asked, frowning, and Tom laughed.

"A number of things," Tom assured him. "None of which you need concern yourself with now. Have a good day, Severus Snape," Tom added, stepping away. "And do be careful with that book, will you?"

"I will," Severus called back, opening it to find his page. He frowned, looking up. "Sir—I mean, Tom, this isn't actually—" He stopped, realizing the other man had vanished from sight. "Tom?" he called, scrambling to his feet. "I wasn't—this isn't—mine," he muttered under his breath, seeing the words Book of Spells on the book's inside cover.

He turned to a page in the middle, mindlessly skimming its contents.

Transfiguration: human to animal.

"Huh," Severus murmured to himself, tracing the letters on the page.

Tom Riddle slid back into the seat across from his companion, replying to her indeterminable look
of curiosity with a slow, too-clever smile.

"What was that about?" Narcissa prompted, arching a brow.

"You saw, didn't you?" Tom Riddle asked, reaching out to tap his fingers lightly on her forearm. "The boy over there—the quiet one, with the dark hair—he showed something, just a moment ago."

Narcissa Black turned over her shoulder, glancing at where the rowdy trio of boys had been. "He showed evidence of having magic, you mean?"

Tom nodded. "I think so," he said, curling a hand around his mouth and leaning back in his chair. "I'd have to see it again," he clarified thoughtfully, "but I figured he could use a push, and then we could find out for certain."

Narcissa nodded, picking up her cup.

"Well," she began coolly, taking a sip of her tea. "What now, Tom?"

Tom smiled his clever smile. "Now we wait," he told her, reaching out to thread his elegant fingers through hers.

II.

The prince was uncharitable, and in his privilege, unused to compassion, and when a vindictive magic danced at his doorstep, he did not take heed; the coldness in his heart beckoned a troublesome flame of ire, and danger revealed itself to have lain beneath an unimposing mask.

And so: a trick, and a disaster.

"Come on," James whispered, nudging Sirius. "I've sent Snivellus a note from Marlene that she wants to meet him in the trophy room—"

"And he believed it?" Sirius scoffed. "Idiot. As if Marlene McKinnon would ever agree to speak to him."

"Yes, well, precisely, so—"

"I wouldn't, James," a voice warned from behind them, revealing Remus Lupin in the common room's corner armchair. "One of these days, Snape's going to bite back."

"Oh, is he, Remus?" James sniffed dubiously. "With what, exactly?"

"I'm just saying," Remus commented, turning the page of his book. "You should really stop messing with him."

"Ignore him," Sirius muttered under his breath, giving James a shove towards the door and glaring over his shoulder at Remus. "He's just a wet blanket with hands."

"And ears," Remus called pointedly, but the other two ignored him, pushing through the common room door without a second glance.

Remus sighed, turning another page. "Idiots," he muttered to himself, shaking his head firmly.
Severus didn't know what happened.

The letter wasn't real, he'd known as much—there was, after all, no world in which any girl was asking Severus to meet him late at night, much less a world where Marlene McKinnon deigned to speak to him—but he figured getting James Potter alone might be worth it in some respect; the book of spells Tom had given him was, after all, useless without practical application.

But then, maybe he'd mixed them up.

He'd meant to try something simple. A stunning spell, for example, but Latin was easier read than spoken aloud, and he'd been thinking about the transfiguration spell, so perhaps language in general was suspect when the mind was unfocused; essentially, the whole ordeal had ended with—

Well. Severus wasn't totally sure what had happened, but when eleven-year-old human boy James Potter had suddenly grown several feet and sprouted antlers, he was pretty sure he'd done something wrong.

"I knew I could do it," he'd whispered to the palms of his hands, but that hardly seemed the most pressing thing at issue when the veritable prince of Hogwarts was currently without his proper face and his best friend had been left behind in the room, looking at Severus with a mix of horror and rage.

In a panic, everything froze—what do I do where do I go what do I say?—and then, wordlessly, Severus ran.

"So," Tom said slowly, "you've turned him into—what, exactly?"

The boy was sweating, his cheeks bloodless and pale.

"I—don't know, exactly," Severus admitted, eyeing his feet. "A, um—a sort of beast-like thing. Antlers," he explained, gesturing to his head. "And, uh, claws, really—and he's sort of, well—inhumanly large, I suppose—"

"Hm," Tom commented, tapping his mouth. "Well," he sighed, "what do you want me to do about it?"

Severus fidgeted. "Well, turn him back, please," he mumbled. "I'll take whatever punishment I get, sir, but I can't leave James Potter like that, the school will kill me—his parents are important, and he's the headmaster's favorite—"

"Clearly you care deeply for the boy," Tom drawled facetiously, and Severus blanched.

"I do feel bad about what I've done," he said hastily, "though Potter is, um—"

"Beastly," Tom said wryly. "Or so you've claimed."

Severus let out a burdened sigh. "Please, sir—"

"Tom," he corrected.

"Tom," Severus amended, "please, can you—" he grimaced. "Can you turn him back to how he was?"

"I'm afraid I can't," Tom lamented, shaking his head. "A curse like the one you seem to have bestowed upon this Mr Potter is not easily withdrawn."
Severus' face fell.

"I can, however," Tom said, making sure to look as though the thought had taken great effort, "take care of the situation. Make sure nobody will find out what's been done," he clarified, "and be certain that nobody at the school would ever come after you."

"You can?" Severus pressed earnestly, his dark eyes wide. "Really?"

Tom eyed the boy carefully, steepling his fingers at his mouth.

"It would be quite a favor," he warned, careful to conceal his delight at how conveniently the situation was unfolding. "You'd have quite a debt."

"I don't care," Severus said quickly. "I'll do whatever you want, I promise—"

Tom smiled, glancing up. "Narcissa," he called, and she emerged from the shop's backroom, her pale blonde hair flowing down her back. "Narcissa, I'd like you to meet someone," he said, gesturing to Severus. "Severus here will be joining our little project."

"Will he?" Narcissa asked knowingly, her gaze flicking down as the boy stared up at her in awe.

Tom nodded, giving her a wink. "Narcissa is a witch, too," he explained to Severus, lifting one arm for her to settle herself beneath it. "An enchantress, one might say," he murmured, passing her a teasing smile. "If she and I fix your little problem, Severus, and we promise not to tell anyone what you've done," he added sternly, wanting to laugh as the boy's chin dropped with shame, "then you'll stay here to work with us, and learn what we know."

The boy couldn't hide the greedy flicker of excitement on his face at the prospect.

"Yes, Tom," he agreed, and Tom nodded again, satisfied.

"We'll fix you up with new accommodations," Tom told him. "In the meantime, Narcissa and I will take care of your little beast problem, and we'll agree not to discuss it with anyone. Are we clear?" he prompted, and Severus nodded. "Good," Tom declared, gesturing to the shop's office. "Just head back, then, and I'll be right there—"

As Severus turned to walk away, Narcissa looked up expectantly.

"What would you like me to do?" she murmured, and Tom smiled.

"Take care of the whole castle, would you?" he requested. "Immobilize them. Render them thoroughly useless."

"Done," she said, offering him her cheek. He brushed his lips against it, chuckling against her skin.

"What would I do without you?" he wondered aloud, and she smirked over her shoulder, letting her hips sway as she went.

"Die, I expect," she proclaimed musically, throwing her cloak over her shoulders.

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**III.**

*One day, the prince was visited by a witch, who placed upon him a curse; that he may wear an abhorrent skin, but be made beautiful within, or else suffer a beastly eternity.*
And in so doing: an enchantress punishes, and a punisher enchants.

James opened his eyes to a dull throbbing pain in his skull and a violently beautiful young woman standing above him, her pale blonde hair catching the light from the castle's flickering torches.

"James Potter," she said softly, her voice like a siren's; tempting, but faintly cold. "I regret that an unexpected series of events has led us to this moment, but I think you should consider it a chance for moral redemption."

James blinked, struggling to sit up. "Ouch," he said foggily, wondering why he could not lift his head. "Who are you?"

"Tell me, James," she murmured. "Is beauty so important to you that you would forsake all else—and all others," she added, "to assume it your right to possess?"

"Uh," he said. "What?"

"Do not be deceived by appearances," she warned. "After all, beauty is found within."

He reached a hand to the source of his head's throbbing, holding his breath as his fingers closed around a thin protrusion of what felt like bone.

"What—" he began, and swallowed. "What's happened?"

The blonde woman straightened, crossing her arms over her chest. "What's happened is that you have been cruel, James Potter, and unkind, and for your errors you must pay the price." She conjured a rose from nowhere, smiling as James' eyes widened in disbelief. "This rose will bloom on your twenty-first birthday," she informed him, levitating it to produce a glass case that blossomed around the outside, settling itself on a pedestal. "If you can learn to love another, and be loved in return, then the spell will be broken."

"Spell?" James echoed hoarsely, scrambling upright. "What spell? What have you—" He broke off with a startled gasp, catching sight of his reflection from the trophy cases. "What—how did you—what am I—"

"If you cannot," the blonde witch warned him, "you will be doomed to remain a beast for all of time."

"Wait," James protested, blinking. "Wait—how can you—what about everyone else?" he demanded. "Severus, he's the one who did this—and where's Sirius? He was right h-"

He broke off as a low moan came from a large black dog, its head resting piteously upon its overlarge front paws.

"Sirius?" James rasped, and the blonde woman snapped her fingers, securing his attention.

"As I said," she told him. "You have until the last petal falls, or you and the rest of this castle will remain beasts for eternity." She turned, moving to exit the room, when James stopped her.

"Wait," he called desperately, struggling to his feet and finding them heinously clawed, his joints stiff and unnatural. "Isn't there something I can do? My parents will pay," he added. "If you want money, or jewels or something, I can just go see them and—"

"Oh, you foolish boy," the blonde woman spat, rounding on him. "Don't you understand? You
cannot leave this castle," she said, gesturing around her. "The very walls themselves have come alive, and they will keep you in—which is just as well," she sniffed, throwing the hood of her cloak over her hair. "For really, who could ever look upon your face long enough to hear you speak?"

"But," James protested. "If I can't leave, then how can I—"

"Darling, mobility is the least of your worries," she assured him, her blue eyes flashing with irritation. "After all," she added, dropping her voice to a sultry purr, "who could ever learn to love a beast?"

He swallowed, and she laughed.

And then, with a twist of her fingers, the air swallowed her, and she was gone.

"How did it go?" Tom asked, glancing up from his book as Narcissa apparated into their bedroom.

"It went," she said smoothly, discarding her cloak and then perching on the bed beside him, sweeping a curl from his forehead. "I decided to teach him a lesson while I was in the business of cursing the castle."

"A lesson?" Tom asked, laughing. "Really? And what did you teach him?"

Narcissa's smile tightened. "That beauty is foolish," she murmured, and Tom chuckled, pulling her towards him.

"Not yours," he said, his hands on her waist. "Your beauty is a dangerous lure, Narcissa."

"And yours a clever mask, Tom," she told him, brushing her lips against his. "Are you certain the Snape boy is worth the trouble?" she asked, the words escaping into the warmth of his mouth. "It wasn't easy concealing the castle, nor was altering everyone's memory."

"You saw Severus' handiwork," Tom reminded her, nipping at her lip. "He's untrained, yes, but certainly powerful enough to be an asset to our project, don't you think?"

She closed her eyes, letting him loosen the ties of her gown as she hummed her vacant acknowledgement. "My cousin was at Hogwarts, you know," she informed him. "Sirius. He's a dog now," she clarified, half-smiling. "I thought it fitting."

"You are arousingly clever," Tom assured her, pulling her onto his lap and smirking as she let out a breath of surprise. "You have other cousins, don't you?" Tom asked, his voice slightly hoarse as he eased her gown over her shoulders. "A younger one we might use?"

"I do," she said. "But we can discuss it later," she murmured in his ear, kissing the side of his neck.

Tom smiled.

"Good girl," he whispered, returning a kiss to the line of her clavicle.

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IV.

For ten long years, the castle festered with wild magic; the edges of it sprouted an enchanted forest that climbed, higher and higher, to hide the walls from view to the villagers below, rendering the inhabitants long forgotten. But while the stone itself thrived, the beasts inside grew mournful, missing their human forms, and the prince succumbed to fits of despair, losing all his
hope.

And so: a beast suffers, and elsewhere, a beauty emerges.

"James—"

"Don't call me that," James snapped gruffly, not turning around. "I told you to stop."

"Right," the rat squeaked nervously, fidgeting with his paws. "Prongs, then."

"What is it?" James muttered, watching another petal loosen from the enchanted rose.

"Well," Peter offered nervously. "I know you're not, er, in the mood, per se, but—"

"Just say it," James snarled, rounding on him. "What, pray tell, can I do for you, your utter fucking ratship?" he growled, the sound of it echoing around the room as Peter let out another squeak, ducking behind one of the school's old trophies. "Sorry," James muttered, suffering a twinge of guilt as he watched the rat tuck his shaking tail in behind him. "What do you need, Wormtail?"

The rat let his head peek out, eyeing him beadily.

"Moony and Padfoot," Peter ventured tentatively. "They're, um—"

"Ugh, don't bother," James cut him off, gritting his teeth. "I know what they're up to." He forcefully rose to his skeletal clawed feet, shoving through the doorway and opting for the east stairs as they shifted towards him, coming alive in his presence. "MOONY," he bellowed, "PADFOOT—"

"Prongs," Sirius barked in response, the sound coming from somewhere on the third floor. "You rang?"

James sighed, leaping over the side of the staircase and swinging onto the third floor landing to find the dog and the wolf tangled in awkward wrestled pile.

"What are you idiots fighting about now?" James demanded, huffing in irritation. "Don't tell me this is about Scarlett again."

"Moony makes her nervous," Sirius yelped defensively, pawing at the wolf's face. "She thinks he's going to fucking eat her, as I've made a point to tell him one thousand times—"

"It's not me she's afraid of," Remus interrupted bitterly, baring his teeth. "You're the one always hunting her down, aren't you?"

"I'm not hunting her," Sirius protested. "I am merely a sweet, domesticated puppy, perfectly well-suited for an adorable red panda—"

"You're a shaggy, unbearable pile of dander and she's a whiskered little snot," Remus cut in, muttering under his breath. "Your obsession with Marle-"

"Don't," James warned, scowling, and Remus let out a small groaning whimper.

"Scarlett, I mean," he corrected himself. "And as I was saying," he continued, snapping at Sirius' tail, "it's getting out of hand."

"You're out of hand, you wolf-faced tyrant," Sirius retorted. "Why can't you let us be in love in
"Peace?" "Love? Don't make me laugh, you horrible brute of a—"

"STOP," James roared. "First of all, you're both monstrosities and I rue the day I was forced to breathe your very air—"

"Always a crowd-pleasing intro," Sirius assured him, to which Remus arched what might have been a brow.

"—and secondly, nobody's in love, nobody's getting eaten, and I'M STARVING," James finished, suddenly hearing his stomach rumble. "I'm going to the kitchens. Have the twins made anything worth eating?" he asked, glancing between Remus and Sirius and then throwing his hands up at their matching looks of skepticism. "They're the only ones with thumbs," James sniffed, stalking away and muttering to himself. "You'd think they'd figure it out one of these days—"

"Right-o, Prongs," Sirius called after him, "be right there—and as for you," he muttered to Remus, dropping his voice, "can you please not upset our little prince?"

"I haven't upset him!" Remus retorted. "He's upset about the rose, you cunting fool—"

"Well, if you hadn't been here while I was in the middle of performing for Scarlett the most stunning ballad the world has ever witnessed—"

"Stop," Remus said, snapping at his nose. "Shut up. You're the one who always gets in my way, Padfoot—so maybe it's me you're actually looking for," he taunted irritably. "Ever thought about that?"

Sirius shoved Remus away with a yelp, smashing his paw into the wolf's snout. "Get off of me, Moony," he growled, baring his teeth. "Stay away from me."

Remus bristled.

"I wish the castle were big enough," he replied, stalking away and glaring at the cat, who primly continued licking her paw and pretending she'd seen nothing.

The last ten years had been kind enough to Severus to permit him the luxury of forgetting, from time to time, what had happened to James Potter; before long, the name had lost most of its meaning, as had any reference to the long-forgotten Hogwarts Academy and all those who had filled it. On occasion, a villager might think of the school; might grow dreamy and nostalgic, tracing a hand to the horizon—"wasn't there a castle once?"—and Severus' innards would twist would fear; but then it would fade, the villager themselves inevitably returning to idle gossip.

The years had been kind enough to Severus, though not excessively so. He had been eager to learn from Tom and Narcissa, but his education had been tempered by errands—menial tasks for a 'project' that he didn't quite understand—and then, later, the recruitment of Narcissa's younger cousin Regulus, which meant that Severus had been pulled away from his studies more than once.

It had been fine, but not idyllic; the years had been kind, but not indulgent.

At least, not until one day in the shop.

"Excuse me," came a female voice. "Is a Mr Borgin or Burke available?"
"They both passed before I started working here," Severus replied, momentarily losing his place at the interruption and opting not to look up from his paperwork. "But if you'd like to speak to an owner, Tom's around here somewhere."

"Oh, not necessarily an owner," the visitor amended. "I'm just looking for one particular book jacket, and I thought—well, I'd just hoped someone could help me, I suppose." She gently cleared her throat. "If you have time, that is."

Severus sighed. "Well, I don't normally deal with customers, but if you—"

He stopped, looking up to catch her eye and promptly swallowing whatever he'd been saying, choking on it with an alarming immediacy. "Sorry," he coughed, giving his chest a hollow-sounding thump. "I just—I wasn't—"

"It's no problem at all," said the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, flashing him a radiant smile.

Her name was Lily Evans, and she was perfection in bodily form. Her long red hair—tinted the kind of auburn that was more autumn than summer, more comfort and richness and warmth than simply grating brightness—had been flowing down her shoulders in loose, yawning waves, and her eyes—the most astonishing shade of green he'd ever witnessed, wide and framed with an exquisite bow of lashes—fixed on his and smiled in tune with her charming lips, rendering him speechless.

"Can you help me?" she'd asked, and he was wrecked, fully torn asunder.

She needed the first edition cover for a book; a rare one, albeit non-magical—and thus, rendering her fairly useless for either Tom or Narcissa's purposes, which struck Severus as a massive relief—and he could barely think, barely process, barely breathe as he searched their inventory, promising her he would find a copy.

"Come back in three days," he said, trying not to beg, and she nodded.

"I look forward to it, Severus," she told him, gracing him with a smile before turning away on a delicate breeze of something floral and tragically alluring.

"You're in trouble, aren't you," Regulus commented from behind him, bringing in a package from the back room. "I think you might have started drooling," he teased, stroking the leaf of a quivering tentacula in the corner.

Severus instantly checked his mouth, hiding the motion with a quick duck of his chin.

"Did not," he muttered, but he looked up again as soon as Regulus had chuckled, retreating to the back. "Lily Evans," Severus repeated to himself, toying with her name on his tongue.

Lily Evans.

Severus Snape was in love.

"He's distracted," Tom commented, watching Severus arrive late from his lunch with the redheaded girl who, despite not having magic of her own, seemed to have bewitched his apprentice to utter imbecility. "I don't like it."

"Of course you don't," Narcissa agreed. "But you don't want to lose focus from your other projects just to intervene with a harmless spurt of calf love, do you?"
"I'd hardly call it love," Tom scoffed, turning to look at her. "Tell me you don't actually believe in such fanciful things, Narcissa."

"What, love?" Narcissa asked, straightening in apprehension. "Are you saying that you don't love me, Tom?"

"Love," Tom retorted skeptically, "is merely a foolish imbalance of chemicals." He took a step towards her, curling a finger under her chin. "The things I feel for you are much stronger than any such childish delusion. I admire you," he informed her, "I respect you. I value your intellect, I trust your abilities, and I feel a kinship with you like no other I've ever known," he added, pulling her towards him. "I worship you as if you alone are my salvation."

She fought a smile.

"You're far beyond saving, Tom," Narcissa informed him at a murmur, and his lips curled up in amusement. "Besides, whether you disagree or not, love is real enough, as far as magical principles go," she reminded him, "Enough to break curses and the like."

"Curses," Tom echoed, his lips at the top of her head. "Like your little curse at Hogwarts?"

"Precisely," Narcissa confirmed, and then glanced up, an idea taking root. "You know, if you wanted her out of the way," she ventured, "that is certainly a possibility."

"What, send her to Hogwarts, you mean?" Tom asked.

"She'd be trapped in the castle the moment she arrived," Narcissa pointed out, musing aloud. "It would be terribly convenient."

"Unless she breaks the curse," Tom countered.

Narcissa laughed; an airy, dubious melody. "She could never love the beast in that castle," she remarked. "And even if she did come to love him, it would take weeks, months, years—time he doesn't have, and which keeps her away long enough for Severus to forget her. Long enough," she clarified, "to finish our project."

"Hm," Tom said, mulling it over. "A very good possibility, my enchantress," he said thoughtfully, passing her a smile.

"Shall I change for the occasion?" Narcissa prompted, transfiguring her clothes to the ones Severus had been wearing. "I think these suit me, don't you?"

"Deviance always suits you," he promised, kissing her cheek. She smiled.

"Perhaps I'll let you adore me later," she murmured, and once he'd reverently grazed his lips against her knuckles, she promptly vanished into thin air.

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V.

There once was a beautiful girl; quite beautiful, and such thing can be a curse of its own.

The girl, of humble means and parentage, was more than simply lovely. She was kind and intelligent, and pure of heart, and made content by simple pleasures; but she was determined, too, and such a thing is often overlooked.
And so: a beauty comes upon a curse, and a castle falls under her spell.

There was something very odd about the people of Hogsmeade.

The owners of the shop where Severus worked, for example, were particularly strange; they gave Lily a very unsettled feeling, despite them being the two most beautiful people she had ever laid eyes on. The man, Tom, had the distinct look of seeing too clearly, or too much; the woman, Narcissa, rarely met her eye, but Lily often felt that she was watching, toying with the space between them, as though she commanded the very air around her without deigning to lift a finger.

The others in the village—well. They hadn't quite warmed to Lily; thought her peculiar, in fact, and wondered with a somewhat unabashed openness why a young woman would choose to remain unmarried, struggling to open a bookshop in a town where most people cared more for stewing turnips than reading literature. She'd heard them whispering about her more than once—and, indeed, scarcely at a whisper; things like "pretty, but rather odd" and "dazed and distracted and always alone, shouldn't she come down and join the rest of us?" and "she'd have a lovely face if her nose weren't stuck in a book"—and slowly, Lily understood that she'd made a terrible choice, coming to this provincial town where everyone seemed to avoid her.

Everyone except Severus, that is, and while she appreciated his friendship—needed it more than she felt she could admit—she wondered if she weren't in some way stringing him along.

"Do you ever wonder," Severus murmured one day, "whether there isn't more for you out there? Somewhere else?"

Lily turned, offering him a smile. "Hard to believe that there isn't," she remarked, reaching overhead as though she could brush the stars with the tips of her fingers. "I like to think the world is too big—and too unexplored," she added wistfully, "for this to be the best part of my story."

Severus looked back at her, his dark eyes surprisingly warm. "Maybe we should run away together," he commented quietly, and she wasn't sure it was a joke.

"I don't think Tom would give you the time off," Lily teased, and Severus' smile faltered.

"Forget Tom," he said seriously. "Forget Hogsmeade." He sat up, turning to look at her. "Would you leave with me, if you could?"

Lily hesitated, wishing she could say something—anything—that wouldn't cause the hope in his eyes to sputter. "I'm trying to carry on my father's legacy with the bookstore," she reminded him. "I hardly think I could just disappear," she added carefully, "do you?"

The last trace of his smile vanished.

"Sorry," he said awkwardly. "I guess I just thought—"

"I care about you, Severus, I do," she assured him hastily. "I just—I don't think it would be a good idea for us. You have a job," she reminded him, "and I'd like to do this for my father."

"I know," he acknowledged gruffly. "I guess I should just be happy you're here at all." He reached over, settling his fingers on hers. "For once, I'm not totally alone," he murmured quietly, and she sighed, sitting up to rest her head on his shoulder.

"No," she assured him. "You're not."
He seemed satisfied with that, or at least relieved, but the mentions of running away together—of a festering need for something *more*—grew more insistent over time; and so, when he brought her in the midst of a thickened forest the following week just to 'get away from things for a bit,' she didn't think anything of it.

"Moony, for the *last time,*" Sirius announced, "I'm trying to find a proper place to take Scarlett after I've recited some poetry for her this evening—"

"Stop talking," Remus snarled, turning sharply and prompting the dog to collide nose-first with the side of his ribs. "Did you hear that?"

"Did I hear you rudely interrupt me while I was speaking?" Sirius whined, indignant. "Yes, Moony, I heard it—"

"Not that," Remus sniffed impatiently. "The *voice.*"

Sirius' ears perked up, listening for something other than the sound of the heavy stone steps shifting.

"There," Remus whispered, cocking his head. "Outside."

"Sev?" they heard a female voice say. "Severus, where are we?"

The familiar name was an unexpected surprise, and for a moment, both the dog and the wolf were lost in thought, feeling a strange sort of tapping from their splintered memories as they each contemplated what this could mean.

"Hello?" the voice came again, closer and more anxious this time. "Is anyone here?"

"Do you think," Sirius breathed, huffing out an excited sneeze, "that she's the one that will break the curse?"

"Do I look like I know the answer to that?" Remus retorted, snapping at him. "Just—*be quiet,* and maybe she'll just—"

The doors to the castle suddenly creaked open, revealing a shadowed figure in the doorway below.

"Hello?" she called, her shoes tapping on the stone as she took a few steps inside, the doors falling shut behind her. "Oh no," she whispered, turning to reach for the handles and giving them a sharp but ineffective tug. "This doesn't seem promising."

Remus and Sirius exchanged a glance, and then they promptly took off down the stairs.

Lily warily surveyed the castle, wondering how she'd never seen it before. They hadn't come *that* far from Hogsmeade, after all; she should have been able to see a building this size from the village. She frowned, looking around for Severus.

"Sev," she hissed, her hand still on the locked door handle. "This isn't *funny*—"

She stopped, hearing the sound of footsteps on the stone. "Hello?" she offered, but paused in alarm, realizing they weren't normal footsteps. "Um," she said, turning towards the doors and giving them another sharp tug. "I just—I don't mean to disturb," she called over her shoulder. "I'm just—looking for a friend—"
She whipped around as the sound of tapping claws grew louder, coming to the conclusion with a strike of panic that the doors weren't going to open. Behind her, a set of glowing yellow eyes appeared from one of the cavernous castle corridors and she let out an unwilling squeak of fear, reaching for one of the torches on the wall.

"Stay back," she called fearfully, trying to look bigger than she was.

"Oh, stop," the wolf replied, making what appeared to be an expression of disdain. "If I were going to kill anyone, I'd have done it a long time ago."

Lily blinked, wondering if she'd gone mad.

"That's true," another voice contributed from somewhere near her knees, and Lily looked down to find a shaggy black dog looking up at her. "Moony's been trying to kill me for several years, but he never succeeds."

"I never try," the wolf—Moony—said indignantly. "Believe me, if I'd tried, I'd have succeeded."

"Are you—" Lily paused, floundering, and the wolf patiently took a seat, waiting for her to finish her sentence. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes," Moony confirmed. "Padfoot is also talking to you. Don't worry," he added. "His bark is far worse than his bite."

"Yes," the dog agreed, "and as for Moony, neither his bark nor his bite are much to write home about."

She glanced down at the dog, who was eagerly offering her his paw. "Oh," she said, accepting the handshake. "Padfoot, was it?"

"Honored to make your acquaintance," Padfoot replied, his tail wagging. "Truly delighted."

"Oh, contain yourself, you shameless sycophant," Moony sniffed.

"And you are?" Padfoot prompted, blatantly ignoring the wolf.

"I'm Lily," she supplied, still not certain she wasn't dreaming. "And I was just trying to leave, but—"

"Oh, you can't," Padfoot told her. "Dreadful inconvenience, that, and as much as I'd love for you to move around of your volition—" he shrugged, or tried to. "Them's the rules."

"Well," Lily sighed, "that's unfortunate."

"It's not all bad," Moony assured her. "Padfoot is the worst of it, obviously, but, um—" he paused, appearing to carefully choose his words. "The master isn't so bad."

Lily frowned, watching Padfoot's tail pause. "The master?" she echoed.

"Er—yes," Padfoot confirmed. "He's upstairs," he added brightly, "if you want to meet him."

"Oh," Lily said, watching Moony's ears suddenly brace apprehensively against the sides of his head at Padfoot's suggestion. "Well, um, I suppose I could—"

"Padfoot, may I speak to you?" Moony interrupted. "Privately?"
"Uh, hello," Padfoot said emphatically, indicating Lily with his snout. "I'm sort of in the middle of something. He's always like this," he added, muttering conspiratorially to Lily. "I'm in love with an exquisitely beautiful lady, you know, and Moony's always showing up, boring holes into my many atmospheres of roman—"

"It won't take long," Moony growled, giving Padfoot a brusque headbutt of a shove that was met with a low whine, both of them slipping quickly through a portrait on the wall and vanishing from sight.

Lily stood frozen, uncertain what she'd just seen.

"Okay then," she murmured to herself, looking up. From the rafters, a very regal looking cat appeared to be observing her closely. "Hello," she offered, waving awkwardly. "Do you talk too?"

"Only when I wish it," the cat retorted, licking her paw.

"What's your name?" Lily attempted, and the cat glanced down, eyeing her through what looked like a set of marked spectacles.

"Minerva," the cat replied.

"Oh," Lily offered warmly. "That's an adorable name for a cat."

Minerva stared at her, blinking once.

"Quite," she agreed dully, exiting the room without a word.

"We can't just spring her on him," Remus argued. "We have to—I don't know, warm him up first, or something—"

"Oh, nonsense," Sirius retorted. "He'll be thrilled to see her—after all, this can only mean that she's here to break the curse, don't you think?"

"Her being here could simply be coincidental," Remus admonished gruffly. "There's no guarantee she'll actually break it. She is, after all, very kind and beautiful," he sighed, "and Prongs is—"


"I was going to say beastly," Remus admitted, "but you're not wrong."

They paused, interrupted by a sudden loud noise on the other side of the wall.

"What was that?" Sirius asked, and Remus sighed.

"I think Lily has met the master," he grumbled, cursing their unfortunate timing.

James squinted down at the shadowed form by the door from one of the shifting staircases, feeling murderous. He'd heard voices and was disturbed from his daily brooding, which was not something he appreciated.

"Who are you?" he growled, leaping from one moving staircase to another and then dropping to all fours before the intruder. "How did you get in?"

"I—"
James squinted at her, startled by the woman who had come into view. He deliberately kept to the shadows, careful to conceal most of his features.

"I'm sorry," the girl said frantically, her hand shaking around the torch she held. "I, um—I was with my friend Severus, and then I got lost—"

"Severus?" James repeated, a harsh bitterness reaching his voice at the name. "He's here?"

She was clearly afraid, but trying her best not to show it; in the light from the torch James could see her hair was an equally glowing sort of red, her eyes a startling green, and he felt a moment of awe that quickly molted to shame, hardened around the edges with envy for the obvious perfection of her face.

"No, I—I can't find him. And I'm sorry," she repeated hurriedly, reaching behind her for the handle of the heavy double doors. "I really didn't mean to disturb you, but I can't—"

James saw the panic on her face, gauged the degree of it, and recognized his own reflection in the flare that had lit in her eyes. He was a monster, after all—had been one for ten miserable years—and she, the only evidence of beauty that he'd seen in a decade, was trying desperately to escape.

It made him angry. It made him suffer shame, and that, more than anything, made him furious.

"You can't leave," he snarled, his voice clipped. "You're trapped here along with the rest of us."

"Oh, wonderful, Prongs," Sirius interrupted, suddenly appearing through a portrait. "Moony and I were just going to bring Lily to meet you—"

Lily. Of course her name was beautiful too.

"Lily, is it?" James echoed, cutting Sirius off and staring at her. "Well," he began grimly, reveling in her discomfort. "Welcome to hell, then, Lily."

The man—the creature—that stood before her was unnervingly tall, though he was currently crouched on all fours. She couldn't see his face clearly—only pieces of it, in streaks of light from the unevenly spaced torches—but what she could see tore the air from her lungs, as if it had been snagged on the very prongs of his antlers.

"Stay away from me," he snarled, and then he was gone, turning with such sharpness that the torch in her hand was put out.

Lily slowly let out a breath, trying to understand what she'd just seen. She felt Padfoot sidle up next to her, his coarse black fur rubbing at her stocking, and she absentmindedly let her hand fall, resting on his head.

"What," she gasped, "was he?"

"That's the master," Moony admitted hesitantly. "He's a bit out of sorts."

"Totally out of character," Padfoot assured her. "He's probably just hungry," he added, and Moony shook his head at that, appearing to roll his eyes.

"But—his face," Lily whispered, unable to blink away the creature's eyes; they'd been so human, a volatile hazel that changed in the light, from rage to fear to fury. "It's—he's not like any animal I've ever seen before, he's—"
"He used to be human," Moony explained. "We all did."

Lily blinked. "You did?"

"Well, naturally," Padfoot said. "It's how we came to possess such undeniable charm."

"What happened?" Lily asked, and the dog and the wolf exchanged glances.

"Well," Moony began, but was promptly interrupted.

"MOONY," they heard, a roar from upstairs. "PADFOOT!"

"Hold that thought," Padfoot yipped tentatively, his tail between his legs as he and Moony padded up the stairs to their master.

"Wait," Lily called after them. "What am I supposed to—"

"Oh, I can take care of you," a small voice squeaked, and Lily, despite her best efforts, let out a scream as she spotted a rat near her foot. "Or not," the rat muttered under his breath, giving Lily a beady-eyed glare of disapproval.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she offered hastily, recovering long enough to regain some semblance of manners. "I was just surprised, that's all—"

"Yes, sure, of course," the rat squeaked. "Nevermind that the wolf didn't make you scream, but the rat, abominable threat that I am—"

"I'm so sorry," Lily said again, crouching to speak to him. "What's your name?"

"Wormtail," he sniffed, "and I can take you to your room, if you like."

"My room?" Lily asked. "But I really should go, you know—"

"Dungeons or tower?" Wormtail prompted, ignoring her. "I only ask, you see, because if the master is to decide, you may not care for what he chooses."

Lily glanced longingly at the door, which remained hopelessly locked.

"Tower," she sighed, and the rat nodded.

"I thought as much," he said, looking pleased. "Excellent choice."

"Please, Prongs," Remus insisted. "You really must try to be nice to her. This could be our only chance to break the curse—"

"That curse will never be broken," James interrupted bitterly. "You heard the enchantress, didn't you?" he reminded them. "Nobody could ever come to love a beast."

"Perhaps not a beast who behaves beast-ily," Sirius ventured. "But if I can make a darling red panda fall in love with me—"

"Which you can't," Remus muttered, "and which is not presently the issue—"

"—then surely you can convince her to see you as you truly are, Prongs!" Sirius finished. "Woo her, Prongs—win her over, and then—"
"Who says I want to win her over?" James growled. "Why try," he demanded, "only to be disappointed when she doesn't return my feelings?"

Remus and Sirius exchanged a hesitant glance.

"Perhaps," Remus attempted, "you might consider doing it for us?"

"Yes," Sirius agreed. "Being a dog has its advantages, but frankly, the tail leaves my very sensitive emotions overly exposed."

James grimaced, watching both sets of ears lift hopefully.

"Fine," he muttered, feeling a brush of guilt. "I'll invite her to dinner. But if she looks at me like—" he broke off, miserable. If she looks at me like I disgust her; like I repulse her, like I'm a monster, like I'm a beast—

"If she looks at me like that again, this is over," James told them, bristling. "If this goes badly, then curse or not, this whole castle be damned," he shouted, stalking away to begin circling the rose with poorly-managed apprehension.

"That's the spirit," Sirius called after him brightly. "Slightly different words, ideally," he clarified, "but I certainly appreciate the spirit."

Remus glared at him. "You realize this will distract from your romantic pursuits, Padfoot," Remus warned. "Are you prepared to focus on someone other than Scarlett for a change?"

Sirius made a face. "I've been known to use my generous talents for seduction for the betterment of all," he sniffed airily. "I think that with my guidance, Lily will fall in love with Prongs by sundown."

Remus glanced up, watching James pace the floor of the trophy room, another petal falling from the rose as he cursed violently under his breath.

"Well," Remus muttered. "I suppose it's too late to warn you not to get your hopes up, then."

"Yep," Sirius confirmed, barking gleefully. "Quite."

"Do you like it?" Wormtail asked hopefully.

"It's beautiful," Lily said, gingerly picking Wormtail up from her shoulder and moving to place him on a nearby bookcase until she stopped, seeing Minerva the cat washing herself in a corner. "Oh," she said tentatively. "You aren't, um—"

"I'm not going to eat him," Minerva assured her listlessly, not looking up. "We don't really do that here."

"Oh, of course," Lily agreed. "You're all just—"

"We're all just a veritable menagerie of creatures forcibly trapped in a magic castle," a small, delicate-faced red panda interrupted, sneaking in through a crack in the door and using her tail to prod it shut as Lily set Wormtail down on the bookshelf. "But we all remember who we used to be."

"You do?" Lily asked, and the panda nodded.
"Yes," she said. "Though Prongs prefers that we not use our real names, and doesn't let us talk about who we were."

"Well," Lily sighed, perching on the edge of a bed that seemed to have conjured itself from nothing, "what should I call you, then?"

"Call me Scarlett," the panda said. "And you must be Lily?"

"Yes," Lily said, surprised. "How did you know?"

"Oh, Trill overheard you talking to Padfoot and Moony," Scarlett explained. "She's a bird. Very nosy."

"Because she's a bird?" Lily asked, and Scarlett's little snout twisted up in a smirk.

"She was nosy well before that," Scarlett said. "In fact, back when this was—"

"Careful," Wormtail warned, displeased.

Scarlett withered slightly, catching herself. "It's really not important," she said hastily. "The point is, Trill's always been a gossip."

"What were you going to say?" Lily pressed curiously, not quite ready to let it go. "Back when this was what?"

"Lily," Wormtail interrupted, slightly squeakier than he had been up to that point. "Is there something I should have the twins prepare for you this evening?"

"The twins?" Lily echoed.

"A pair of chimps," Minerva explained, patently unimpressed. "We call them 'See' and 'Do,' but really can't tell them apart—"

"—and they're not particularly great cooks," Scarlett warned her. "The castle at least seems to provide us with food, presumably from the Forbidden Forest—"

"Forbidden Forest?" Lily repeated, frowning. "Why's it called that?"

Minerva hacked up something that sounded like a feline scoff. "Guess," she quipped, unenthusiastically.

"Right," Lily murmured, just as there came a loud, thundering set of footsteps from the hall, the monster's voice tearing through the echoing corridor and prompting a fearful wrench in the base of her stomach. However kind the other animals might be, the master of the castle was something . . . different.

Something both more human, and considerably less.

"LILY," the creature called Prongs had shouted. "YOU WILL HAVE DINNER WITH ME THIS EVENING—"

"Gentler, perhaps?" Lily heard Padfoot whisper from the corridor. "Perhaps more, um, songlike?"

"Or simply ask her," Moony countered. "You know, as though it were a question."

"Ridiculous," Prongs muttered, sighing before thudding his fist twice against the door. "Lily," he
said again, only slightly softer. "You will have dinner with—" he coughed, adding a lilt to the end of the sentence. "Me?"

"Phrasing," Padfoot tutted. "Try a 'please,' also—"

"Are you deliberately undermining my authority?" Prongs snapped. "It's not a request—"

"Yes, but women like to be requested," Padfoot told him, which was met with a sniff from Moony.

"I would never stoop to admitting that Padfoot ever knows what he's talking about," Moony reminded Prongs, "but in this case, he isn't technically wrong."

Prongs let out a growl. "Lily," he said, trying again. "Dinner, you me. Please. Tonight."

"Close enough," Padfoot sighed, and Lily glanced nervously at the animals who watched her from inside the room, blinking expectantly as they waited for her answer.

No, her fear whispered. No, no, I can't—

"Um," Lily called back, biting her lip as she ducked Scarlett's imploring gaze. "I don't know."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KN-"

"Hush, hush, Prongs, gentle—"

Prongs let out a growl, lowering his volume. "What do you mean," he seethed irritably, "you don't know?"

Lily chewed her lip, trying not to look at Scarlett's hopeful nod.

"I just—it's been a very confusing day," she said, frantically searching for a possible excuse. "I don't know that I wish to have … dinner," Lily finished, staring at her feet.

I don't wish to have dinner with you, she had been careful not to say, but by the look of Scarlett and Wormtail's displeasure, the intent had been clear enough.

There was a pause from the other side of the door.

"What does that mean?" Prongs demanded, his voice poorly hushed. "She doesn't wish to eat?"

"Er," Padfoot said, clearly not wanting to clarify. "I, um—"

"Perhaps," Moony interrupted, "it might show a softer side of you, Prongs, if you were to accept her disinclination to join you, and thus—"

"LILY," Prongs roared furiously. "YOU WILL HAVE DINNER WITH ME, OR—"

"Well, now, wait a minute," Padfoot cut in nervously, "perhaps you could cushion the request with some humor, perhaps—use that excellent wit of yours, my liege, or offer her some flowers, or chocolates—"

"Or promises you don't intend to keep," Moony contributed in a low drawl, as Prongs huffed his disapproval.

"Lily," he said again, the entire room shaking beneath her as he stepped closer to the door. "You will have dinner with me. You can't stay in there forever—"
"Can't I?" Lily remarked bitterly, the words slipping out without much forethought. "You've trapped me in this castle, haven't you?"

"Oh no," she heard Padfoot whisper.

"You think I've trapped you?" Prongs snarled. "Fine. Fine. Stay in there," he shouted, the sound of claws raking pointedly across her door. "STARVE, FOR ALL I CARE!"

"Prongs," Padfoot pressed nervously. "Prongs, if you could just—"

But by the sound of it, he had already stomped away.

"Yes," Moony remarked eventually. "You do have quite the romantic touch, Padfoot."

"Shut up," Padfoot retorted, and on the other side of the door, Lily Evans sank to the floor, wondering what she'd just done.

\[ VI. \]

A curse upon a castle seeps in through the floors, flooding the souls of its occupants. A beauty, well-intentioned, is still capable of fear; a beast, clinging to hope, is still capable of cruelty. A curse, then, which lives in their bones, tears apart what would destroy it.

And thus: danger, and deceit.

Lily slipped out of her tower bedroom, careful to keep her steps silent.

"Where's the kitchen?" she whispered to Minerva, who offered something that might have been a shrug.

"Down," the cat replied, darting in front of her and prompting Lily to nearly trip over her own feet on the stairs. "Be careful you don't go anywhere you shouldn't," she warned, leaping onto one of the stone banisters.

"Somewhere I shouldn't?" Lily echoed curiously. "Like where?"

"Hey," Moony barked, sitting up at the bottom of the staircase. "What are you telling her?"

"Nothing," Minerva purred smoothly, though she looked rather smug. "Didn't you hear me specifically say that she's not allowed to go to the west wing?"

"West wing?" Lily repeated, her eyes wide. "Why not?"

"Oi, would you not?" Moony yelped, baring his teeth slightly. "You know Prongs would utterly lose his shit if he heard you telling her not to go to the—"

"The trophy room?" Minerva asked languidly, flicking her tail. "You heard me, Moony. I specifically told her not to go there."

"But why not?" Lily protested, though she was ignored as Padfoot suddenly barreled into Moony's thick grey fur.

"Did I miss it?" he panted. "Is she coming down for dinner?"
"Yes," Minerva said stiffly, just as Moony let out a groan.

"Prongs specifically said for us to make sure she *didn't* leave," he reminded them. "You know how he is—"

"Yes, we do," Padfoot said, "and we don't care. Look at her!" he said, bounding up a step to rest his chin on Lily's thigh, whining excitedly. "We have to care for her, Moony, she's a lady—"

"But of course, she shouldn't go to the west wing," Minerva remarked, scrutinizing her paw. "Certainly not there."

"Okay," Lily sighed, "you keep saying that, but—"

"Oh, *hard* no to the west wing," Padfoot agreed. "But surely we can indulge the tiny mutiny of finding her *dinner*—"

"You're impossible," Moony grumbled.

"Well, do you want her to starve?" Padfoot countered, leaping down the steps to bound after him. "Listen, we'll take her down to the kitchens and have the twins prepare her something, it'll all be very delightfully hush-hush—"

"Will you *stop*?"

"No I will not *stop*, Moony, not until Lily has been properly fed and loved and protected—"

"For heaven's sake. Have you ever heard the phrase 'worship like a dog,' Padfoot?"

"Have you ever heard the phrase 'hungry like the wolf,' Moony?"

"That's not even relevant!"

"It is too, she's *hungry*, like a *wolf*—"

Lily, who had only pretended to follow, watched the bickering dog and wolf disappear from sight before ducking down one of the alternate shifting staircases.

"Hey," she whispered to Minerva, "which part of the castle are we in?"

The cat didn't look up. "Third floor," she said, nudging a paw to the left, and Lily hid a smile, promptly descending the staircase and stepping off in a hallway lined with armored figures, all of whom seemed to have turned their heads to watch her go.

She picked up speed, feeling nervous, and suddenly emerged in a room that *had* to have been the trophy room; or rather, it must have been at one time. The glass cases had all been smashed—a long time ago, by the looks of it, as dust had collected on the broken shards—and what had not been broken or shattered lay on the floor, shoved against the walls, the trophies themselves tarnished beyond legibility.

Lily bent, picking one of them up and running her thumb over what appeared to be a crest, featuring four animals and a scroll she couldn't quite make out. She was about to rub the letters into view when she looked up, catching sight of something glistening; a single red petal, falling from a perfect blooming rose.

She came to her feet, approaching it curiously. Unlike the other trophies, the rose was clearly cared for, the glass around it pristine and untouched by dust, and it hovered mid-air, suspended from
nothing above a pedestal. She raised a hand, suffering an inexplicable need to touch it—to connect with it, knowing it was magic—and feeling in awe of it, despite its obvious fragility.

"Don't fucking touch that," a voice warned behind her, and Lily leapt back with a gasp, Prongs' ominous shadow coming into view behind her. "You may not want to have dinner with me," he said testily, "but you certainly don't get to ruin me."

"Ruin you?" Lily echoed, fighting the urge to gulp as he took a step closer, his face coming into the light. "Why would a rose ruin you?"

"As if you care," Prongs snorted dubiously, taking a step and then seeming to delight as she shrank back in fear, something in his eyes changing as they met hers. "All you see when you look at me is a beast."

"And why shouldn't I?" Lily retorted, trying to be firm despite how very foreboding he was, all black claws and big teeth and sharp edges. "It's not like you've been particularly welcoming, you know."

"Please," Prongs said gruffly. "I've been more than kind. I've been indulgent, in fact. Overly so, seeing as you are a trespasser, and would have been dumped in the dungeons if I were anything but immensely charitable—"

"I told you, this was an accident!" Lily countered. "I was with my friend—"

"Severus?" Prongs supplied, his eyes flashing dangerously. "Well. Trusting him was your first mistake, then."

"What does that mean?" Lily demanded. "He's actually been nice to me, you know, unlike you—"

"Yes, well, 'niceness' doesn't exactly top my list of priorities, considering it's his fault that I—nevermind," Prongs growled, abruptly cutting himself off. "The point is," he said brusquely, "you need to learn to follow the rules."

Despite herself—despite the danger she knew she should feel in his presence, and the very real sense of apprehension—she felt compelled to give in to a sudden rush of temper.

"Why do you make the rules?" Lily demanded, glaring at him. "The others seem terrified of you!"

He shrugged, indifferent.

"Animal kingdom, darling," Prongs muttered, flashing his teeth. "In case it escaped your attention, I'm rather large and impressive."

"So?" Lily countered. "What gives you the right to tell them what they can do, or what they can call each other, or—"

His face darkened warningly, and she let the words trail off, dissipating from her tongue as she watched him stiffen in anger.

"I've suffered long enough in this castle without the added trauma of being forced to listen to you," Prongs snarled at her. "Just—go back to your room—"

"You can't tell me what to do!" Lily retorted, taking a step forward in her fury. "You may be their master, but you're certainly not mine—"
"Oh, I most certainly am," Prongs snapped, lunging forward. "If you're going to live in this castle, you'll abide by my authority—"

"And who are you to decide that?" Lily retorted furiously. "You're arrogant and selfish, and if Severus did this to you, then—" She stopped, scowling. "Then you probably deserved it!"

Prongs' face went blank with rage.

"You," he said, stepping towards her, "have no idea what you're talking about."

"I think I've seen enough to know," she protested forcefully, stumbling backwards as he took a step, unnerved by the prospect of him coming towards her. "You can't possibly be so cruel and still think you're somehow innocent, you know—"

"And you can't possibly be this self-righteous and stubborn, and yet here we both are!" Prongs roared angrily. "You're living in my castle, disturbing my rose—"

"Listen," Lily seethed, "I don't want to be here any more than you want me here, so I'll just—" she sputtered. "You can just—"

"Er, found her," Padfoot interrupted sheepishly, appearing in the doorway with Moony. At the sound of their voices, Prongs turned, leaving a vacancy between Lily and the door.

She didn't say anything; didn't make a sound. She simply aimed herself towards the exit and took off running, knowing that two things were certain: one, that a locked door didn't necessarily mean barred windows, and two, that there was no possible way she could spend another moment with the beast who called himself Prongs.

"Where is she going?" Sirius said fretfully, and James let out a huff of annoyance.

"Running away," James muttered, staring at where she'd disappeared. "Good riddance," he added, fighting the unconscious shudder of nerves that Remus, watching silently, hadn't missed.

"Prongs," Remus warned, his voice low. "You know what'll happen to her if she gets outside these walls."

James grimaced, helplessly bringing a hand to the raised edges of the scars around his throat. "She's the one who wanted to leave," he said simply, but Remus shook his head.

"Come on now, Prongs," Remus said, shaking his head. "You know you can't let her go like this."

There was a crashing sound of a window breaking from elsewhere in the castle, and James reached up, rubbing the bridge of his monstrous nose.

"This isn't my fault," he muttered insistently. "She came in here fucking around with the rose. She goaded me. She broke the rules. She—"

"Yes, yes to all of that," Sirius agreed. "But still." He lowered himself to the ground, resting his head mournfully on his paws. "You won't let her die, will you, Prongs?"

James sighed.

"She'll always hate me," he told them, stiff with certainty. "I can't make her love me."

"How about," Remus ventured, "you settle for saving her life, and then we'll see how that turns
out?"

James grimaced.

"Fine," he muttered, shoving past them and heading towards the sound of the crash.

Lily leapt from the smashed-in window frame of the castle's Great Hall down to a thicket of trees, determined to make it out. It was dark by then and the foliage rendered sight nearly impossible, but she steadied herself and launched ahead, certain it was this or nothing.

She stumbled against a tree trunk, something wrapping itself around her ankle; she tried to free herself but the more she pulled, the tighter the grip got, a vine of sorts twining up her leg and rooting her in place. She struggled, fighting to tear herself free, but the vines only seemed more insistent, reaching out like tentacles until they had twined themselves around her waist, her ribs, her chest, her neck, slowly cutting off her breath.

"Help," she choked out, shutting her eyes to avoid the thorns she could feel on the branches and calling desperately to anyone who might hear. "Help me, please—"

The final word was incoherent, little more than a gasp, and she surrendered herself helplessly to a solitary defeat when suddenly a large claw sliced through the vines across her front, releasing her with a loud, gasping breath. She turned, feeling herself tugged against the chest of the creature that could only be Prongs as he used his claws to fight the tangled vines, the thorns of them shifting their paths to reach greedily for his throat.

"Get out," he muttered hoarsely to her. "I'll keep them away from you."

She nodded and ran, searching for something useful at the line where the trees had met castle walls. She caught a glimpse of silver—an axe—and heaved it up over her shoulder, running back to where Prongs had already collapsed, the branches dragging him to his knees.

She slashed at the vines with difficulty, finding the tool difficult to maneuver, but discovering that it was enough for only one of two things. One, to free enough space for a small person to get out, to make it through the forest, to possibly escape while the vines were distracted; or two, to hack them away long enough to permit a much larger beast to crawl back towards the castle.

Lily made her choice and slammed the axe against the largest branch—the one that had wrapped itself around Prongs' neck, the thorns digging in and leaving tracks of blood in their wake. The vines, finding a new target, slowly retreated from Prongs' unsteady form, instead swallowing the silver axe as Lily managed to drag her rescuer back towards the castle.

She collapsed with him, her strength used up by the process of moving him, and tore a piece of her skirt, pressing it to the wounds at his neck. She noticed, then, that there were raised white edges torn into the skin and fur; scars, she realized, from what must have been a similar attempt.

"You could have warned me," she murmured to him, putting pressure on the seeping wounds. His eyes fluttered, neither open nor closed.

"I did," he said flatly, and she sighed.

"You could have been killed," she told him.

This time, his eyes opened, revealing the odd, human hazel within.
"Yes," he said. "But you didn't let me die."

"No," she agreed. "I didn't."

Prongs sighed, flinching as he tried to move his arm and found it bloodied. "You can't get out," he told her. "I've tried."

"How many times?" she asked, and he grimaced.

"Enough to know for sure," he admitted, staring at his hands.

For a moment, she felt sad for him, seeing the way he had suffered; she felt, despite everything, that there was something in this creature she could understand.

Escape.

"Can you stand?" she asked, gesturing to the heavy double doors. "I don't think I can drag you, or that it would be very comfortable for you even if I could."

Prongs glanced at them, and then seemed to consider her for a moment. "Will you follow my rules?" he demanded, and she made a face.

"Will you be nice?" she countered.

He scoffed. "Will you be reasonable?"

"I will if you will," she said sternly, and he let out an unsteady breath; something that might have been a laugh, had his lungs not been compromised, or his pride not been wounded.

"Fucking magical forest," he muttered, glaring at it, but Lily thought she saw something flicker in his eyes when they met hers.

Another thing she understood, she realized.

Relief.

"She didn't open the bookstore today," Severus said, fidgeting. "I was supposed to meet her this afternoon, but she wasn't there."

"So?" Regulus asked, not looking up from his cartography assignment; he was charming a map to chart the magical zones of an Albanian forest, on the basis of one of Tom's ambiguous whims. "Is that so abnormal?"

"Yes," Severus replied impatiently. "That bookstore means everything to her—the collection was her father's, and he's the reason she wanted to open one, and—" he grimaced, trailing off. "It's just not normal."

"It's one day," Regulus assured him. "I'm sure she'll have an explanation tomorrow."

Severus chewed his thumbnail, still festering with worry.

"Sure," he lied, thoroughly unconvinced.

VII.
What does a beast share with a beauty? A hunger to be seen for what lies beneath; to be witnessed for a soul, which bears no face, but harbors truth unyielding. For things that are shared, beauty beholden; for things accursed, cast aside.

And so: close quarters, and on the horizon, distant smoke.

"She's been missing for nearly three weeks," Severus ranted, pacing the floor of their workshop. "This is no accident, Reg, something happened—"

"You're certain she wouldn't have left on her own?" Regulus asked, glancing up. "I know you were close, Sev, and perhaps you don't want to admit it, but people come and go, especially ones who don't have any other roots in Hogsmeade—"


Regulus sighed, finding the other man's sorrow impossible to ignore. "Alright," he said quietly. "I'll help you."

"Thank you, Regulus," Severus exhaled, gripping the other man's shoulder with a mixture of gratitude and relief. "Thank you."

"Prongs," Lily said in greeting, taking her seat across from him at one of the Great Hall's tables. "Good morning."

The window, unsurprisingly, had long since repaired itself.

"Lily," Prongs returned, nodding once. He picked up a spoon, glaring at it, before dipping it in the twins' mediocre approximation of porridge. "Did you sleep well?"

"Quite," she replied. "And you?"

"Horribly," he told her. "Had a nightmare."

"Were you trapped in a magical castle with only talking animals for company?" she asked innocently, and he glanced up, checking for signs of mockery.

Not finding any, he relaxed.

"No," he replied smoothly. "I dreamt that I was an unholy abomination. Red hair," he explained, gesturing to his antlers.

"Oh, hilarious," she snorted, rolling her eyes.

He smiled, though the evidence of it vanished the moment his spoon slipped between his fingers. "The nightmare continues," he muttered to himself, fishing it out of his porridge.

She stifled a laugh, hiding the motion behind a napkin.

"It's happening," a voice whispered loudly. "Do you see it, Moony?"

"Yes, Padfoot," the wolf returned, sighing. "I'm right here."
"What's happening?" Wormtail piped in. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Padfoot and Moony said in unison, the former releasing a dreamy sigh.

"Padfoot," Prongs called neutrally, prompting the dog to pop up from beneath the table. "Don't you have a panda to woo?"

"Ah, she can wait," Padfoot returned. "Romance takes time, you know," he added slyly, and then let out a swift yelp. "Moony, can you not—"

"Sugar?" Lily asked. Prongs nudged it towards her.

Their hands touched; she didn't flinch.

"Thank you," she said, absentmindedly taking a bite of toast as she lowered a cube of sugar into her tea.

At her feet, Padfoot sighed with pleasure.

"You should give her something," Remus advised, stretching lazily. "She seems to like books."

"She likes them, yes, but her taste in them is horrid," James muttered reflexively, but at the suggestion, he slowly looked up. "What would you propose?"

"Frankly, I would simply propose," Sirius ventured obnoxiously, but Remus placed his paw on the dog's insufferable snout, silencing him.

"She's already seen the library," Remus remarked, "but we all know where the good books are."

"Is the owl still hoarding them?" James asked, frowning thoughtfully, and Remus gave him an oddly cogent shrug.

"One way to find out," he mused, refusing to budge as Sirius snorted his approval from beneath the wolf's paw, contributing a muffled bark of agreement.

"So," Prongs said, gesturing to a door with an eagle-shaped knocker. "This is Ravenclaw tower."

"Ravenclaw," Lily echoed, staring at the lifelike brass. "What's that?"

"This castle used to be a school," Prongs explained, either failing to notice her look of surprise at the rare detail or dismissing it entirely. "Ravenclaw was one of the four houses."

"Oh," she said, noticing he was in a sharing mood, but deciding not to press the issue. "And what's so special about Ravenclaw?"

"Well, they're intellectuals," Prongs began, sounding bored with his own characterization, "or so they believe; but more importantly, they're deeply insatiable thieves."

"Thieves?" she asked skeptically.

"Thieves," he confirmed, nodding. "The best books—the rare ones—will be in here."

"Oh," Lily said, trying and failing to hide her excitement at the prospect; she missed, more than anything, the comfort of her father's books, and had found the castle's library nearly stripped of any
she'd once loved. "How do we get in?"

"Well, I wasn't a Ravenclaw," Prongs informed her, bending to look at the knocker. "But I think we have to answer a riddle."

"What kind of rid-"

"What do all men want," the knocker began, opening its beak, "but few possess, that some would die for, and none protest?"

"Beauty," Lily guessed, just as Prongs murmured, "love."

She glanced at him with surprise, but the eagle seemed to nod smugly, satisfied. "Both answers accepted," it murmured, and the door was opened, revealing an airy room with high ceilings, the breeze from a tower balcony swirling around their waists to draw them in.

"Wow," Lily exhaled with surprise, looking around the room. "This is—"

"Those fucking thieves," Prongs cursed under his breath, shaking his head.

The room was lined—floor to ceiling, apart from equally high windows—with shelves that were littered with books, all neatly arranged; there was obvious care here, even reverence, but the books themselves showed signs of age, of constant touching along their spines. Lily stepped towards the nearest shelf, freeing a thick royal blue volume from its slot.

"This looks just like a book my father gave me," Lily murmured, running her finger over the embossed lettering of the anthology of fairy tales. "On the inside cover, he had written—"

She stopped, her breath catching as she noticed the familiar handwriting inside. Dearest Lily, it read, may your life always have magic. "No," she whispered, looking up. "Prongs, this is—I can't believe it—"

"Hm?" he asked vacantly, looking up from a book titled Hogwarts, A History and stepping towards her. "What is it?"

"This book," Lily said, wondering if it were even possible. "I think it's the exact one my father gave me, but—I left it in my shop, in the village—"

"Huh," Prongs remarked, tilting his head. "Well, this is a magic castle," he reminded her wryly. "I suppose if it can trap us and feed us, it can do us the not-unreasonable favor of also slipping us a book or two."

"Yes," Lily agreed, feeling a shiver of awe and something strangely promising. "I suppose so." She looked up, smiling helplessly as she hugged the book to her chest. "I miss him," she confessed quietly, and Prongs, unexpectedly, seemed to soften, his hazel eyes warming as he looked at her.

"What happened?" he asked, and she sighed.

"My parents passed away when I was a teenager," Lily explained. "My father had a bookshop that had quite a bit of debt, so my sister and I sold the store and agreed that I would keep some of the books. I promised my sister I would re-open his store somewhere else—not that she really cared," she added, making a face. "She thought being a shopkeeper would be too small a life."

Prongs considered her silently. "Is it?" he asked, and Lily grimaced.
"Smaller than a castle," she admitted, and he made a sound that she swore was a low appreciative chuckle. "What about your parents?"

Prongs swallowed heavily, his amusement promptly fading. "I haven't seen them since—since this," he said, gesturing vaguely to his face. "Not really, anyway—but I do know they passed somewhat recently."

Lily bit her lip, watching his chin drop with sadness. "I'm so sorry," she murmured, reaching for his hand. She rested her fingers atop his. "How do you know?"

He opened his mouth and then closed it, hesitating; his gaze tentatively darted askance, and she frowned. "What is it?" she pressed, letting her hand fall back to her side.

He looked down, noting the absence, before letting out a burdened breath.

"Lily," he ventured tangentially, slowly dragging his eyes back to hers. "Would you want to have dinner with me tonight? I could show you the castle," he offered, and she blinked, finding the suggestion deeply unexpected. "Take you on a tour?"

"I thought there were rules about where I could go," she remarked mockingly, and he made a face. "I'm making an exception," he grumbled, looking haughtily bristled. "So will you?"

In the moment, he was devastatingly awkward, hunched over slightly as though he fully expected her to refuse and was dreading the inevitable; overall, the effect was surprisingly charming, and yet the smile that tugged at her lips still caught her by surprise.

"I'd like that," she told him honestly, and he gave her a beatific look of relief.

"I made us dinner tonight," she said, placing the plate of food in front of him. "The twins and I actually share the benefit of opposable thumbs, after all," she explained, "and the castle provided us with the materials for a roast my mother used to make, so—"

"I'm ecstatic," James assured her, taking a deep, satisfying breath of the most indulgent meal he'd had in several years. "My mother used to be diligent about Sunday roast, and this looks even better."

Her cheeks flushed, breathlessly pleased.

"Good," Lily said primly, doing a rather poor job of hiding her satisfaction as she sat down and tucked her napkin in her lap, promptly raising a leg of chicken to her lips with her fingers.

"What are you doing?" James asked, startled. She took an overly large bite, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Eating," she said simply. "Forks and knives are tiresome."

James looked down at the too-small fork—one that he'd been struggling to use for nearly a month now—and felt a tingle of something warm: gratitude, perhaps, or else—

Well. It was a small thing, in any case. He shifted in his seat, grateful neither Remus nor Sirius were present to remark upon his—

"PADFOOT," James barked, and then a hurried series of footsteps carried from the hall to the corridor. "Sorry about that," he offered, and Lily smiled, holding a finger to her lips.

"You can leave too, Moony," she called, and then there was a loud, burdened sigh, followed by more sounds of retreating footsteps. "There," she said, smiling.

He smiled back.

"This tastes remarkably familiar," James ventured, flashing back unwillingly to time spent with his mother and father. "It's quite a bit like how my mother used to make it."

"Were you close with your parents?" she asked, and he swallowed uncomfortably, something inexplicably lodged in his throat at the thought.

"Yes," he said, but didn't elaborate. He stared down at his potatoes, severing one with his claw and bringing it to his mouth.

She reached out, stilling the hand that remained on the table. He looked down, surprised, but she continued eating, seemingly pretending not to notice the contact.

"You know, there's nothing like a roast," James attempted, aiming for airy nonchalance, "but one of these days, I'd murder someone for cacciucco."

"Sorry?" Lily asked, glancing up. "What?"

"Not really," he assured her quickly. "I mean, I'd like some, but I promise nobody would have to die."

"Not that," she said with a laugh, rolling her eyes. "The other thing."

"Oh, cacciucco? It's a seafood stew from Tuscany," James explained, his mouth watering at the memory of the meal, eaten on a family holiday in Livorno. "Have you had it?"

Lily shook her head, cheeks flushed. "I haven't been much outside this county, to be quite honest," she told him, the confession clearly burdened as she slowly retracted her hand. "I always wanted to travel the world," she insisted, attempting brightness before her expression promptly faded. "But then my father, and the books, and opening the store—" she shrugged, picking at her food. "I suppose somewhere along the way, preserving his legacy became more important."

James frowned. "You're his legacy," he corrected, and when she ducked her head sheepishly, he reached out, careful not to scratch her as he rested his hand on hers. "No, listen," he admonished, shaking his head. "Don't you think he would want you to be happy?"

"Well, I—I know that," Lily stammered, fidgeting. "But still, the books—"

"The books are something you shared, and they're important," James told her seriously, "but you're his daughter." He stared at her, taking in the way the light flickered, making her green eyes dance. "He was probably prouder of you than any of the books," he added softly, and Lily's eyes widened, something warm filling her gaze.

There it is again, he thought. Something small.

Gratitude.

"Come on," James announced, suddenly toppling the bench behind him as he rose abruptly to his
feet. "I want to show you something."

"So," Tom said, kissing the back of Narcissa's neck. "How goes it at Hogwarts?"

"Rather swimmingly," Narcissa remarked, watching their captives in the looking glass. "A bit too swimmingly, I'd wager."

"You think they'll break the curse?" Tom asked, and she shrugged.

"Nothing I can't remedy, even if that's the case," she assured him. "Hogwarts is a veritable fortress, and they seem to have abandoned any desire to venture out."

"Really? Even the girl?" Tom asked, surprised. "Perhaps she does love that terrible little beast, then."

"She does seem to have a way with broken things," Narcissa commented, waving away the glass reflection and leaning back against his chest. "After all, look at the devotion she seems to have wrangled from Severus."

"Ah, yes," Tom sighed in acknowledgement, pursing his lips. "His distraction doesn't seem to have resolved itself," he lamented. "Perhaps his feelings for her are harder to stamp out than I predicted."

"Is he an asset still?" Narcissa asked pointedly. "Or has Severus become a liability for the success of the project?"

Tom hummed thoughtfully. "Hard to tell," he murmured, and then smirked as she turned in his arms, her fingers running suggestively down the line of his chest. "But perhaps we should discuss it later."

"Perhaps we should," Narcissa agreed, pulling him towards her as she curled her fingers around the back of his neck.

On the other side of the door, Regulus slipped quietly out of sight, uncertain what to make of what he'd just heard.

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VIII.

A reflection can be an illusion, a trick of the light, and a mirror will prove it so; what lies beneath is stirring, and turmoil amongst the beastly thunders underfoot. Beauty and honesty rarely lock hands, but the prince, given one, must then face the other.

And so: a threatening truth, and a very true threat.

"Sev," Regulus said urgently. "I've just heard Tom and Narcissa talking about Lily, and, well, I don't really know what to make of this, but—" he inhaled, grimacing. "Have you ever heard of Hogwarts?"

The parchment slipped from his fingers. "No," Severus whispered, suddenly realizing where Lily had gone.

"Wait," Regulus called after him. "Wait, Sev, there's more—"
"The rose's petals have almost all fallen," Lily commented, slipping her hand into the crook of Prongs' arm as they walked. "Are you worried?"

He glanced down, noticing the gesture, but apparently chose to ignore it in favor of sighing dramatically. "I thought I told you to stay out of there," he muttered, glaring at her, and she shrugged.

"You did," she assured him. "I opted to ignore you."

"You're terrible," he grumbled.

"You're in trouble," she pointed out. "Are you sure there's no way to break the curse?"

Prongs hesitated, then grimaced. "I don't know," he said smoothly—too smoothly—and then took a sharp turn, leading her down a corridor she'd never noticed before. "I wouldn't worry about it. After all," he added, "you've no need to fear ever becoming a beast."

"Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad," Lily said neutrally. "Easier to eat with my hands. And I'd have a much easier time reaching things," she added, "so you wouldn't have to do it for me every time I needed a book from Ravenclaw tower."

Prongs came to a sudden halt. "What?"

"Well, you're tall," Lily joked. "Which may have escaped your attention, but—"

"Not that," he cut in, fidgeting. "You'd—stay?"

She cocked her head, realizing what he meant. "Well," she said slowly, "I'm trapped, aren't I?"

"But what if you weren't?" Prongs pressed. "What if when the last petal falls, the castle lets you go?"

"Oh," Lily said, chewing her lip. "I suppose I hadn't thought about it."

Prongs appeared to force a nod. "Right," he said vacantly, his voice clipped and distracted. "Well, this way, anyway—"

He pulled her into another long darkened corridor, the walls of which were midnight blue and lined with mirrors, each a different size and shape.

"This is the Hall of Mirrors," he explained, gesturing to it. "Each of these mirrors shows you something different."

Lily felt her eyes widen, stepping towards the closest one; an ancient, ornate fixture with clawed feet and a gold frame. "What does this one show?"

"This is the Mirror of Erised," Prongs informed her. "It shows you the thing you desire most in the moment."

Lily stepped in front of it, curious what she'd see. She waited, her reflection suddenly shifting; she was somewhere warm, colorful buildings and the sea behind her, and she was holding something in her hand. A bowl, she realized, filled with a richly vibrant stew, the steam of it wafting up and manifesting in a knowing look of pleasure on her face; an expression that she somehow
instinctively knew meant that she'd been everywhere, and seen it all.

"Cacciucco," she murmured, and turned to Prongs, unable to resist a smile. "What do you see?"

She stepped aside, gesturing for him to take her place, but he shook his head.

"I always see the same thing," he informed her unhappily, with a sulky twinge to his voice that almost made her laugh.

"Which is?" she prompted, and he arched a brow.

"Don't push it," he warned gruffly, but at her look of pleading disappointment, he sighed. "Myself," he admitted, the sound rumbling unhappily under his breath. "As I was before the curse."

"Oh," she murmured, trying to ignore the sudden curiosity that rose up in her chest at what the person under the claws and antlers—the man, with the changing hazel eyes—might have looked like. "Well," she said, glossing over it, "don't you want to have a look?"

"No," Prongs muttered. "It tends to make things worse."

"Oh, come on," she urged, taking his hand and giving him a yank. "Just for a minute—"

He let her pull him into the frame of the mirror and pursed his lips, facing his reflection. "Okay," he muttered, "you got your way, and now I have to—"

He stopped, his eyes widening as he stared.

"What?" Lily pressed. "What is it?"

Prongs heaved a swallow. "Nothing," he whispered. "Like I said," he told her, clearing his throat loudly and hastily ducking out of the mirror's view. "Same as always."

She frowned. "Are you sure?" she asked. "Because you look a little—"

"This one is why I brought you here," he interrupted loudly, pointing to a smaller oval-shaped glass in the corner. "This mirror lets you see anywhere in the world that you wish."

"It does?" Lily gasped, successfully distracted. She stepped towards it and then looking over her shoulder at him. "This is how you saw your parents?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "I would ask to see them, and the mirror would oblige."


"Wait," Lily said, her eyes widening as she watched. "Oh no—oh no—"

"What is it?" Prongs asked worriedly, stepping towards her. "What's happened?"

"Tom," Lily gasped, bringing a hand up to her mouth.

"What have you done to Lily?" Severus demanded, storming into the store's back room. "And why, Tom? Why her?"
"You're very worked up, Severus," Tom murmured, not looking up from the locket he was toying with. "It's very difficult to understand you when you're frustrated."

Severus bristled.

"How did you do it?" he insisted violently, suffering an unwise combination of anger and worry and fear. "You told me the school had been closed, Tom, that you'd fixed it—"

"And I had," Tom replied, referencing the spellbook at his side and then glancing down again at the necklace. "You've noticed, haven't you, that nobody's come after you in the last ten years?"

"Is the castle still there, then?" Severus pressed. "Hogwarts, the castle—is she there? What have you done?" he asked again, taking several furious strides forward. "What did you do, Tom?"

"My goodness," Tom drawled, turning the page of his book. "It's almost as though you've forgotten that I've been the one to take care of you for the last ten years. I'm the one, after all, who cleans up your messes," he reminded him pointedly, "and I'm the one who taught you everything you know."

He finally glanced up, slowly meeting Severus' eye. "If I didn't know better," Tom mused, his cold blue eyes flashing with something that felt suspiciously like a taunt, "I'd say you might've foolishly forgotten that I protected you from the vitriol you surely would have faced from this town, if not something far worse. Imagine," he murmured emphatically, "if the villagers of Hogsmeade knew you were a wizard, and a dark one, at that—"

He trailed off meaningfully and Severus clenched a fist, long past irritated.

"You may have protected me then," Severus hissed, quietly seething, "but you've crossed a line now, Tom."

"Have I?" Tom asked neutrally, leaning back in his chair. "Tell me, Severus, how I've done such a thing."

"Lily isn't yours to play with," Severus snapped. "You may have toyed with me for the last ten years, but I'll be damned if I let you—"

"Let me?" Tom cut him off, scoffing. "Do you think there is a world where you are a match for me, Severus? Because let me assure you," he said, rising sharply to his feet and holding out a hand, "there is not."

Severus choked as Tom's fingers closed in mid-air, his magic coiling itself around Severus' throat.

"Yes," Tom murmured suddenly, his brow faintly furrowed as he watched Severus struggle for air, "the castle still exists. It's hidden in the forest." He tilted his head, observing Severus from afar. "Lily's there—though I should warn you, so is James Potter. You remember him, don't you?" He smiled as Severus fought for a gasping breath. "You do remember turning him into that—well, what should we call it?" He tapped his mouth facetiously with the hand that wasn't strangling Severus, making a show of his deliberation. "A beast, perhaps, is the word?"

Severus choked out something like acknowledgement, and Tom smiled.

"You did that, Severus," he reminded him, half-laughing at the memory. "You used a spell to ruin him, and now you wish me to save your precious beauty from—what, exactly?" Tom mused. "Do you imagine, somehow, that I wish an innocent girl's demise?"

"You—" Severus choked out. "You—"
"I?" Tom asked expectantly, cupping a hand around his ear. "Do spit it out, Severus," he remarked, chuckling as he abruptly released him and Severus fell to his hands and knees, coughing and retching on the floor.

"You know," Tom commented, walking around his desk to drop to a crouch beside Severus, "I had no intention to hurt her. I wonder, though," he tutted softly. "If the beast you created feels the same way?"

Severus' chest filled with fear, straining in his lungs.

"Where," Severus rasped, coughing again. "Where is the castle now?"

"Ah, same place it always was," Tom informed him, looking terribly amused. "You were just too eager to put your sins behind you to ever bother looking, weren't you?"

Severus reached up, using the corner of the desk to launch himself to his feet, ignoring Tom's unflinching smile.

"I'm going to save her," Severus grunted, and Tom chuckled beatifically as his apprentice shoved past him, heading for the door.

"Best of luck," he called, resoundingly unapologetic as he watched the other man's exit.

The moment Severus exited the room, Narcissa entered, apparating with a soft crack.

"Well?" she prompted, gesturing to where Severus had been. "What would you like me to do?"

Tom turned towards her, flashing his too-clever smile. "Oh, just gather the villagers," he suggested whimsically. "I think it's time we told them who the real monster is in this town."

"He's in trouble," Lily said, her eyes wide. "Tom's hurting him, and I can't tell how or why but something is wrong—" She paced the room, toying with her long auburn hair. "I just—I wish I could get to him, somehow, to make sure he's okay, but—"

She groaned, stopping in front of James and suddenly resting her forehead against his chest. "I just wish there was something I could do," she whispered, and James let his hands fall, one of them gingerly stroking her hair.

"Maybe there is," he murmured, and she looked up, her brow furrowed.

"How?" she asked. "You've tried for ten years to get out, Prongs, so I doubt there's a way to—"

"The book I found in Ravenclaw Tower," he interrupted, a stir of apprehension at the confession sinking unhappily in his chest. "It says there's a room in the castle that can produce a way to the outside."

Lily frowned. "Like a secret passage?"

"More like a portal," James said. "But I didn't say anything before," he clarified hastily, "because I have no idea yet if it's true, or if it would even work, so—"

"But we have to try," Lily exclaimed, taking a step back and pulling him out of the Hall of Mirrors at a fairly graceless run. "Where is it? If we could just—"

"Oooh, you two are in a hurry to get upstairs," Sirius interrupted, suddenly appearing out of an
alcove and nipping playfully at their heels as Remus followed. "I take it the dinner went well?"

"Not now, Padfoot," James grumbled, leading Lily up one of the shifting staircases.

"Where are you going?" Remus called after them, a dubious tone creeping into his wolfish growl.

"Oh, hush," Minerva admonished, the voices fading as James and Lily stepped onto the seventh floor landing.

"It should be here," James explained, pointing to the wall. "You just have to, um—think about it," he said, feeling foolish. "About where you want to go, and then walk in front of it three times—"

"I feel silly," Lily sighed, dutifully following his instructions. "I mean, what if it doesn't work?"

"It might not," James admitted. "But if it does, then—"

He stopped as a door appeared and Lily's eyes widened; she pulled it open and a long tunnel seemed to materialize from nothing, a light glimmering at the other end.

James, catching the look of wonder on her face, paused to consider that he wished the feeling that had struck his chest had been, as her response indicated, simply surprise at the portal's appearance, but he knew that in reality it was something much worse. It was an incomprehensible, harrowing dread, knowing for certain what would have to come next now that her way out was real.

"Wow," she whispered, and then shook herself of her reverie, taking James' hand. "Come on, we have to stop him—"

"Lily," James ventured hesitantly, his claws closing gently around her wrist as she tried to pull him through the doorframe. "I can't come with you."

She frowned. "Why not? Don't you want to leave?"

Yes, he thought. With you, anything—anywhere—I swear it—

"Lily," James sighed forcefully, "look at me."

She blinked. "It's—you're not—" she inhaled sharply, shaking herself of what they both knew was true and yet wanted so badly to deny. "It'll be fine, Prongs, I promise—"

"No, it won't be," he told her. "Look at me, Lily, look at what I am—"

"Okay, so people will be frightened at first," Lily babbled tentatively, "but eventually they would get to know you, and they would see, like I did—"

"That's not how the world works, Lily," James interrupted regretfully, shaking his head. "And you don't understand—this happened to me because I was cruel to someone," he confessed, the words spilling out despite his fervent wish to shut his mouth. "Because I was selfish and arrogant, just like you said—"

"I didn't know you then," she half-whispered, but he pressed on.

"This is my punishment for what I've done," he told her. "I will be a monster forever, and no one outside of these castle walls will ever understand. If anything, the fact that you—"

He broke off, still tormented by the image of her in the Mirror of Erised; haunted by the look on her face, the way she had glanced up at him with a smile that had said, somehow, that everything
would be alright, that it would be *them*, that they would be *together*—that despite what he was, what he'd been, what he'd done, she would love him—

That she could *love him*, wretched as he was—

But that could only be a foolish dream.

"The fact that you bothered to know me at all was reprieve enough," he told her sincerely, blinking away the fiction in the mirror. "But you deserve more than this castle. More," he added, feeling his heart convulse to ash in his chest, "than a life that was meant for a beast."

She bit her lip, staring up at him. "I'll come back, then," she offered, her voice a little wobbly. "I'll come back, and maybe we can still figure it out—maybe we can still break the curse, Prongs, there's still *time*—"

"Yes, there's time," James agreed, "for you. Go see the world," he urged. "Travel, explore. Eat with a fork," he teased, and she gave a tiny, tragic hiccup of a laugh. "Forget me," he murmured, tilting her chin up with his inhuman finger. "Forget me and live your life, Lily."

She leaned into his touch, her gaze dropping sorrowfully to the floor.

"Prongs," she began, but he shook his head, nudging her through the doorway before releasing her.

"Go," he urged, taking a few steps back. "And Lily, I—"

She paused in the doorway, still looking over her shoulder. "Yes?"

*I'll miss you.*

"I hope," he forced out, "that you get everything you're searching for."

Her lip trembled, and she nodded. "You too, Prongs," she whispered, and then he closed his eyes, standing still until the door had blended back into the wall and he was certain she had gone.

He wandered morosely through the halls, the castle suddenly empty without her; he came across Sirius and Remus waiting expectantly by the door to the trophy room and tried to summon the energy to address them.

"She's gone," was all he managed, the impact of the words like knives against his throat as he headed towards what was left of the enchanted rose.

"What do you mean she's gone?" Sirius demanded, following him inside. "Where'd she go?"

"Padfoot," Remus muttered, nudging him as he looked at James' face. "Not now."

"Do you mean spiritually gone?" Sirius pressed. "Psychologically?"

"Padfoot—"

"No, I want to understand this," Sirius insisted, his teeth snapping together. "Are you saying you found a way out and then you *let her go*? What about the curse, James?"

"Don't," James growled, flinching at the sound of his name, but Sirius shook his head, for once refusing to cooperate.

"You're James Potter," Sirius barked furiously, "and I'm Sirius Black, and she was supposed to
help us be fucking *human again*—"

"Padfoot," Remus warned sharply. "Don't—"

"How, James?" Sirius insisted as James fell to his knees in front of the rose, watching the last remaining petal and wishing the castle would simply swallow him whole. "How could you let her go?"

"Because that's love," Minerva interrupted, landing lightly atop one of the shattered cases. "And if he had asked her to stay, the curse could have never been broken."

"But it can't be broken *now,*" Sirius wailed, burying his head in Remus' side. "She's fucking *gone!*"

"Well," Minerva said primly, leaping from the shelf to James' side and perching daintily beside him. "Call it feline intuition, but let's just say I'm optimistic."

"You just say that because *you* have eight more lives after *our* beastly eternity," Sirius muttered, resting his head on his paws with a sigh as Remus curled up beside him, nudging him with a low, sorrowful whine.

Minerva cleared her throat, and James slowly shifted his head, tearing his gaze from the rose's final petal to glance down at her.

"Cheer up, Mr Potter," Minerva told him quietly, tucking her tail underneath her. "Have a little faith."

James, who wanted very much to be completely laid to waste, managed a sigh.

"Thanks, Professor," he whispered, lightly patting the top of her head.

"Citizens of Hogsmeade," Tom announced to the crowd, "it is with great displeasure that I inform you that one of our own, Severus Snape, is responsible for unleashing a monster upon us this evening. I regret that I couldn't do more to stop him," he continued, painting a mask of sympathy, "but things being as they are, it is our responsibility to protect our town—to defend our women and children, and to be certain that his dalliances in the dark arts do not bring great evil among us."

He paused, watching their eyes widen predictably in horror.

"We must be brave," Tom continued, "and *strong,* and we must defeat Snape's creature together, so that our futures will be restored along with our peace of mind."

"What is it?" someone asked. "A creature?"

"With horns," Tom confirmed, nodding, "and claws and terrible fangs, and a most gruesome appetite for those of us who simply wish to live our humble lives."

"We must kill it!" another voice shouted. "We must be rid of it before it destroys us!"

There were several shouts of agreement; Tom nodded solemnly, painting the final stroke.

"Be careful with Severus," Tom begged. "I hate to ask it of you, but seeing as I am so very fond of him—"

"He who creates abomination is vile himself," a voice contributed firmly. "I say we kill Snape and his beast!"
"Yes, kill the sorcerer and the beast!"

"We're not safe until we're rid of him—"

"We must stop them both before it's too late!"

"Oh no," Tom murmured under his breath, fighting not to laugh. "What have I done?"

The voices grew louder, clamoring and festering, fear spreading like a virus in the night.

"We must—"

"We should—"

"It's our duty to our children—"

"There's no way around it—"

"We'll have to—"

"KILL THE BEAST!"

Tom curled a hand around his smile, letting it dissipate into his palm.

"I know the way," he announced grimly, and beckoned over his shoulder. "You all can follow me."

---

Lily emerged from the darkened tunnel to a room that looked hazily familiar; something carefully cluttered, much like the stockroom of her bookstore. She took a step through a full-sized mirror, passing through it as though the glass did not exist, and upon glancing ahead she was startled to find herself suddenly looking directly into a set of coldly alluring blue eyes.

"Hello, Lily," Narcissa said expectantly. "You didn't think it would really be that easy, did you?"

Lily leapt back, startled, but the mirror behind her had already turned back to glass. "Where's Severus?" she demanded, and Narcissa let out a haunting laugh.

"Going after you, I expect," she replied, shrugging innocently. "Pity that won't do him much good."

"How did you—" Lily gaped at her. "How did you know I was—"

Narcissa tapped her foot impatiently, summoning a set of restraints from nothing and fastening Lily to the wall behind her.

"Now, now, Lily dear," she murmured, taking a step towards her. "You didn't actually think your beast was the only one with a magic mirror, did you?"

---

**IX.**

*Here is a riddle to end the story: what makes a monster, and what makes a man?*

*And thus: a prince is redeemed.*

"Lily," Severus shouted, running through the castle. Most of it had been destroyed over time, its finery long eroded, and an unsettling number of eyes seemed to blink at him from the shadows,
hovering near his feet. "Lily, where are you?"

He ran through one of the familiar open doors, nearly stumbling over a shaggy black dog. "Lily, are you here?"

"Oh good," a voice said irritably. "You're here."

Severus caught a glimpse of antlers and swallowed a vision that had haunted his nightmares, a set of hazel eyes beneath a halo of prongs. "Potter," he managed hoarsely, and the beast who was James Potter sat up, flashing him a darkened grimace.

"Severus," he said dully.

Severus blanched. "Not Snivellus?"

"Yeah," James scoffed. "Like I'd make that mistake again."

He fell back against the floor, curling up in an awkwardly uncomfortable-looking ball.

"Have—" Severus started, and faltered. "Have you seen Lily?"

James' spine seemed to bristle at the mention of her.

"She's gone," he mumbled. "Went after you."

Severus blinked. "Me?"

"Something about you being in trouble," James muttered. "I don't know. Can you just leave me to my curse in peace, please?"

"Your curse?" Severus asked, and James turned over his shoulder.

"Can you not play dumb right now?" James demanded, his oddly human eyes squinting in a mix of misery and spite. "Yes, the fucking curse. The one that was put on this castle because of you. Because of what I did to you," he amended softly, turning away.

"But," Severus began, frowning. "But I only— it was just you that I—"

"Doesn't matter," James said miserably. "She's gone now." He stared into nothing, pulling his limbs in close. "She's gone," he murmured to himself, "and nothing matters."

Severus waited, unsure what to make of the creature before him whose heartbreak looked so very familiar, and more upsettingly, what looked so—

So completely human.

"Wait," Severus said slowly. "Did you—did you fall in love with her?"

The monster that had been James Potter forced his eyes shut.

"Get out," he croaked, just as a wolf bounded into the room, nearly startling Severus into dropping his torch.

"Prongs," the wolf shouted, speaking with an oddly familiar cadence that Severus was sure he had once known. "There are people coming. A mob," he clarified, "and they have guns, Prongs—"
James didn't react; didn't budge.

"Good," was all he said, and Severus, torn between the memory of the boy he'd hated and the man he'd destroyed, felt an inexplicable wave of panic.

"Hey," Regulus whispered, nudging Lily as he suddenly materialized in the empty room. "Come on, we have to get you out of here—"

"What?" Lily asked, startled. "But—Narcissa—she could be back any moment—"

"Yes, precisely," Narcissa said, appearing with a soft pop. "Oh, Regulus," she lamented, tutting as she watched him pause his attempt to unfasten Lily's restraints. "And here I thought I could trust you."

"I heard him rounding up the villagers, Narcissa," Regulus said firmly, spinning to face her. "Tom's looking to get Severus killed, and I'm not going to let that happen!"

"No he isn't," Narcissa retorted brusquely, making a face. "You're being dramatic, Reg—"

"You didn't hear him," Regulus warned. "I did. And you and I both know he's capable," he added vigorously. "He's leading a vigilante mob to the castle right now—"

"The castle?" Lily gasped suddenly. "But Prongs—"

"Oh, don't pretend you care for him," Narcissa snorted delicately, arching a brow. "You can't possibly tell me you've actually caught feelings for the beast."

"And why not?" Lily countered, glaring at her. "He's—he's kind, and sensitive—"

"And nine feet tall with horns," Narcissa reminded her, pursing her lips.

"I don't care what you think—I'm not going to let him get hurt," Lily said, struggling with her restraints. "Please, just let me go—I don't care if I get trapped in the castle again," she added wildly, not even sure what she was saying until the words had already fallen out of her mouth. "I don't care if I have to stay forever—just please, please don't let anything happen to him—"

Narcissa stared at her, an inexpressible emotion filling her eyes for the first time.

"Do you admire him?" Narcissa asked abruptly. "Do you trust him?"

Lily blinked, uncertain what was happening.

"Yes," Lily said firmly, pleading finding its way to her voice. "Yes, yes, I do—"

"Do you value his intellect?" Narcissa pressed, taking a few rapid steps towards her. "Do you feel a kinship with him?"

"Yes," Lily cried desperately. "Like I've never known before, I swear it—"

"Interesting," Narcissa mused, pressing her fingers to her lips. "Very interesting indeed."

"Narcissa," Regulus cut in, his hand still poised above Lily's restraints. "Just let us save them, will you?"

Narcissa glanced at him, her brow furrowed in thought.
"Please," Lily begged, staring hopefully at her.

Narcissa turned to face her, considering her a moment. "You're very beautiful, you know," she commented, her gaze flicking pointedly over Lily's face. "Are you certain you would trade your precious freedom for the chance to save a beast?"

Lily locked eyes with her, certain of her answer.

"Yes," she confirmed flatly, and then, with a curl of Narcissa's fingers, the restraints at her wrists disappeared.

"Then go," Narcissa said, shrugging ambivalently, and with another wave of her hand, the tunnel in the mirror reappeared.

"Prongs, please—"

"They're breaking down the door, we have to do something—"

"They'll be coming for you, Prongs, just get up—"

James rolled over, tuning them out.

"PRONGS!"

"Padfoot, stop—just—get downstairs, we'll have to stop them ourselves—"

"I'm not leaving him, Moony—"

"He'll be safest if we stop them, Padfoot, you know that—"

"Mr Black—"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Rally the troops. Mr Lupin?"

"Yes?"

"Bare your teeth, young man. You're not a wolf for nothing."

"Yes, Professor."

"And as for you, Mr Potter—"

"I'm not moving," he whispered. "I'm not going anywhere."

He heard her sigh.

"Very well," she murmured.

Her small, padded footsteps faded down the hall.

"I'm not leaving either," a quiet voice informed him.

Snivellus.
"Don't care," James replied, covering his ears and gritting his teeth as the sounds of chaos outside swelled over him in a wave, leaving him numbly defeated.

"Ah," Tom said, shoving the trophy room door open with a bang. "Always excellent to see you, Severus."

"What is this?" Severus hissed, stepping away from where James remained on the floor. "You told me you fixed it, that you'd done something about my mistake—"

"I did," Tom said, gesturing around the castle. "You've noticed the animals, have you not? One of our finer curses," he mused, stepping closer. "And now, I expect the townspeople would like to slay themselves a beast, if you don't mind complying."

"Why did you bring them here?" Severus seethed. "What possible purpose did any of this serve? This—this curse," he said, repulsed by the very thought. "Was this always just about your own vanity?"

"Beauty," James muttered, and Severus stared at Tom.

"Was it?" he demanded, gesturing to James. "Was it only ever about that?"

Tom threw his head back, laughing. "You didn't really think this was ever actually about beauty, did you? This was always about power," he scoffed. "This was always about control, and you were simply too foolish to see it."

"Control," Severus snarled, shaking his head. "You can't control me anymore, Tom—"

"Perhaps I can't," Tom agreed, smiling cruelly. "But then, that's what all these men with guns are for."

Lily raced through the corridors with Regulus at her side, dodging a raccoon that had sunk its claws into the baker's leg. "This way," she said, pulling him after her. "He'll be with the rose, I'm sure of it—"

"What about Severus?" Regulus demanded, and Lily grimaced.

"I think if we find one, we find them all," she said, taking hold of his wrist and dragging him through the corridors as they skirted the collision of Minerva landing atop the banker's head, just missing the twins smashing spatulas into the greengrocer's abdomen and gleefully shoving him into Moony's waiting teeth. "Wait," she said, holding Regulus still as they reached the trophy room, hearing voices inside. "Be careful—"

"Now, let's see," Tom crooned, turning to where she could just barely make out the shape of Prongs curled up on the floor. "This way," she said, pulling him after her. "He'll be with the rose, I'm sure of it—"

"What about Severus?" Regulus demanded, and Lily grimaced.

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"Now, let's see," Tom crooned, turning to where she could just barely make out the shape of Prongs curled up on the floor. "I suppose I can take care of the beast myself while we wait for the others to join us—after all, the villagers believe you to be the sorcerer, Severus, and so conveniently, too —"

"NO," Lily shouted, barrelling into the room and leaping in front of Prongs as Tom raised a hand. She yelped in pain, shuddering and convulsing as she took what felt like the corner of a wayward spell; at the sound of her voice, Prongs instantly turned, blindly seeking her out.
"Lily," he whispered, blinking to focus, as though he didn't trust his eyes. "Lily, what are you doing—"

"Prongs," she sighed, cupping a hand around his cheek. "I had to come back, I couldn't leave you—"

"Ah, how wonderfully sweet," Tom sighed insincerely. "Well, I suppose while you two are busy—"

Lily turned over her shoulder in time to realize that Severus was staring at her—some sort of baffled realization on his face—and had failed to take notice of Tom's ominously outstretched hand.

"Severus," she said, scrambling to her feet, "watch out!"

Severus turned, quickly deflecting Tom's spell at her warning just as she picked up a broken trophy, advancing towards Tom with it.

"Well," Tom sighed, scowling. "I hadn't planned to have to do away with you, Lily," he remarked, lifting a hand towards her. "But I suppose I'd be a fool not to take advantage of the opportunity, wouldn't I?"

"DON'T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HER," Prongs bellowed, suddenly launching himself in front of Lily and Severus and shielding them both to take the brunt of what must have been a curse, the shock of it coursing through him and sending him crashing to the floor in a sideways blow.

"Prongs," Lily gasped, rushing to fall beside him. "Prongs, no—"

"Lily," Severus yelled forcefully, thrusting out a hand that sent her sliding out of Tom's way in the same moment that the room was filled with a loud, guttural scream; Lily turned over her shoulder, fearing the worst, only to find that Tom's hand had dropped, the rest of him going horribly still.

Tom's blue eyes were unnaturally wide, the ghost of the scream still etched into his terribly handsome face as he suddenly dropped to his knees, his spine rigid. There was a moment—a lurch, a distressing sway—and then he collapsed to the floor, revealing Regulus in the doorframe behind him, one hand outstretched as color drained from his cheeks.

Then there was a moment when the sound below them rushed to their ears—the sound of a victorious howl from Padfoot and Moony and then the sounds of retreat, of villagers pressed to the edges of the Forbidden Forest; sounds of another battle altogether. There was a moment, a collective gasping breath, and then Severus rose to his feet, closing the few steps to Regulus as Lily turned back to Prongs, taking his face in her hands.

"Prongs," she whispered, feeling her heart wrench. "Hold on, okay? Hold on, I've got you—"

He reached up with difficulty, drawing the smooth edge of a claw across her cheek. "Lily," he murmured, and she nodded furiously, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Yes," she told him, choking on fear. "Yes, I'm here, so just—hold on, okay? Hold on—"

He drew the hand down, letting it fall against his chest. "James," he said hazily, and she blinked, taken by surprise.

"James?" she repeated, startled, and then it sank in. "James," she breathed, realizing. "Your name is James—"
"I love you," he whispered, his eyes slowly falling shut. "I love you, Lily—"

"I love you, James," she said back, feeling tears slip down her face as she cradled his head in her hands. "James, I love you—stay with me, please—I love you—"

_I love you, I love you, I love you_—

Neither of them noticed when the last petal fell.

"James," Lily whispered, feeling the life drain from him as he fell still in her arms, and Severus came up behind her, resting his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "About you, about him, about _everything_—" he broke off, his voice breaking. "I'm just so sorry."

Lily shook her head, refusing to believe it.

"No," she said. "No, no, no, this can't be—this isn't—"

She stopped abruptly as James suddenly rose in the air, slipping from her hands and changing, molting, shedding his skin and becoming, in the most radiant of transformations, a man whose face she'd never seen but still seemed so familiar; a man whose face bore traces of laughter lines, of a mouth for arrogant quips, of a brow meant to be artfully furrowed. Hazel eyes, she knew instinctively, that changed color in the light, and when he looked at her.

She watched a young man with messy black hair and a lean frame come into being and she watched, her lips parting with a gasp, as he came to his feet, his eyes fluttering open to give her proof of what she'd somehow known all along.

"James," she exhaled, watching his eyes change as they met hers, and he opened his arms, catching her in them as though she'd been made to fit.

"Lily," he whispered, and she pulled back, taking his face in her palms and kissing him firmly, the taste of him in equal parts the thrill of finally coming home and the inexplicable promise of adventure, of a life, of a precipice, of a _change_; of a love story, a tale as old as time.

He released her, stroking her cheek, and then glanced over her shoulder, meeting Severus' eye.

"Hi," he offered, holding out a hand as he slid one arm around her waist. "I'm James Potter."

Severus hesitated, and then met his grip. "Severus Snape," he said solemnly, and the two men locked eyes, a sense of understanding passing between them. "Do you want to go somewhere?"

Severus suggested, somewhat unsteadily. "Talk about it?"

Lily glanced up, watching James meet her eye with a smile.

"Get me the fuck out of this castle," James agreed bluntly, and despite everything, Lily found herself laughing.

Behind them, Regulus turned to Narcissa, who slowly lowered her hands, visibly spent from the effort at mass transfiguration.

"Thanks, Cissy," Regulus said, nudging her. "I know this isn't exactly how you wanted things to go."

"Oh, it wasn't so bad," Narcissa admitted. "As it turns out, I happen to have a rather soft spot for a
love story."

"Do you?" Regulus asked, surprised, and she flashed him a wry smirk.

"Better tell him how you feel, Reg," she said tangentially, gesturing to Severus. "I think you might be surprised by the outcome."

He glanced at her. "You think?"

She gave him one of her practiced smiles. "I do."

"Huh," he said, fighting a smile. "And what about you? I'm sorry about killing Tom," he added sheepishly.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about me," she assured him. "I have a project to finish. I think all of this is for the best," she ruled decisively, and Regulus gave her shoulder a squeeze.

"See you around?" he asked her.

She smiled. "See you around," she promised, and then she took a step back, promptly disappearing from sight.

"Is it just me," the man who had been Moony said slowly, glancing at his now-human associate, "or are you actually quite handsome?"

"It's certainly not just you," the man who had been Padfoot retorted, though something equally appreciative seemed to glint in his grey eyes. "But you're not so bad yourself, Moony."

"I'm no adorable red panda," Remus reminded him gruffly, and Sirius smirked.

"I think I've come to discover that I rather have a taste for a surly predator these days," Sirius murmured, leaning towards him and flashing a promising glance that, despite lacking in fangs, still had a bite of intrigue. "Care to test my theory?"

"I have a list of romantic requirements to be met first," Remus informed him. "Remember, I've witnessed your attempts at wooing, so I know to demand atrocious poetry, for one thing," he said loudly, "and I would also like to hear of your affection in terribly written, ill-conceived, utterly pitch-less song—"

But then Sirius leaned forward and kissed him, and he found he was easily distracted.

Tom slowly opened his eyes, glancing at the discarded locket at his side before struggling to sit up, managing an unsteady cough.

"Hello, my love," Narcissa offered coolly, the spark in her blue eyes jolting him back to the living. "Where to next?"

It took him a moment to remember how to use his voice, but he managed it. "How many did it take?" he asked, rubbing his throat.

"Just the one," she said, but held up the ring and the cup. "Though I was prepared to use more if I had to."

"Hm," Tom said. "Perhaps we should finish the project, then. Did you say Gryffindor had a
"Gryffindor has a sword," Narcissa confirmed, nodding.

He gave her a slow, too-clever smile.

"Excellent," Tom murmured, pulling her into his arms and pressing a kiss to the side of her neck. "I find I rather fancy something I can use to kill a beast."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Olivie Blake: Convoluter of Plots, Vomiter of Words. Hope you are enjoying these ridiculously long one shots? The final installment (yes, the Dramione) is up next.
Valour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Valour

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Disney AU (Mulan)

Rating: M for language, sex

Summary: The final of four one shots based on Disney plots. This one takes bits and pieces from multiple concepts, but is largely based on Mulan.

When Harry and Ron are forcibly taken by Grindelwald's army, Hermione is left to survive on her own with only an orphan's tale and a battered old hat. To find her friends, she impersonates a man and winds up with a surprising ally—a surly captain with a chip on his shoulder, who has some problems of his own.

Here are four lessons to begin the tale:

One, heroes make their own rules;
Two, a man's worth is built on his word;
Three, legacies are lived, not left;
and
Four, let no one destroy your magic.

"Can't sleep?" Harry asked, settling himself beside her.

Hermione turned, smiling faintly. "No," she admitted. "Feels sort of like something strange is in the air. Something coming." She stretched a hand out to let the night breeze slip through her fingers, the brush of it cool and dispassionate as it slid past the lines of her palm. "Which is stupid, of course," she qualified with a grimace, letting her hand fall back to her side.

"Not stupid," Ron informed her, flopping down on her other side. "My mum always said you could tell more by the feel of the wind than by the word of any man."

"Did she?" Hermione asked fondly, leaning back to wrap one arm around each boy's shoulders. "And what does the wind tell you now, Ronald?"

"Tells me we need a fire," Ron replied shortly, shuddering for dramatic effect. "Don't you want a jacket?"

"Nah," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Then the wind will need a translator," she joked, and Ron made a face, giving her shoulder an indignant shove.

"You mock, but he's not wrong," Harry told her, arching a brow as he met her eye. "My mum and dad always said something similar." At the mention of his parents, he turned his head to look out into the forest, his gaze drifting through the trees; searching them, as though if he looked hard
enough, he would see his family standing there. "They told me there was magic in everything," he murmured sadly, "and that the earth breathed it in."

Hermione leaned a cheek comfortingly against his shoulder, letting out a hushed, nostalgic sigh.

"Tell me again," she asked him, and he looked down at her, questioning. "Tell me about the Court of Miracles, I mean," she clarified, and he smiled.

"Ah, that again." Harry looked over at Ron, who passed him a cheeky grin; she never gets tired of it, he seemed to say, and he was right.

"Once there were four mages," Harry began, settling into the story as Ron leaned over, resting his head in her lap. "The Mage of Valour, who stood for bravery and loyalty; the Mage of Wisdom, who stood for knowledge and truth; the Mage of Virtue, who stood for honesty and justice; and the Mage of Power, who stood for cunning and ambition."

"The four mages lived in a time of fear, of blind hatred for their magics; and so, for protection, the four mages hid themselves away and created the Court of Miracles, a safe haven for those who believed in their powers, and who sought refuge from a prejudicial world. For centuries the mages lived in secret, shielding themselves from those who could not accept their abilities and living in sheltered, peaceful harmony, devoting their time to the learned study of magic. But then one day they were betrayed, and the Court of Miracles was overrun by those who feared the mages' power, and who wished to destroy them, one by one."

"The Mage of Power, being the most cunning, and the least trusting of the others, had built a mechanism for escape within the Court, and so he managed to slip from the hands of his would-be captors, surviving to leave an heir who would someday—as legend has it," Harry clarified, and Hermione nodded, "rise up in triumph, to return his magic to this world. But while the Mage of Power had hoped to possess and preserve the magic of the other three, they, fearing his intentions, chose instead to dissolve the Court and scatter their gifts elsewhere, setting their magic loose upon the world so that one day, others of righteous conviction could claim it in times of need."

"Some say the Court still exists," Harry continued, smiling at Hermione's helpless rapture. "That it can be found by those in need, whenever anyone should call to it—"

"But Mum says that because of the Mage of Power's bollocky paranoia, it's heavily protected," Ron chimed in, twisting to look up at Hermione. "By a magical forest full of creatures who'd drink your blood and eat your face—"

"Okay, well, maybe not that," Harry said quickly, shaking his head as Hermione giggled, giving Ron's face a playful swat. "But some people believe that Hogwarts originally held a passage to the Court of Miracles," he explained, "and some people even believe Hogwarts itself once belonged to the four mages."

"Hogwarts?" Hermione echoed. "You mean Grindelwald's castle?"

"It didn't always belong to him," Ron interjected roughly, pulling himself upright. "My dad always said Grindelwald took it because of the rumors of magic there. To prove there wasn't," he added, making a face. "Even though you'd probably die in that forest, too."

"My mother told me that Grindelwald had secretly hoped to find the Court," Harry agreed. "But when he didn't, he went quite mad with frustration, and now he haunts it like a ghost."

"Like a dictator, more like," Hermione corrected, grimacing. "Nothing magic or haunted about it."
"Yeah, well," Ron shrugged. "It makes for a pretty good story, doesn't it?"

"It does," Hermione agreed, and turned back to Harry. "Tell me again about what your parents left for you," she urged him, pointing to the item that was always in Harry's right hand, if not sitting on his head. "That thing," she sniffed, making a face, and he laughed.

"This hat?" he asked, holding it aloft. "It's just a hat."

"It's quite an unattractive hat," Hermione informed him. "In case that managed to escape your attention."

Harry shrugged. "My father always said things are more than what they seem," Harry replied. "I guess I choose to believe him."

"Besides," Ron added, the word falling out of a loud yawn, "it's not like he has any girls to impress out here."

"Hey," Hermione said, pawing at him. "How rude—"

"You're not a girl," Ron reminded her. "I've never even seen you in a dress, so, if anything, you're like our tiny, chatty brother. And anyway," he added, grinning mercilessly as he ducked another of her mocking swats at his face, "a hat's a hat, isn't it? Seems like it's doing its job if it does nothing but keep the sun out of his face."

"And, if it's all the same to you," Harry contributed, rising to his feet. "I'm rather fond of it. Sometimes it speaks to me," he informed her whimsically, a smile pulling at his lips, "just like the wind speaks to you."

At that, Hermione rolled her eyes. "The wind isn't speaking to me," she informed him. "I just—I have a weird feeling, that's all."

"Mum would say it was the mages whispering to you," Ron told her, slowly dragging himself upright to join Harry. "Though, honestly, I think she just told us that to make us shut up and go to sleep."

"Not a bad idea," Hermione reluctantly agreed, letting out a sigh of resignation and following them back to their tent. "Where to tomorrow, boys?" she asked brightly, standing on tiptoe to ruffle Ron's hair again as he stifled another yawn.

Harry leaned over, smacking a kiss against the top of her head and throwing an arm around her shoulders. "Wherever the wind takes us," he murmured, his gaze drifting through the trees.

But the wind did not take them very far; or, rather, it very unhelpfully took them directly into the clutches of a gang of Snatchers.

"What do we have here, eh?" one of them asked, crouching to look Ron and Harry in the eye as a couple of the others held them down. Hermione, who had been returning with a fresh supply of water for the day's journey, ducked behind a tree, finding herself hopelessly outnumbered and waiting for the right moment to intervene.

"Administer the serum," the Snatcher who seemed to be in charge snapped to one of the others, and a second Snatcher nodded, stepping forward and using both hands to pry open Harry's jaw, dripping something onto his tongue. "Make sure he takes the full dose," the first Snatcher commanded, and the other tilted Harry's head back, forcing the liquid down his throat.
"Now," the first Snatcher said neutrally, after the second Snatcher had wrenched Harry's jaw open to show that the liquid had been swallowed, "what's your name?"

Harry's face contorted with fury, but the words still slipped from his lips.

"Harry Potter."

"Good," the Snatcher purred nastily, patting the top of his head and then snapping his fingers for someone behind him to check the registry. "And his name?" he asked Harry, gesturing to Ron.

Again, Harry's tongue betrayed him. "Ron Weasley."

"Got them," the Registrar said from behind them, pointing to something on his piece of parchment. "Harry Potter, son of James and Lily Potter, both deceased. Ronald Weasley, son of Arthur and Molly Weasley, both missing. Both men last registered—ah, over seven years ago," he mused, smirking at the two of them. "Been dodging your Summons, have you, boys?"

"There's a third," someone grunted, emerging from their tent, and Hermione's breath rose up in her throat. "Who is the third?" he prompted, and Harry grimaced.

"Granger," he said, still unsuccessfully fighting his traitorous mouth. "Hermione."

"A girl," the second Snatcher noted, making a face. "Army won't want her. Hardly anything worth hunting."

"Not much here worth keepin', neither," the Snatcher in the tent added, cocking his head inside it. "No money or nothin'—just some old worthless junk and a right shit-lookin' hat," he added, shuddering dramatically.

"There's no record of any Grangers on the registry," the Registrar commented, leaning in to mutter to the first Snatcher. "It's just these two that we need. They're both summoned for service in the First Army."

At that, both Harry and Ron looked enraged. "I won't fight for him," Harry snarled, struggling against the Snatchers' hold. "I'd rather die than serve Grindelwald—"

"Well, then you may yet get your wish," the first Snatcher cut in, looking smug. "Definitely First Army," he confirmed for the Registrar, nodding. "They're both tall, young, capable. Fit to stand active duty at once." He smirked. "Precisely as Commander Grindelwald requires, don't you think?" he asked, reaching out to pat Ron's head and then pulling his hand back as Ron snapped at it, baring his teeth.

The Snatcher turned, disgruntled, and Hermione, who sensed an opening at his inattention, began to creep out from behind the tree, freezing in alarm as a branch snapped beneath her feet.

Stop, she saw Harry mouth at her, giving her a tiny shake of his head. Take the hat, he added, and when she frowned, he mouthed another set of words.

_Court of Miracles._

She glared at him, but he slowly shook his head.
"Take the hat," he told her, mouthing the words as slowly as possible. "Find the Court of Miracles."

Hermione gritted her teeth, frustrated, as the primary Snatcher motioned for Harry and Ron to be taken away. *Harry,* she mouthed furiously, motioning, but he tore his gaze away, dropping his chin waringly as she ducked behind another tree to avoid the furrowed, searching stare of the Snatcher who held him.

She waited, counting the Snatchers—at least six of them, plus the Registrar—and knowing, with a sinking feeling, that it was hopeless; but still, she ran out the moment they'd gone, picking up a rock and throwing it at the wooden spoke of the wagon they'd shoved Harry and Ron into.

It was no use, of course, and she had nothing at her disposal, left to stare helplessly at the place where they'd been. At first she tried to track them, following the Snatchers' trail, but when it became clear that they were gone, she clutched Harry's hat in her hands long after she'd lost him, feeling empty; she wished that she'd thought to ask for more than just a silly story, sitting beneath the hooded canopy of trees and turning it over and over in her mind, searching for a hidden clue she might have missed.

Eventually, though, her hope of finding the only family she'd ever known slipped cruelly from her fingers, and when it did, the silence of their absence was as cool and dispassionate as the wind.

The last time Hermione had been alone, she'd been a girl—a *child,* too, at that—wandering the streets alone until she'd bumped into Harry and Ron, a fortuitous moment in a dodgy alley amidst a particularly unsavory part of town. To her memory, people had scarcely spared her a glance, and now that she was alone once again, she'd expected something of the same, figuring herself not worth remarking.

She was wrong. Now the men leered at what slight figure she possessed, and the women sniffed with disapproval before they callously turned away.

On a particularly inhospitable night, Hermione made her way into a tavern, seeking warmth; she slid into a seat near the bar, making a swift calculation of what little coin she had to spend as she shifted uncomfortably away from a dark-haired man who sat alone a few seats over, poring blankly over his tankard of ale from beneath a rather menacing cloak.

"What'll you have?" the barkeep asked her, not particularly kindly. Hermione was relieved, at least, that he seemed disinterested enough in her not to give her too much trouble.

"A mead," she asked quietly, counting out a few pennies, "and a cup of stew?"

The barkeep nodded, wiping down the bar. "Best not to linger," he muttered in warning, his gaze flicking disapprovingly over her attire. "Between you and this one"—he nodded unpleasantly at the man a few seats over—"this ain't good for business. Unless, of course, your business is—" he shifted, nudging his chin pointedly at a group of scantily dressed women in a corner of the tavern.

Hermione followed his gaze and then felt her eyes widen, hastily shaking her head. "No, I'm not—I don't do that," she assured him quickly, glancing down as the women unabashedly met her eye, their noses wrinkling distastefully at the sight of her.

"You could," the barkeep offered, shrugging, before flicking a scrutinizing glance her way. "Get you a dress instead of those britches and I'd wager you could make a pretty coin or two, love," he added, giving her a brittle feeling of discomfort even as he gifted her what she assumed was meant to be a compliment.
"I'm just looking for someone," Hermione told him, forcing a hesitant smile in thanks as he slid a mead across the bar to her. "You wouldn't happen to have any idea where I could find the—" she hesitated, grimacing as she lowered her voice. "The Court of Miracles?"

The man a few seats over glanced up sharply, frowning, and the barkeep promptly burst into laughter; first it was a chuckle, paired with a sniff of disdain, and then it gradually evolved to a full, raucous belly laugh, leaving him doubled-over and wiping at the moisture that pooled in the corners of his eyes.

"Ah, yes, the Court of Miracles," the barkeep echoed mockingly, shaking his head as he took the bowl of stew from the kitchen boy and placed it in front of her, licking the bit of it that had sloshed onto his hands from his grievously unsteady handling. "Right—sure, I know where to find it—just follow the leprechauns outside," he wheezed, jerking his head as he collapsed back into laughter. "They'll tell you I'm the King of the Underworld, and then you can sell a handful of magic beans to the dragon I keep out back, and that'll take you right to it—"

"I get it," Hermione cut in grimly, catching the motion of the man in the dark cloak as he suddenly slipped away, tossing a handful of coins onto the bar before heading swiftly for the door.

"Look," the barkeep said, wiping his eyes again and finally quieting to manage a loud, throat-clearing cough, "if you want to get by around these parts, better to keep your mouth shut and your legs open." He shook his head irreverently, leaning towards her over the bar. "Take it from me, love—folks around here catch you talking about the Court of Miracles and they'll pin you for an empty-headed purse for the taking, you hear?"

"Right," Hermione muttered, taking a sip of her mead and forcibly dipping her spoon into the stew, torn between the lurching fear that it might be her last meal for an indeterminable period of time and the inescapable feeling that she'd never wanted to be further away from where she was, warmth and food be damned. "I'll remember that."

"Best that you do," the barkeep warned, picking up the cloaked man's coins and tossing them into his apron. "Court of Miracles," he muttered to himself, dissolving again in laughter as he ducked into the kitchen. "Ridiculous—"

Hermione sighed, taking another bite as the barkeep disappeared. "Thanks, Harry," she murmured to no one, letting the flavor of the broth settle on her tongue before reaching for her mead, scarcely noticing as someone new slipped onto the stool beside hers.

"Evening," the man said, his voice low and steady. She glanced up, startled, to note yet another strangely cloaked man, his face obscured by a thick black hood. "How's the stew?"

Hermione swallowed. "Fine," she supplied uncomfortably, inching slowly away. "The meat's tender enough, and—"

"I'm not here for a review of your food," the man interrupted briskly, turning to look at her. She felt a jolt, registering the particularly piercing blue of his eyes as they met hers beneath the cover of his cloak. "You asked about the Court of Miracles?"

The bite she'd swallowed seem to stick in her throat. "Yes," she admitted, a little unsettled, and the man's shadowed mouth curled in a smile.

"Where'd you get that?" he asked tangentially, gesturing to the hat that she'd strapped to her bag. "Yours?"
"No," she said, looking down at it and fighting the urge to shudder in repulsion at its consummate shabbiness. "A friend's."

"Huh," the man said, nodding as Hermione took another sip of mead. "Well, I'll tell you what," he said definitively, delivering her a disquietingly intent stare. "I'm a reasonable man. I'll tell you how to find the Court of Miracles," he offered, his voice silkily promising, "if you just give me that awful hat of yours."

"What?" Hermione asked, the hand holding her mead freezing midair.

"Did you think the Court of Miracles wasn't real?" the man asked, gesturing to where the laughing barkeep had been. "Ah, well—it's not real for everyone, now is it?"

She frowned. "But—"

"I'm a reasonable man," he said again, interrupting, "but I'm hardly a patient one. What do you say?" he prompted, his gaze flicking somewhat greedily to the hat at her side. "Trade you the hat for information on how to find your friends?"

"My friends?" she asked, startled. "I didn't tell you th-"

"Let's not play games, you and I," the man cut in sharply, the smile on his face stilling somewhat warningly. "I can help you, you know, if you'll just be clever enough to let me," he mused, giving her a particularly chilling smirk.

Hermione forced a swallow, looking longingly at what she knew would have to be her soon-discarded stew before digging the coins out of her pocket, placing them next to her bowl. "I'm so sorry," she lied, nodding apologetically, "but I really must go—my brother will be expecting me—"

"You don't have a brother," the man commented, shaking his head. "You don't even have a friend,"

Hermione forced a swallow, looking longingly at what she knew would have to be her soon-discarded stew before digging the coins out of her pocket, placing them next to her bowl. "I'm so sorry," she lied, nodding apologetically, "but I really must go—my brother will be expecting me—"

"You don't have a brother," the man commented, shaking his head. "You don't even have a friend," he informed her with a laugh, "so I suggest you rethink my offer.

"I'm so sorry, I must have given you the wrong impression," Hermione said quickly, slipping from the stool and backing away. "I—he's waiting, you see, and I don't wish to keep him, so—"

"You're lying," the man snapped, getting to his feet as she picked up speed, nearly knocking over a chair in her haste to get away. "Sorry," he called to the crowd, catching her arm and removing his hood to smile apologetically—a rather beguiling smile, from an extraordinarily good-looking man—at the people who had begun to stare. "My young wife," he explained, offering a conspiratorial expression of sheepishness; Hermione gaped in disbelief as the other patrons shrugged impassively, turning away in disinterest. "I'm afraid she's rather high-spirited," he lamented sympathetically, leaning over to glare warningly at her, "aren't you, sweetheart?"

"Let go of me," Hermione hissed, yanking her elbow free and darting towards the door, intent on getting out.

"Sweetheart, there's no need to play games," the man drawled, following her as she shoved through the doorway, brusquely nudging a middle-aged couple out of the way. "We'll be home soon enough, darling—"

Hermione dodged a few scattered passersby and slid around a corner, breathing heavily, hearing the man start to whistle faintly behind her as he followed, clearly unconcerned by her haste. "Seen my wife?" she heard him ask someone on the street. "Curly brown hair, devastating smile—terrible sense of mischief, I'm afraid—"
Hermione hastily unfastened the hat from her things and shoved it down on her head, using it to cover her hair as she ducked down a narrow alley.

"Turn left," she heard in her ear, and she jumped, glancing sharply over her shoulder. "No, no," the voice said irritably. "Left."

"Who are you?" she hissed, staring down the alley, and she heard a soft, throat-clearing cough from somewhere above her head.

"Turn left," the voice said again in her ear, "and we can discuss it when you're not being followed."

Hermione grimaced, but after registering that the man's footsteps were growing closer, she opted to obey, slipping through a narrow opening between two buildings.

"Now," the voice continued, "see that brick wall?" She looked around, spying it and nodding. "Tap the third brick from the left, and the fourth from the top—"

She followed the instructions, her heart pounding somewhere in the depths of her throat as the wall suddenly parted, revealing another extended alley lined with shopfronts.

"Keep walking," the voice prompted, giving her an audible nudge as she slowly took a step. "He won't think to follow you here."

"How do you know?" Hermione whispered, glancing over her shoulder as the passage smoothed over, becoming brick and mortar once again. "What if he's—"

"You'll simply have to trust me, Hermione," the voice interrupted. "After all, I do more than keep the sun out of your face."

Hermione stopped suddenly, glancing up with a jolt of surprise. "Am I," she began uncertainly, and instantly faltered. "Are you—"

"Are you talking to a hat? Yes," the voice assured her. "Am I a talking hat? Also yes," it determined. "Should you keep walking?"

She waited.

"Yes," the hat prompted impatiently.

"Right," Hermione muttered, ducking her chin as someone frowned curiously at her from a storefront window. "Where am I going?" she asked, trying to conceal the motion of her lips moving behind the wide brim of the hat.

"An excellent question," the hat ruled. "A question for your brain, though, not your hat," it suggested snottily, "don't you think?"

"Well, you've taken me this far," Hermione said, grimacing. "I thought you might've had a destination in mind," she added, leaping back as a cart suddenly appeared from between two shops, nearly knocking into her.

"Watch it, boy," the man operating it growled, glaring at Hermione, and she bowed her head apologetically, frowning as she hurried away.

"Boy?" she echoed.

"Well, it's not as if you've so feminine a figure," the hat sniffed. "Your cup hardly overfloweth, and
if those are supposed to be child-bearing hips," it began sarcastically, "then I'm a—"

"Talking hat?" Hermione supplied, scowling as she glanced up at the brim. "There's no need to be rude, you know."

"OI," someone shouted, nearly colliding with her in the street. "GET OUT OF THE STREET, BOY, OR LEARN TO WALK—"

"You'll need food, you know," the hat reminded her, tutting as she leapt out of the road. "Terrible idea spending the last of your money in that tavern," it added, as if it felt she might have overlooked that fact.

"Thanks," Hermione muttered glumly. "Any other expert advice?"

"Well, off the top of my head," the hat said, "if you're going to find Harry and Ron, you'll need safe passage."

"Right, I know this, and—"

"Shelter, food, a place to sleep—"

"Seriously? Not helpful—"

"Or, I suppose, you could simply find the First Army," the hat mused, and she paused, turning slowly as she noticed a sign on one of the shopfront doors.

DON'T DREAM OF VICTORY, she read below a picture of a First Army soldier, FIGHT FOR IT—and in slightly smaller letters, ARMY RECRUITMENT, followed by a date and location—and then a symbol, the poster's message ending on the words For The Greater Good.

"Join it, you mean?" Hermione asked, staring at the sign.

"I would never encourage such a dangerous and foolish idea," the hat said snottily. "Though it is a rather effective one, all things considered."

"That's encouragement," Hermione informed it.

The hat made a sound like a scoff. "Potato, potato," it muttered.

Draco Malfoy paused a moment before entering his father's office, taking a deep, steadying breath and adjusting the lapel of his uniform before knocking on the door, rocking nervously back on his heels until he heard his father's voice beckon.

"Father," Draco said as he entered, inclining his head in greeting. "You sent for me?"

"Ah, Draco, yes," Lucius replied, looking up from his map. "You've met Tom, haven't you?"

"General Riddle," Draco remarked, surprised, as he glanced at the dark-haired man beside his father. "Apologies, I don't mean to interrupt—"

"You're not interrupting," Tom assured him coolly, his startling blue eyes flashing as they met his. "Lucius and I were expecting you."

"Have a seat," Lucius said, gesturing to the chair, and Draco obeyed, trying not to fidget as he waited. "So, Draco," Lucius began, "as you know, Commander Grindelwald has been troubled by a
new threat, and the First Army will be shortly disembarking on a defensive campaign to combat the so-called Knights of Walpurgis. The campaign has been masterminded by Tom, of course," Lucius explained unnecessarily, and Tom nodded in confirmation, crossing his arms over his chest as Draco waited. "And seeing as you have recently finished first in your class at the Academy, I thought it fitting that you be awarded a commission." He paused, smiling indulgently. "The timing is perfect, of course, and Tom agrees—so I've submitted your nomination," Lucius concluded, "for you to become an officer in Grindelwald's military."

Draco fought a surge of elation, his pulse skipping as he felt himself finally arrive at the moment he'd so long waited for. "Father, I don't know what to say," he managed eventually, his chest swelling with pride. "I've worked so hard for this moment, and I vow to work tirelessly by your side as—"

"Ah, well, about that," Tom interrupted, prompting Draco to falter. "Actually, Draco, your father and I feel you are best suited for a rather astronomic promotion. Rather than remaining at your father's side as his lieutenant, we would prefer you take up an alternate post. As captain," he clarified, and Draco's brow furrowed.

"Captain?" he repeated uneasily, shifting his gaze to frown questioningly at Lucius, who only gave him a neutral smile.

"Draco Malfoy," Tom offered grandly, "you have been selected and approved by Commander Grindelwald and myself to lead the new recruits in the Second Army reserves." Tom strode over to him, thrusting out a hand. "Congratulations, Captain."

Draco stared at the proffered hand, slowly meeting Tom's grip with his. "I—thank you," he said, blinking back his disappointment as Tom took a step back. "I thought you would have asked me to join you on campaign against the Knights, Father," Draco commented to Lucius, feigning brightness. "Have I displeased you?"

"On the contrary," Tom informed him, cutting Lucius off as he opened his mouth. "You're highly skilled, Draco, in tactics and in combat, and certainly an asset to the Commander's armed forces—and I presume you wish, someday, to obtain the highest rank, don't you?"

Draco bristled, feeling trapped.

"One day, certainly," he confirmed quickly, "but—"

"Then experience will be what gets you there," Tom cut in. "The Second Army begins recruitment as soon as we embark, and I, for one," he said, passing Draco another unsettling smile, "can think of no better man to lead them."

You should really fucking try, Draco thought bitterly, forcibly biting his tongue.

"I must of course thank you for the honor, General," Draco forced out, glancing back at his father. "But—forgive me—as to the subject of your Lieutenant, Father—"

"I've chosen Nott to join me on campaign against the Knights," Lucius supplied flippantly, prompting Draco's stomach to lurch in misery at the knowledge of being ousted by his best friend. "But let us not lose sight of your accomplishments," he urged, gripping Draco's shoulder again. "Lead the new recruits of the Second Army well, and then perhaps I will send for you and your unit to join me, Draco, when the time to fight against the Knights is right."

Draco hesitated, weighing his crushing disappointment, before finally forcing a smile. He looked
at Tom, who still wore his indulgent, too-sharp smile, and then rose slowly to his feet, dropping his chin in a respectful bow.

"I won't let you down, Father," he promised, fighting an innate sense of loss.

"How do I look?" Hermione asked, brushing her shorn hair back from her ears and frowning at her reflection from the stream.

"A little dirty," the hat replied, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I meant," she said emphatically, "do I look like a boy?"

"Oh, that," the hat drawled. "Do you look like boy? Yes," it confirmed, sounding deeply uninterested as she adjusted the tight binding over her breasts. "Do you look like a man fit for combat? Perhaps less so," it muttered. "Do you even know how to fight?"

"I'm a quick study," Hermione assured the hat, which grunted its disagreement. "And in any case, the Army reserves can hardly afford to be so picky," she reminded it, throwing her belongings over her shoulder and taking off towards the recruitment grounds.

"Are you certain you're ready for this?" the hat asked her, its voice dripping with skepticism. "It's not too late to do something, oh—entirely different, you know."

"Well," Hermione sighed irritably, "as I mentioned, if you would just tell me how to find the Court of Miracles—"

"And as I mentioned, I can't," the hat cut in. "It's not that kind of place."

"What, the kind of place that exists, you mean?" Hermione asked, glaring up at it as it once again sulkily refused to answer. "You do know you're entirely infuriating right?"

"Well, seeing as I'm pretty sure the army will have you executed if they find out you're a girl," the hat informed her stiffly, "in the grand scheme of things, I could really be worse."

Hermione let out a loud sigh, shoving the hat further up on her head.

"You know, now would be the time for encouragement," she grumbled. "Isn't there something helpful you could say?"

The hat paused, mulling it over.

"Aim for the groin," it suggested, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Thanks," she said, pointing herself at the crowd of men and forcing herself to walk forward.

"Let's get down to business," Draco announced, looking out over the sea of hapless recruits and trying not to express the discouragement he so thoroughly felt. Unlike his class at the Academy, the young men before him were out of shape, inattentive and unmotivated, with most of them visibly never having done much hard labor in their lives. "If we're going to defeat the Knights, the Army will need the best possible soldiers, and it's my job to make sure that means you."

He paused, parsing his words carefully before continuing on with a grimace, watching a couple of yawns as the men shaded their eyes from the sun. "Despite what you may have heard," Draco went on, "the Second Army is not any easier than the First, nor will I expect any less from you. It only
takes a moment to be called up from the reserves, and in the troubling times we face, it could be any of you who makes a difference in the fight against the Knights."

A man in the front scratched dully at his arse, and Draco sighed.

"Break into groups of two," he said, gesturing. "We'll begin with disarming drills."

The men scattered aimlessly, picking over the barrels of practice weapons, before gradually falling into some semblance of order, slowly following his instruction.

"Captain," a sentry called, rushing over with an envelope. "Your father sent this for you, sir."

"Has the First Army left for Diagon?" Draco asked, and the sentry nodded. "Great," Draco muttered under his breath, tearing the envelope open. "Thanks," he added, and the sentry nodded again, permitting a bow before heading back the way he'd come.

Draco, he read, looking over his father's familiar handwriting, I wish you the best of luck in training the new recruits. Wear the Malfoy name with pride, son; the General and I are counting on you not to disappoint.

Lucius

Draco forced an uneasy lump from his throat and glanced up, tucking the letter in his pocket and then crossing the field, seeking out his lieutenant as he weaved his way between the sets of new recruits.

"How's it going?" Draco asked, sidling up to him.

"Bad," Blaise replied, curling a hand around his mouth.

"Wonderful," Draco sighed. "Excellent."

"Look at that one," Blaise said, pointing to a blond man with a round face who was struggling to wield a broadsword. "Name's Neville Longbottom. Joined up because 'Gran said it would be good for him,' or so he babbled on about for about twenty minutes, and—oof," Blaise said, cutting himself off and making a face as Neville took a smack to the abdomen from his opponent. "That'll take some work."

"Who's that one?" Draco asked, pointing to a scrawny, eager-looking man with curly blond hair. "Small, isn't he?"

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," Blaise supplied, grimacing. "A walking disaster. Knocked over an entire line of quivers within five minutes of arriving. But," he added, pointing off to the side, "he's at least bigger than that one."

"Which?" Draco asked, shading his eyes. "The dark-haired one? Looks like a bit of a brute," he added, making a face.

"That's Marcus Belby," Blaise informed him, "and no. I mean the one behind him," he said, shaking his head as Marcus stepped aside, revealing a boy with cropped brown curls that looked to be barely over five feet tall. "Says he's over eighteen, but—"

"Fuck," Draco breathed, watching the recruit struggle to lift the practice sword. "I mean, all of this is a mess, but that's—" he grimaced. "I can't do anything with that. Who is he?"
"No idea," Blaise said. "Been keeping to himself all morning."

Draco shook his head, innately furious. "There's no way I'll ever join my father with recruits like that," he muttered, taking off to stalk towards the boy.

"—that's Captain Malfoy," he heard, catching a whisper as he passed. "Heard his father declined to send for him; sent him here instead—"

"Hey," Draco shouted gruffly, startling the curly-haired boy as the too-heavy sword dropped from his hand. "Not you. Out," he said, gesturing towards the exit. "There's no way I'm letting you endanger the lives of my Army—"

"What do you mean out?" the boy demanded bluntly, staring up at Draco. His eyes were a wide, earnest shade of golden brown and his features were so delicate that, for a moment, Draco was fully taken aback. 'I'm not going anywhere—"

"I'm your captain," Draco interrupted furiously, regaining his composure, "and if I say you're out, and you most certainly are going somewhere," he snapped, picking up the practice sword and tossing it at the boy, shaking his head as the boy reached out to catch it and instantly stumbled from the weight. "You're entirely unsuited for combat, which should be obvious," he added emphatically, "so pack up, go home. You're through," he ruled decisively, turning away and wincing as a few feet away, Longbottom took another loud smack to the gut.

"How about a wager?" he heard behind him, and Draco paused, narrowing his eyes.

"A wager?" he prompted dubiously, turning over his shoulder. "Do you really think I would ever enter into one with you?"

"What I think is that you're wrong about me," the boy said boldly, taking a step forward. "When does this unit leave for training?"

Draco glared at him, and the boy's mouth tightened.

"When do you leave for training, Captain," he amended stiffly, and Draco bristled.

"Three days," he said flatly, and the boy lifted his chin, glaring up in defiance.

"Give me three days, then," the boy said. "In three days, let's fight, you and I," he challenged, and it took everything Draco possessed not to let his mouth fall open at the boy's unspeakable audacity. "If you beat me, I'll leave," the boy offered, shrugging, "but if I can get a hit on you, then you agree to train me."

Draco let out a loud scoff. "Do you actually think you can beat me? You can't even lift that," he muttered, pointing to the training sword in the boy's hand.

"It doesn't cost you anything to let me try," the boy retorted. "Unless you're afraid, that is," he added, and Draco felt his own eyes narrow, glancing at the practice sword and quietly contemplating running the boy through where he stood before realizing that the other recruits had stopped to watch them.

"Listen," Draco said flatly, shaking his head and taking a step towards the boy, "if you're interested in humiliating yourself—"

"I'm interested in being taken seriously, Captain," the boy interrupted, not backing down. "If you give me a chance, I swear to you," he added, a glimpse of sincerity flashing in his eye, "I will serve
you well and loyally."

Draco paused, surprised by the offer.

Part of him knew it was a terrible proposition, and that the boy stood no chance, but he found himself unnaturally swayed by the boy's flaming defiance, determining he had nothing to lose.

"Fine," Draco said sharply, turning around to glare at the rest of the recruits who'd been staring at them. "Get back to work," he snapped, and they turned, sheepishly eyeing their feet as he strutted impatiently away.

"Well, this was a stupid idea," the hat informed her, letting out an indignant *tsk*-ing sound in her ear. "What on earth possessed you to challenge your would-be Captain to a duel?"

"I have to get to Harry and Ron," Hermione reminded it firmly, struggling to raise the practice sword over her head and nearly toppling over from the weight of it. "If I can't find this Court of Miracles," she reminded it, pausing to wipe sweat from her brow, "then I can at least find them."

"This is an imbecilic display," the hat told her.

"Well, if imbecility is the cost of saving them, then so be it," Hermione retorted, and was instantly admonished with a loud thunk at the top of her head. "*Ouch,/* she said, wincing, and reached up, gripping something thin and metallic that appeared to have fallen out of the hat. "What's this?"

"Hell if I know," the hat muttered stiffly. "Get it out of me, you wretch."

Hermione sighed, taking the hat in her hands and then blinking as she caught the ruby-studded hilt of a silver sword, slimmer and finer than the one she had been just been struggling to wield.

"Oh," she said, pulling it from the hat. "Is this—"

"Ah, figures," the hat commented, groaning as she unsheathed it. "Godric would certainly approve of you, though I'd caution you against finding that much of a compliment."

"Godric?" Hermione echoed.

"Yes, Godric Gryffindor," the hat supplied. "The Mage of Valour."

"That's not real," Hermione said dully, eyeing the sword.

"Said the cross-dressing girl to the talking hat," the hat drawled. "Look at the blade, you little minx."

She rolled her eyes, obliging. "Gryffindor," she read, running her finger over the name on the blade of the sword and then hefting it in her hand, tossing it from left to right and marvelling at the ease. "Huh. This feels like it was made for me."

"It wasn't," the hat informed her. "It was made for Godric Gryffindor, though he seems to think you should have it."

"Well, I can certainly make use of it in three days," she said, giving it a testing swing. "Oh," she exclaimed, feeling a tug of sorts as the sword nudged her arm, guiding the motion of its arc. "I think it's actually *helping* me—"

"And here you said I wasn't helpful," the hat yawned, tutting pointedly as she parried mid-air.
Hermione avoided the others for most of the day of her agreed-upon wager, though it wasn't all that difficult; nobody had attempted to speak to her yet, despite eyeing her disdainfully for much of the time since she'd arrived. By the time Captain Malfoy had emerged from his tent, the others had already formed a circle around her, waiting expectantly—like vultures, she thought with a shudder, shaking herself of her misgivings—as the Captain approached, the midday sun glinting against his pale blond hair.

"Alright," he said flatly, tearing his shirt off and tossing it aside. His torso was perfectly carved and smooth except for a series of scars—one which ran raggedly across his chest and dipped into the line of his abdomen—and as he twisted to draw his sword from the scabbard draped low across his hips, she caught a glimpse of a tattoo across his back; his family crest, with the Army seal beside it. "You ready, then?"

Hermione swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry as she tore her gaze back to his face. "The terms, Captain?" she asked, summoning her nerve.

"If you get a hit anywhere on me, you'll be permitted to join Army training with the rest of the recruits," Malfoy began, and she cut him off.

"No," she interrupted, shaking her head. "If I get a hit on you, I train with you," she corrected emphatically, trying to ignore the startled whispers. "That was the agreement."

Why? the hat had asked when she'd told him her plan. Surely you find him unpleasant. I certainly do, it sniffed.

I do too, she assured him. But the closer I get to him, the sooner I'll find out where Harry and Ron are.

Suit yourself, you little demon, the hat had replied drily. Best of luck.

Captain Malfoy's mouth twisted skeptically. "Fine," he ruled, clearly confident that she wouldn't manage. "And if—" he paused, smirking. "When I disarm you," he amended, "you leave here, and we all pretend I never deigned to participate in your foolish little wager. Deal?" he prompted, eyeing her expectantly.

"Fair enough," Hermione replied, raising her sword. "I'll keep my shirt on, if you don't mind," she added irreverently, and Malfoy gave her a withering glance.

"Zabini," he called to his lieutenant. "You'll start us off?"

Blaise stepped between them, shaking his head. "Ready?" he asked, eyeing both sides, and Hermione nodded as Malfoy's mouth twitched upwards, his chin dropping once.

The moment Blaise nodded, stepping back with a motion to begin, Malfoy took an impossibly quick lunge forward, crossing his blade with hers and then twisting, reaching out for the hilt of her sword with his left hand. She grimaced and leapt back, drawing him forward and then aiming the flat of her blade at the side of his ribs. He made a face, cutting her off with an effortless one-handed thrust.

"Inelegant," he remarked, taking a step back.

"Elegance wasn't a factor of the terms," she reminded him, circling him once before trying the same move again, stumbling back as he parried her blow with an effortless one-handed thrust.
"You're relentless, I'll give you that," he commented, extending an arm to meet her blade in a maneuver that would have knocked her entirely off-balance if the sword had not somehow righted her, moving for her to meet Malfoy's advance in an adjustment so unerringly sharp there was a collective intake of breath from the other recruits.

"You're better than you look," he conceded, his teeth flashing as he gave her a grimacing smile, "but you're not better than me."

"I don't have to be better than you," she reminded him breathlessly, sweat beginning to drip from her forehead as she lunged forward again. "I just have to get in one good hit, and then—"

He met her jab and rolled, shaking his head. "And then?" he prompted, sparing a moment to mock her with a smile.

She and the sword had a moment of perfect unity, taking advantage of his pause to aim forward and down, striking near his feet; he blocked her, stepping to the side, and in the moment his arm crossed his body she brought her sword up, smacking his ribs with the flat of Gryffindor's sword and leaving behind a thin line of blood, a drop of it slipping down the pale expanse of his skin.

For a moment Malfoy only stared at her, his brow furrowing in disbelief as the rest of the recruits and Blaise held their breaths; and then, just as she might have questioned whether to continue, he abruptly lunged forward, aiming high and forcing her to meet his blow with her sword above her head, raising a foot to kick her firmly below the chest and knocking the sword from her hand as she collapsed backward, gasping.

She lay still for a moment, taking in the impact of the sword thudding to the ground beside her as she struggled to breathe, and then blinked, gradually processing the sight of his pale blond hair materializing in front of her face.

"You're small," Malfoy informed her, his head cocked as he waited for her to lift her head, thrusting a hand in her face. "People will take advantage of that."

She blinked, accepting his proffered hand and letting herself be pulled to her feet. "You disarmed me," she commented experimentally, picking her sword up from the ground and dusting herself off.

"You needed to be taken down a peg," Malfoy offered flatly in explanation. "But you got me," he conceded, gesturing to the thin cut on his ribs with what appeared to be equal parts bewilderment and annoyance. "I stand by my agreements, however ill-founded they may be." He eyed her for a moment, considering something, before passing her a curt nod, seeming to have come to an impasse with himself. "What's your name?"

"It's, er—James," Hermione said, recalling Harry's stories.

"Last name?" Malfoy asked.

"Yes," she replied, and he frowned.

"Your last name is James?"

"Er, no—I mean, yes," she amended, blinking.

His frown deepened. "And your first name?" he prompted.

"Arthur," she replied, Ron's father's name leaping to mind.
"Your name is Arthur James?" Malfoy asked, confused. "Why does your sword say Godric Gryffindor?"

"Gryffindor?" she echoed vaguely, glancing down at the blade and registering his point with a jolt. "Oh, um—that's my nickname," she offered hastily, tucking it behind her back.

Malfoy crossed his arms over his chest. "Your nickname?"

"Yeah, it's—that's what my friends call me," Hermione explained hurriedly, and Malfoy grimaced.

"I know what a nickname is," he told her gruffly, but he cut her off as she opened her mouth to explain herself, apparently losing patience with her inability to articulate herself. "How did you manage to get your shit together in three days?" he demanded, looking genuinely curious.

Hermione shrugged. "Necessity," she replied evasively, and Malfoy considered her for a moment, pursing his lips.

"Fine," he said, snapping his fingers at Marcus Belby and motioning for where his shirt had been discarded on the ground. "We leave in one hour," he announced to the rest of the recruits, barking at the circle that had formed around them as Marcus handed him the garment and he threw it on over his head. "If all of you work as hard as Gryffin-whatever," he said, shaking his head and ambiguously referencing her, "maybe you twats'll be allowed into the First Army by the time their campaign is up. Understood?" he demanded, and the others nodded. "Good."

Hermione felt a thrill of satisfaction, suppressing a smile as she turned to follow the others when Malfoy suddenly reached out, gripping her arm.

"Don't think this little stunt you pulled comes without consequences," he said, his voice low. "You may have managed quite a show today," he permitted with a grimace, "but if you're going to train with me, you'll need to learn some respect."

She fought the urge to glower at him.

"Will you earn it?" she asked.

His eyes narrowed. "You know, you walk a very fine line between brave and insubordinate," he warned. "Be comfortably certain that I won't take kindly to the latter, Gryff."

It was a firm statement, direct but not tyrannical; she found herself oddly swayed by it, intrigued by his attitude towards her.

"I meant what I said, Captain," she told him, and she was surprised to find herself quite genuine in the offering. "Train me, and I'll serve you well and loyally."

His brow furrowed momentarily, as if responding to a shift in her gaze, and then he nodded.

"You'd better," he muttered, releasing her arm and turning away.

At first, training was awful.

No, not awful -

Nightmarish.

The training exercises were grueling, particularly for Hermione, who was undersized and
undertrained to begin with. She went to bed each night with sore muscles and a pulsing ache that crept into her bones—the days of sleeplessness with Harry and Ron regrettably behind her—and she seemed to be constantly hungry and thirsty and sunburnt, her entire body crying out for relief.

And then there was her captain, who was a man of unusual tactics, to say the least.

"In the Army, there are two main tenets to success," Malfoy announced, his tattoo starkly visible in the early morning sun as he addressed the unit, pacing before their ordered formation. "The first is strength, which few of you possess," he began, "and the second is discipline, which even fewer of you appear to have heard of."

"He forgot nepotism and shirtlessness," Marcus Belby whispered to Neville Longbottom, who gave him an impatient, silencing shove.

"Belby," Malfoy snapped sharply, catching Marcus' sidelong comment. "Perhaps you'd care to offer a demonstration."

"With pleasure," Marcus confirmed, stepping forward. Malfoy's eyes traveled slowly across the unit, landing on Hermione's.

"Gryff," he said, gesturing, and she joined him at the front, glancing uneasily at Marcus' anticipatory smirk. "Now," Malfoy continued, addressing the unit, "strength is what delivers the blow. Belby," he barked, and Marcus nodded, "hit Gryff as hard as you can."

Hermione blinked. "Wait, but—"

She was cut off, managing to dodge Marcus' shot just successfully enough to take the blow of his fist against her left arm, instantly cradling it as he stepped back with unadulterated glee. She fought a scowl, the impact of the punch throbbing through the entirety of her limb.

"Strength," Malfoy declared flatly, gesturing to where Hermione shook the pain out, flinching. "Strength is what makes the impact, but discipline is what determines the hit. Discipline," he clarified, "is what directs it; and when you've aimed the same blow a thousand times perfectly from every given angle and scenario, discipline is what determines your success. Gryff," Malfoy called, gesturing to her, and she inched towards him, stiffening apprehensively.

Malfoy ducked his head, dropping his voice to speak in her ear. "There's a sweet spot below his chest, above his stomach," he murmured, and she glanced up at Marcus, frowning. "Don't look," Malfoy warned, admonishing her with a glare. "If he braces at all, it won't be effective. Swift shot, at an upward angle," he instructed at a low mutter, concealing a small demonstration and checking her face for comprehension.

She gave him a quick nod, resuming her place across from Marcus as her pulse stuttered in preparation.

"Discipline," Malfoy continued, addressing the unit again as Hermione re-joined Marcus, "determines whether you walk away from a fight, or—Gryff," he prompted, and she aimed a sharp jab just under Marcus' sternum, stepping backwards as the other man abruptly doubled over, slowly falling forward to his hands and knees.

"Or," Draco continued smugly, watching Marcus gasp for breath on the ground, "whether you need to be carried away."

"Shit," Justin whispered loudly, staring at Marcus, and Hermione shook out her hand, mildly amazed.
Malfoy sidled up next to her, dropping his voice again. "Hit a little harder next time and he might lose consciousness," Malfoy muttered in her ear, patting her shoulder once before nudging her back towards the unit, leaving her to stumble dazedly to her spot beside Neville.

"Another lesson you would all do well to note," Malfoy continued, addressing the unit as Marcus slowly dragged himself back to his knees, "is that antagonizing your captain will not bode well for you. Are we clear?" he asked loudly, arching a brow, and everyone slowly nodded, Marcus shrinking away as Malfoy reached out to clap him on the shoulder.

"Good," Malfoy said firmly, gesturing for Blaise. "Now—let's do that again, but with weapons this time," he beckoned expressionlessly, and Hermione fought an inward groan, rubbing at her still-sore arm.

"I'm not cut out for this," Neville muttered, rolling over as Hermione returned from her early morning bath, which she took in the nearby stream long before anyone else was awake, each time luxuriating in the freeing of her perpetually sore breasts. "I don't care if he punches me in the face this time, I'm not getting out of bed."

"Oh, cheer up," Hermione told him, stepping over a groaning Justin. "All this stuff he's having us do could save our lives someday, you know."

"Not that this is much of a life worth saving, you monster," Marcus mumbled, just as Malfoy's head poked into their tent, jolting them all upright.

"Town over attacked by Knights," he barked, blandly informational. "We're moving camp."

"Why?" Hermione asked him, frowning. "You think the Knights will come here?"

"Don't ask questions," Malfoy snapped briskly, shutting the tent flap and disappearing.

"Okay then," Hermione sighed, shaking her head as he went.

"Malfoy's not worried about the Knights," Marcus informed her, falling back against his bedroll and holding a pillow over his head. "He just wants to join up with the First Army."

"So what if he does?" Justin asked. "I wouldn't mind, either. First Army's where the action is, isn't it?"

"I don't need action," Neville muttered. "I need sleep—"

"Malfoy's just trying to impress his father," Marcus said in answer, scoffing. "I heard he got passed over for his father's lieutenant," he added snidely, "and all this working us to death and chasing the Knights is meant to get him into General Riddle's good graces."

Hermione glanced up, eyeing the tent flap where Malfoy's head had been. "You should really lay off him, Belby," she warned, grimacing. "You're asking for trouble, you know."

"Gonna fight me over it, Gryff?" Marcus asked, smirking.

"I'll knock you flat on your knees," she promised, and he chuckled, thoroughly entertained.

"You know, you're not half bad, Gryff," he muttered, and Hermione shook her head, putting on Harry's hat and bending to pack her things.

Boys, she thought. They're so weird.
"Animals, the lot of them," the hat agreed, sniffing with contempt.

"Captain," Hermione said, slipping into his tent and pausing as he stood with his back to her, poring over something on his makeshift desk. "You sent for me?"

Malfoy turned over his shoulder, hefting his sword in his right hand. "Hat off," he said, pointing to it with the tip of his sword, and she obeyed, setting it down near the tent's entrance. "Disarm me," he invited flatly, and she blinked, her hand moving reflexively to the scabbard at her hips.

"Now?" she asked. "But—"

"What are my weaknesses?" he asked, and she frowned, stammering.

"I—I don't know if I should—"

"You've been training with me for nearly a month," Malfoy reminded her, arching a brow impatiently. "I'll consider myself insulted if you haven't come up with something you can use against me."

"Well," Hermione said hesitantly, "it's just—I really don't—"

"Gryff," Malfoy said firmly, suddenly feinting towards her left shoulder as she quickly drew her sword up in a circle parry, "what the fuck are my weaknesses?"

"You're weaker on your left side than your right," she blurted out, hardly processing that the words had left her mouth. "Presumably from whatever it was that gave you that scar," she added, gesturing to where she knew it to be beneath his shirt and then forcing herself not to blush.

"Good," he said, lowering his sword to pace around her in a circle. "And?" he asked, lunging in a downward strike that she deflected and then met, forcing him to throw his weight forward with his left shoulder.

"Arrogance," she replied, unthinking, and his face contorted with indignation.

"Excuse me?" he asked, sweeping upward with his blade and forcing her to counter with a parry that left her torso exposed; a mistake she'd made before, but which she rectified now by pulling out of the block early, forcing him to adjust his balance and shift his stance before he could attack again.

"Your counterattacks are quick, but your defensive motions are slow," Hermione clarified. "Not because you can't be faster," she added, feinting to the right, "and not because you don't have the skill, but because—" she paused, panting as she struck to draw him forward. "Because you don't believe anyone else is fast enough to catch your little openings, so you leave a moment while your opponent is in range, and that's—"

She struck again, hitting the flat of her blade against his right shoulder and then, as he arched up with his right elbow, slamming the hilt of her sword against his right wrist, prompting his grip to falter.

"Arrogance," she finished, breathing hard as his sword clattered to the ground below him.

He stared, first at the sword at his feet, and then at her.

"Good," he said eventually, picking up the sword and then sheathing it, nodding once. "You know
your own weaknesses, I presume?"

Not for the first time, his conversational shift was so startling she scarcely knew how to react.

"I'm small," she said, half smiling. "I'm weak."

He let out something that might have been a chuckle.

"Get some rest, Gryff," he told her, waving his hand. "You're dismissed."

She nodded, sheathing the sword of Gryffindor and picking up Harry's hat from the floor, nudging the tent flap open.

"Oh, and Gryff," Malfoy called after her, and she turned, setting the hat back on her head.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Good work," he told her. "You know," he added. "For someone small and weak."

She shook her head, furiously fighting the smile that was slipping across her lips as she ducked out of his tent, feeling an unexpected rush of pleasure.

"You like him," the hat commented, tutting snidely. "That would almost be sweet if it didn't make for a total cockswallop mess."

"I do not," Hermione retorted, muttering to it. "He's my Captain."

"He's my Captain," the hat mimicked, and she assumed by the sound of its voice that if it could have rolled its eyes, it would have. "You little monster."

"You know, you're supremely unhelpful," she told it. "Maybe I'll just drown you in the river."

"You wouldn't," the hat retorted.

"I would," she replied. "What do you say to that?"

"What do I say?" the hat sniffed. "Dishonor on you," it declared, "dishonor on your family, dishonor on your sword—"

"Fine, fine," Hermione muttered, shaking her head. "I won't, then."

"I knew it," the hat said smugly, and Hermione let out a quiet groan, heading back to her tent.

"Hands up," Draco said, pausing to adjust Gryff's elbows. "Protect that pretty face of yours, Gryff, or you won't have much for your mother to cry over when you come home. Again," he said, gesturing to Neville, who repeated his left hook. "Good," Draco said, nodding approvingly as Gryff adjusted his hand position. "Better block, Gryff. Muscle memory," he added, and Gryff nodded, resuming his defensive position. "Good. Longbottom, don't twist so much when you get tired," he warned, demonstrating. "Leaves your torso exposed—"

"Draco," Blaise called, gesturing to him, and Draco turned over his shoulder, acknowledging him before turning back to his soldiers.

"Again," he instructed Gryff and Neville. "Run it until it hurts, and then thirty more after that." Neville chuckled; Draco glared at him. "I'm not joking," he warned, watching the smile fade from
Neville's face as Gryff smothered a laugh at his expense, and then he turned, gesturing for Blaise to follow into the tent.

"What is it?" he asked once they'd entered, crossing his arms over his chest. "News from my father?"

Blaise shook his head. "Knights," he supplied grimly. "There was a raid last night in Knockturn."

"Fuck," Draco exhaled. "They're getting closer to Hogwarts, aren't they?"

"Looks that way," Blaise agreed, shrugging as he met Draco's eye. "What do you want to do?"

"They still haven't sent for us?" Draco asked, pointedly not mentioning Lucius. "Not General Riddle, even?"

"The Second Army's only been training about two months," Blaise reminded him. "I doubt they think you're ready."

"Maybe not," Draco agreed, tapping his fingers irritably on his arm. "But it can't hurt to be closer, can it? Just in case they need reinforcements," he mused, glancing innocently at Blaise.

Blaise gave him a slow smile. "Shall I tell them to pack?"

"We can train on the road," Draco confirmed, promptly turning to shove his things into his bag.

"What's with the hat?" Neville asked, and Hermione turned.

"Keeps the sun out of my eyes," she replied, and Neville shrugged, looking skeptical.

"That hat looks older than my Gran, and that's saying something," he commented.

"Say that to my face, you limp noodle," the hat muttered fiercely in Hermione's ear.

"I like it," Justin said, joining them as they walked. "Sort of emphasizes how much smaller you are than me, which is always appreciated."

"Thanks," Hermione told him, rolling her eyes.

"Not that his size matters much," Marcus cut in, catching their conversation and jogging to catch them. "Pretty nice being the Captain's favorite, I bet."

Neville groaned. "Not this again—"

"I'm not Malfoy's favorite," Hermione protested for the umpteenth time. "I'm just—"

"Gryff," Malfoy interrupted, pulling up alongside her and calling down from his horse. "I don't believe today's training was meant to be a lesson in mindless chatter, was it?"

"Timely," the hat chuckled darkly, and Hermione sighed.

"See?" she muttered to Marcus, who snickered. "What can I do for you, Captain?" she called back to Malfoy, falsely bright, and he smirked at her, leaping down from his horse and thrusting the reins into Blaise's hands as he took off on foot.

"Keep up," he told her, darting past her to set the pace at a brisk run. "Come on," he shouted over
his shoulder, glaring impatiently at the rest of the unit, and Hermione sighed amidst the collective groans, struggling to catch Malfoy as Marcus and Colin dragged their feet behind her.

"Here's some training for you," Malfoy mused casually, glancing over at her as she started to wheeze slightly. "Do you know how wolves travel?" She shook her head, already panting, and he grinned. "The weak set the pace," he explained, turning around to jog backwards, "pushed by the strongest; then the rest of the pack follows, and they're closed out by the leader, who keeps everyone on the path. Now, obviously I'm the leader," he continued, "so my question is this, Gryff—" he paused, slowing down to match her pace. "Which wolf are you?"

She grimaced, shaking her head in resignation before forcibly resuming the faster pace he had set.

"Good choice," he said smugly, clapping her on the back as he circled around to run to the back of the unit. "I'll make a man out of you yet, Gryff," he shouted over his shoulder.

"Doubtful," the hat muttered in her ear, and Hermione grunted her reluctant agreement, certain she would be requiring yet another thorough ice bath by the time the day was through.

"Good," Malfoy said, correcting the angle of her elbow and then beckoning for her to strike again. "Now, if you're going to aim for the neck," he said, gesturing to his own, "you want to strike here, right at the side. There's a nerve here," he explained, pointing to it, "so if you hit it, you can cut off reception from the brain, even if it's just temporary."

Hermione nodded, looking at it. "It'd be an easy hit if I got them to bend over," she commented, grimacing. "Can't reach it otherwise."

"Easy enough," Malfoy replied, reaching out to give her an unexpected hard tap toward the back of her ribs, chuckling a little as she instantly folded over. "Got it?"

"Yeah," she panted, thrusting her elbow up and nearly catching him in the nose as he darted back, blocking her shot and laughing.

"You're getting dangerous, Gryff," Malfoy remarked, sounding pleased. "Clearly I'm an exceptionally talented teacher."

"And so humble, too," Hermione joked, making a face at him. "It's a wonder you manage to stand under the staggering weight of your many limitless virtues—"

"You have to admit, I made a marvel out of you," he interrupted, shaking his head as he looked at her. "I have no idea what possessed you to even join the Army." He paused, picking up his shirt to wipe the sweat from his brow, and frowned at her. "Why did you join the Army?" he asked, and she, startled by the question, simply gaped at him for a moment.

"Oh," she began, clearing her throat. "I mean, I guess I just—"

He lifted a brow, waiting, and she sighed.

"The truth is I'm looking for someone," she confessed. "Two someones, actually. My friends," she explained. "They're like brothers to me, and they were summoned to the First Army."

"So you joined the Army to come find them?" Malfoy asked. "That's quite a witless plan, Gryff."

"I've done dumber things," she said, and he chuckled.
"I don't doubt it," he agreed, shaking his head. "My father would have had you quietly removed from your tent while you slept and tossed in a ditch by the side of the road, and that's just for the stuff I've seen—"

"I suppose I'm lucky then," she said, wiping sweat from her face with the back of her forearm. "Having you as a Captain, I mean," she clarified, and instantly felt sheepish, ducking her head and clearing her throat. "Lucky I'm not in a ditch, that is."

Malfoy laughed, seeming not to notice the heat that rose in her cheeks. "You could call it luck," he agreed. "But maybe we should call it a night." He rolled his neck out, throwing himself down on his cot and tossing his shirt aside. "Good work, Gryff. Keep it up and maybe we'll find your friends."

"Thanks, Captain," she said, turning to leave, but paused as she reached the tent flap. "Captain," she ventured slowly, turning over her shoulder. "Have you heard of the Court of Miracles?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment, drifting away on something she couldn't quite see or read, and then seemed to slowly return, his grey eyes settling on hers from afar.

"My mother used to tell stories about the Court of Miracles," he finally said, propping himself up on his elbows. "She always said something about a lord. A 'once and future' lord," he recalled, "an heir who would return to bring magic back to the world."

He paused, frowning. "I haven't heard that story in quite some time," he murmured, more to himself than to her. "Not since she told it to me as a child."

"Your mother?" Hermione asked, and Malfoy blinked, shaking himself of the memory.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "She died when I was quite young. And my father's an Army officer, and he wasn't particularly paternal to begin with, so it was off to boarding school, and then the Academy, and then—" he shook his head, grimacing. "I don't really know why I'm telling you this," he said, looking puzzled. "I guess I just—"

He trailed off, and she stepped towards him.

"I don't have a family," Hermione offered, recognizing the need for reciprocation. "My friends, Harry and Ron," she explained, "they've been my only family since I was eleven."

Malfoy looked up, his gaze softening slightly. "You're an orphan?"

"We all were," Hermione confirmed. "Well, they had families," she amended. "Which is how they knew about the Court of Miracles. Children's tales, like the one your mother told you."

He paused, mulling over her admission.

"I suppose if I were in your shoes, I'd try to find them as well," Malfoy commented. "I imagine that's why it matters so much to me to finally join my father. Well, that, and to prove to him I'm not a waste of his time," he said glumly. "That I'm worth carrying on his legacy, I suppose."

Malfoy had been playing with his hands as he spoke, and something about the insecurity of the motion caught her eye.

"Captain," she began, and he stopped, his fingers stilling at the sound of her voice as he looked up. "I just—I wanted to say that I think you're a great Captain," she told him. "And I don't know your father, but I think he's a god-awful fool if he isn't proud of what you've done with your Army," she
added, making him laugh.

"Maybe we should just go after the Knights ourselves, then," he suggested mockingly. "Make our way to Hogwarts on our own without waiting for a summons—"

He stopped, and she froze.

There was a chance, she could tell, that the statement had been intended as a wild hypothetical, but the moment the words left his mouth they both seemed to hold their breaths, staring experimentally at the other.

"Maybe we should," she said, careful that he could see she wasn't joking.

He stared at her, his brow furrowing.

"Get some sleep, Gryff," he said slowly, curling a hand around his mouth in thought as she turned obediently to leave. "We'll find your friends," he added. "I'll get us there, I promise."

She nodded over her shoulder, passing him a grateful smile before heading back for her tent.

For the first time in a long while, Hermione tossed and turned that night, unable to stop thinking about Malfoy's version of Harry's story.

"Is magic real?" she asked the hat. "Or am I losing my mind?"

The hat sighed.

"Go to sleep," it instructed firmly; and then, softer, "said the talking hat to the cross-dressing girl who wonders if the world has magic," it added, murmuring in scolding lamentation.

"Well, Malfoy's lost it," Marcus announced as they packed their things again. "Honestly, I think he's just chasing the Knights now."

"Why shouldn't he?" Hermione asked. "We're Army. We're trained. There's no reason for us to keep running drills in the woods—"

"I'm with Gryff," Justin contributed firmly. "Besides," he added, "this way we get to go through town. Don't know about you all, but I could use a break from you prick-studded wonders."

"Looking to show off your new biceps?" Neville joked, grinning at him.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," Justin retorted. "I bet even Gryff'll get a lady," he added, throwing an arm around Hermione's shoulders and ruffling her hair as she dragged herself out of his reach.

"No thanks," Hermione said, scowling. "I'll leave the ladies to you three, I think."

"So generous," Neville noted with a smile, as Marcus rolled his eyes.

"Well, I doubt you'll have Captain Pretty Boy to conspire with tonight," Marcus warned her. "I'd be willing to bet Captain Shirtless has his hands full with something that isn't practice drills for once—"

"To women," Justin cut in pompously, nudging Marcus and raising an imaginary glass, "and to the wars we fight for them."
"Hear, hear," Marcus agreed, taking an imaginary pull from the invisible cup as Hermione struggled to swallow a burdensome lump in her throat, wondering why the thought of Malfoy with a woman was suddenly so horribly inconceivable.

"It's because," the hat reminded her rudely, "you have an inadvisable crush on him."

"Shut up," she whispered to it, ducking her head and sighing aloud as Neville and Justin broke out in an old tavern song about large-bosomed women and frothy beers, leaving her with a heady sense of dread.

It wasn't until she watched Malfoy shake his head politely at a pretty barmaid that her intestines seemed to slowly relax, uncoiling tentatively in her stomach.

"You liiiiiiiike him," the hat sang, and Hermione shoved it in her pocket, heading towards the bar.

"Why's it so damn busy?" a man at the bar asked, prompting Draco to glance up.

"Second Army's in town," a second man huffed dubiously. "Though with all these misfits it looks more like a traveling circus, if you ask me."

"That Captain Malfoy's as green as they come," the first man replied, shrugging. "No service record to speak of—and his own father took another lieutenant," he added laughingly. "What else'd you expect from his troops?"

Draco's fingers tightened stiffly around the handle of his tankard.

"About time you give us a night off," Blaise interrupted, taking a seat beside Draco at the bar and sighing as he motioned to the barkeep. "Even if I can fully tell that this is just a plot to chase down the Knights," he warned, admonishing him with a finger.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Draco said innocently, though at the sound of another mutter of his name he growled into his tankard, willing himself to ignore the surrounding gossip.

"I almost guarantee this goes badly," Draco muttered, glancing over his shoulder. "I will admit, though, that the more deviant part of me is inhumanly fascinated to see what these goons'll look like with a little alcohol in their system," he conceded, glancing at where some of the recruits stood near the bar.

"You did a good job with them," Blaise informed him, motioning for a tankard of ale. "Frankly, I still can't believe you actually made something out of the little one," he added, jutting his chin out at Gryff. "Though I'm not sure I really understand why you paid him so much attention."

"Hey," they heard over their shoulders, both turning towards the insistent voice. "That's my Captain you're talking about," Gryff warned from near the door, and Draco grimaced, recognizing that he was speaking to the two men had been staring at him. "Care to take it up with me?"

"What's he doing?" Blaise asked, frowning. "Those men are twice his size."

True, Draco acknowledged internally, though he was admittedly less worried about Gryff's safety than he was unhealthily curious about the result. "Oh, come on, Blaise," he said, casually taking a sip of his ale as he watched. "Don't you know size doesn't matter?"

"That," Blaise pronounced drily, "is an argument for far lesser specimens, and one that I have never had to use."
Draco chuckled, turning his attention back to Gryff and the men at the bar.

"You?" one of the men scoffed, glaring down at Gryff. "You couldn't hurt a fly."

"Lucky I didn't come for flies," Gryff retorted, brandishing his signature defiance. "Last I checked, I was talking to the two sad sacks who had a problem with my commanding officer."

"Excuse me?" the man demanded, rising to his feet. "Better watch your mouth, boy," he growled, stepping forward, and at Gryff's narrowed gaze, Draco fought a sense of preemptive satisfaction, watching his soldier's eyes travel calculatedly across the man's torso.

The stranger wound up, preparing to throw a punch, and Gryff quickly spun, throwing the blade of his hand in a rapid side jab to the man's kidney and then, as the man went down, striking downward on his neck, rendering him unconscious with breathtaking precision; evidence, Draco knew, of thousands of carefully practiced blows, filling him with an inordinate sense of pride that he fought instantly to smother.

Gryff stepped back, surveying the damage on the floor, and then smiled up at the second man, beckoning.

"What was that about flies?" Gryff prompted, and the man opened his mouth, gaping. "Better not," Gryff warned, stepping over the first man's crumpled form. "They're dropping like mad," he lamented falsely, winking across the bar at Draco before making his way toward a booth with Justin and Neville.

"That," Draco told Blaise, leaning towards him and gesturing as the crowd parted soundlessly for Gryff to pass. "That's why I spent time with him."

Blaise let out a low whistle. "Forget I said anything," he conceded, shaking his head in disbelief.

"God, this is so much worse with a hangover," Marcus muttered, rubbing his temple and squinting. "I think I'm being murdered by the sun."

"He's not wrong," the hat said in her ear. "I notice nobody has any unceremonious mockery for me today," it added smugly, preening slightly atop her head.

"Hush," Hermione murmured, turning over her shoulder to look for Malfoy. "Captain," she called nervously, sidling up to him. "Shouldn't we have run into the First Army by now?"

Malfoy nodded grimly. "We've already passed into the outskirts of Hogsmeade," he confirmed. "They should have been here to—"

"Captain," Blaise interrupted, doubling back on horseback. "You need to see this."

Malfoy frowned. "What is it?"

Blaise shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, gesturing to an ominous cloud of smoke that hung over the rooftops of Hogsmeade ahead, and Malfoy froze for a moment, blinking, before suddenly taking off at a run, Hermione following after him.

They turned the corner to find that part of Hogsmeade had been nearly razed to the ground, the sky black and thick with an inhospitable cloud of dust above a series of ashy, charred buildings, little more than remnants where shops and homes and livelihoods had stood. There was a stale sense of fear in the air, of dread and death and vacancy, and Hermione felt she swallowed misery and
breathed in anguish, suffering under a fog of despair.

They walked solemnly through the village, looking for survivors; they found none, though Hermione was selfishly relieved to find that neither Harry nor Ron was among them.

"What the fuck," Marcus breathed, bending his head in a rare portrait of sympathy, and behind him Hermione caught the motion of Draco kneeling beside one of the bodies that bore the First Army seal, his hand curled around his mouth in grief.

"Captain," she exhaled, joining him, and he shook his head.

"My best friend," he murmured, swallowing heavily as he sank down beside the body. "My father's lieutenant."

"Captain," she repeated, a breath rising up fearfully in her lungs. "I—I'm so sorry—is your father —" she broke off, unable to voice the question. "Is he—"

The implication was clear enough; no one had survived this. She broke off, forcing the words back down her throat, and Malfoy looked up, his grey eyes hardened with anger.

"They're heading for Hogwarts," he said miserably, his mouth sealing in a thin, tight line. "We have to stop them before they get there."

"Draco," Blaise insisted, chasing after him. "You have to think this through—you have to be rational—"

"They're obviously coming for Grindelwald," Draco reminded him, not slowing down. "Where else would they go but Hogwarts?"

"Still," Blaise urged. "We have no strategy, no plan of attack—we have no idea how many Knights there are, or whether they're armed—"

"Of course they're fucking armed, Blaise, but we didn't come here for nothing," Draco snapped furiously. "What have we been training for if not for this?"

"I just don't think—"

Blaise stopped suddenly, coming to a halt, and Draco groaned.

"Don't think what?" he shouted impatiently, pivoting, but Blaise's eyes had abruptly grown large, staring at something in the distance.

"I don't think we can stop them," Blaise whispered. "I think they're already here."

"Holy shit," Marcus breathed. "What kind of doomsday scenario is this?"

The figures seemed to appear one by one from the heavy smoke-filled air, black cloaks materializing from the fog as if the fog itself had crafted them. Hermione coughed, choking on something that felt and tasted like sickness and despondency, struggling to reach Malfoy as he took several steps back, his face pale as he looked out over the army of shadowed figures.

The air seemed to grow thicker, more unstable with each step, a horrifying taste of misery on her tongue as her lungs filled with terror and ash, the cloaked figures edging closer and closer as she reached out, blindly seeking out Malfoy.
"Keep both hands on the sword," the hat told her, alarmingly unsarcastic, and she hurriedly obeyed, unsheathing it and then nearly dropping it from her hands as a blinding light seemed to shine from it, clearing a path as the hooded figures shrank away. "What do you see?"

The moment Hermione managed to put both hands on the hilt of Gryffindor's sword, the number of cloaked figures seemed to cut by half; there were a few standing with their feet planted, lining the path to the castle that loomed in the distance, but the others seemed to hover mid-air, shrinking from the light of her blade.

"They're not all human," Hermione said hoarsely. "What are they?"

"Creatures," the hat told her. "They feed on despair."

She frowned, the entire concept seeming impossible. "But—"

"I really don't have time for a reality check," the hat informed her impatiently, and she turned, watching as a hooded figure begin to descend near Malfoy.

"HEY," she yelled, slashing at what might have been its face to force it cowering away from her sword, half leaping back. "STAY AWAY FROM HIM—"

She took another step, and then another, and looked down in awe as the motion of her blade seemed to keep the hooded figures at bay, as though they couldn't stand its presence. She brandished the sword, growing bold, and then she felt a wrench, realizing someone's hand had wrapped around her wrist.

She worked herself free, slashing through the air with the sword and slamming her elbow into the chest of something that was decidedly not a mere phantom of despair.

"Some of them are human," she panted to the hat, trying to see through the thickening fog. "Which are which?"

"The ones with feet," the hat said unhelpfully, as Hermione thrust her sword up, knocking an opponent away as the hooded figures scattered backwards from the gleam of her blade. "Of course, the further one gets from the dementors—"

"What?" Hermione shouted, stabbing gracelessly as a figure began to hover over Justin's head.

"The soul-sucking despair creatures," the hat supplied. "The further you get from those, the easier time you'll have fighting the human ones—though, ideally, if you could rid yourself of both at once—"

"Soul-sucking," Hermione echoed, absurdly thinking that it sounded like something Ron would say about the forest; the forest, she thought again, the one with the face-eating, blood-drinking—

"The forest," she gasped, a mad impulse driven by a fanciful children's tale that seemed suddenly no less strange than anything else, and took off running; she held the sword aloft, instantly feeling the change in the air as she drew the creatures into the woods, the sound of footsteps following in her wake serving to indicate that the men, whichever ones they were, had followed too.

She slashed a clearing into the thick of the woods and thrust the sword down, plunging it into the earth; the moment the blade had touched the forest floor the entire mass of uninterrupted woodlands seemed to fill with light, so bright she brought a hand to her eyes, blinded momentarily. The hooded creatures let out inhuman screams, as repelled by the light as they had been by the blade of her sword, and they vanished into air, leaving behind only the few scattered men who
were cloaked.

Hermione was dizzied, disoriented from the effort, but processed the triumphant sound of footsteps coming from behind her, the Second Army descending upon the remaining Knights at the forest edge.

"Gryff," she heard behind her, stumbling as Malfoy gripped her shoulder, pulling her back from the line of trees. He tucked her under one arm, half dragging her, and threw up a left-handed block, slamming a Knight into an opposite tree trunk as she struggled to gain her footing at his side.

They reached the edge of the forest and paused, gasping for breath, as the few Knights that remained were pummeled back by the Second Army, forced out of range.

"They're retreating," Malfoy said, turning to head towards where Blaise had run a Knight through with a dagger. "Come on—"

She turned over her shoulder, following him, and a flash of something from afar caught her eye; a knife, she realized, thin and silver, with the point of it aimed at Malfoy's back. "NO," she shouted, leaping forward, processing the sting of something that dug into her side and then collapsing, struggling to conjure breath as she felt Malfoy drop beside her.

"Gryff," she heard Malfoy say, squinting up at where the pale sheen of his hair caught her eye. "Gryff, it's Draco, focus on my face—it's going to be fine," he told her, and she wanted to laugh. "You're going to be alright, just hold on—"

"Gryff," she heard him say, his face swimming behind closed eyes, "just hold on—"

Hermione woke slowly, groggily peering through laboriously slitted eyes as she caught a strangely familiar face staring down at her, like a vision from a dream.

Not a dream.

A nightmare.

"You," she muttered, barely able to make out the features of a face she only partially remembered, a hooded figure in an unwelcoming pub. "I know you—"

"Don't strain yourself," the man said, his voice low and clipped. "You'll want to save your strength."

Hermione's stomach flipped apprehensively. "For what?"

"Ah, for certain death, of course," she heard, another voice, and turned her head weakly to catch a flicker of startling blue eyes, a gasp slipping between her lips as she recognized the man who'd chased her from the tavern. "Hello," he said, flashing her a ruthless smile. "You've certainly had a run of things, haven't you?"

"No," Hermione spat, struggling to sit up until the other man forced her back down. "No, I—where's Malfoy—where's my Captain—"

"You know, the thing about being being stabbed is that medical treatment requires a certain level of . . . revelation," the man said, and Hermione glanced down in a panic, realizing that the binding around her breasts had been removed, a bandage fastened to the side of her waist where the errant blade had struck. "Funny," the man said. "I don't believe women are permitted in the Army, are
they, Severus?"

"No," the other man confirmed, shaking his head. "They are not, My Lord."

The handsome so-called Lord tapped his mouth facetiously. "Punishable by death, isn't it?"

"Quite," the man called Severus agreed, dully uninterested.

"Pity," the Lord lamented, his lips slipping into a taunting grin. "Don't you wish you had simply given me the hat when you had the chance?" he asked Hermione, and she shrank back as he took a step towards the cot she'd been lain on, setting a hand on Severus' shoulder for him to move aside.

"I see you procured a sword," the Lord commented, gesturing to it in the corner. "And quite a valuable one, too. What a talented little minx you are," he tutted softly, pursing his lips in mocking disdain. "A liar and a thief."

"That sword isn't stolen," Hermione informed him. "It's mine."

"Oh?" the Lord asked dubiously. "And how does an orphan girl masquerading as a soldier come to possess such a priceless artifact? The silver alone costs more than you're worth," he remarked, picking it up and looking over it. "And when you factor in the rubies, well—"

"I didn't steal it," Hermione insisted flatly, and the Lord laughed.

"How did you come by it, then?" the Lord taunted. "Pulled it out of a hat, did you?" he added, laughing. "Such a pity no one will believe you."

"Get Malfoy," Hermione said instantly. "He'll know I'm not a thief—"

"Do you really think he'll believe you when he finds out you've deceived him?" the Lord prompted, seeming to bristle with impatience. "You're a fool, then, whoever you are, and I pity you your insipid trust in your Captain's mercy." He looked down, eyeing the sword in his hands. "I think I'll hold onto this," he murmured, "and the hat as well. You may have delayed the inevitable, but destiny has a way of working out. Besides, surely they wouldn't kill you," he added with a chuckle. "Do you think they will, Severus?"

Severus gave a grim, unsettling smirk that filled Hermione with an unspeakable dread.

"Ah, well, what a magnificent gamble," the Lord mused. "In any case, I thank you, my dear, for saving your Captain's life," he added, heading for the tent's exit. "I find it will be quite helpful for my purposes," he murmured, and Hermione blinked, catching a glimpse of something as his black cloak shifted; a flash of emerald green.

The color of the First Army.

"Where's Harry?" she demanded suddenly, forcing herself upright. "Harry and Ron, where are they?"

The Lord glanced over his shoulder, darkly amused.

"Wouldn't you like to know," he murmured, disappearing through the tent's exit without another word.

"General Riddle," Draco exhaled, looking up as Tom exited the infirmary tent and striding quickly over to meet him. "How is he?"
Tom grimaced, shifting his black cloak aside and shaking his head with a solemn misery. "I'm sorry to tell you this, Captain Malfoy, but we've been fooled," he remarked quietly, and Draco frowned. "The soldier in there is not who you think he is. Apologies—that soldier is not," Tom amended, calling for pause, "who you think she is."

"She?" Draco echoed, bewildered. "What do you—"

"The soldier who has been impersonating the man called Gryff is, in fact, a woman," Tom informed him. "The sword she's been using is a stolen artifact. She is, in reality, little more than a common thief, who has made a mockery of Commander Grindelwald's forces with her shameless deception."

It was entirely too implausible to be real.

"That's—that can't be," Draco stammered, blinking through his confusion. "I know him—I trust him—"

"Well, then let us both be glad your father isn't present to see this," Tom cut in harshly, his blue eyes turning sharp beneath his furrowed brow. "I would not wish to disappoint him with the knowledge that his son was so poor a judge of character."

Draco swallowed a painful lump of misery, still unable to process what he was hearing.

"Who is she?" he asked, forcing moisture to his throat, and Tom shrugged.

"Does it matter?" he countered. "You know the law, Captain Malfoy."

Draco's entire body stiffened.

"Yes," he forced out slowly, "but—"

"Get rid of her," Tom commanded, just as his associate slipped from the infirmary tent with Gryff's sword and hat in hand. "Are we clear, Captain?"

Draco blinked, staring at the sword, and then turned to face the General, seeing no other option.

"Yes, sir," he conceded, and Tom nodded stonily, gripping Draco's shoulder.

"You've done well today," Tom said. "Clearly Commander Grindelwald will be needing you and your Army by his side, and he owes you a great deal for the protection you've already provided. I'll be expecting you at Hogwarts for commendation."

"Thank you, General," Draco said numbly, and Tom nodded again, beckoning for the man he'd called Severus to follow.

"Do not disappoint me," Tom warned. "Your legacy hangs in the balance, Captain Malfoy."

Draco watched him go, feeling inexplicably bereft.

"Draco," Blaise said, stepping up to him. "Is Gryff okay?"

Draco's mouth tightened as he stared at the tent, tortured by the knowledge of the stranger who waited inside.

"Don't let anyone interrupt us," Draco said, gritting his teeth as he shoved the tent flap aside.
Hermione's hair had grown longer in the months they'd been training; long enough that she'd begun tying it back out of her eyes in recent weeks, and now that it had grown, she wondered what Malfoy was seeing when he stared at her, his grey eyes turning cold with what looked to be either fury or betrayal—or, perhaps, both.

"Captain," she said quietly, and his mouth tightened. "Please, you have to believe me," she pleaded, "this isn't what you think—"

"Who are you?" he demanded, taking a few steps to where she sat up in the infirmary cot, flinching through the pain of her wound.

"You know who I am," she told him, forcing herself not to drop her gaze. "My name is Hermione Granger, but everything else you know about me is true—"

"How can you say that?" he retorted gruffly, the line of his mouth contorting with anger. "You lied to me," he accused her. "You lied."

The bitterness in his tone was so palpable she felt struck by it, the very bones of her made brittle by the impact.

"I wasn't lying when I nearly died for you," she reminded him, the wound at her side still throbbing. "Isn't that the only truth that matters, Captain?"

"Don't," he growled, shaking his head. He stared at her, his gaze hardening, before it suddenly seemed he could no longer look at her; as though the truth of her had sickened him, and he could no longer stomach the sight. "I'm not your Captain," he told her gruffly, turning to leave.

"No," she corrected him, bristling with frustration as he went. "No. You're the one turning your back on me." He paused, and she forced herself to her feet. "You're still my Captain," she said emphatically, watching the tension manifest in his spine at the words. "You're the man who trained me, and that hasn't changed. Nothing has changed unless you let it," she told him furiously, "but Captain, this isn't over. There's an enemy that's still out there, and you and I both know you're not equipped to do this alone—"

He spun on his heel, color rising in his cheeks.

"You know the law, Gry- Hermione," he told her, shaking his head at the correction. "You know what I have to do."

She swallowed, wondering for the first time if he would do it.

"I'm still the same person who chose to fight for you," she reminded him. "And you know that too, Captain, I know you know that—"

"Don't tell me what I know," Malfoy snapped. "You impersonated a soldier, you deceived me at every turn—"

"Not every turn," she retorted, half-snarling at him. "When I gave you my loyalty, I meant it. When I said I would fight with you—for you—I meant it," she repeated, staring at him. "If I lied about my name, it was only by necessity—and if there wasn't a part of you that already knew that, you wouldn't have come here," she added, watching his brow furrow helplessly as she voiced what they both knew was true. "You could have had someone else kill me—you could have just left me to die. But you're here because you know," she pressed, swallowing her anguish and forcing him to meet her eye. "You know I would stand by you if the tables were turned."
His grey eyes flickered with something like shame.

"My hands are tied," he told her, taking a step closer. "I don't have a choice."

She let out a bitter scoff of laughter. "You think this isn't a choice?"

He took another step, and another, until he was even with her, staring down at her as he'd always done.

"Why'd you do it?" he asked, and she bit her lip, avoiding his eye. "Hermione," he said, swallowing. "Why?"

"I told you. I had to find my friends," she insisted, aware of the stubbornness that filled her voice. "This was the only way to find them. It was the only way," she repeated painfully, lifting her chin, "but I—I never thought it would go this far," she added, her eyes meeting his as she forced a heavy swallow. "I didn't think—"

"That I'd find out?" he prompted miserably. "That one day you'd be revealed? Surely you knew you couldn't do this forever—"

"I don't know what I thought," she admitted. "But it was necessary, and I wouldn't have deceived you if I didn't have to. Please," she begged, taking a step towards him with difficulty. "Please, Captain, you have to believe me—"

She faltered, reaching helplessly towards him, and he paused where he stood.

He shut his eyes for a moment, struggling internally, and when they opened again, the grey settled on hers with a sort of longing she knew must have been in her imagination; a dream, or a wish, or something she so desperately hoped were true that she must have conjured it herself.

"Go," he said, and her breath rose up to choke her. "Just—get out of here. A life for a life," he offered, part of him looking as though he wanted to laugh; to unravel to nothing in a comedy of errors as he took a step back, gesturing toward the tent's exit. "My debt is repaid."

He dropped his gaze, not meeting hers; she took a step, defeated, and made to exit before stopping, turning slowly to look at him.

"I would have served you if you'd let me," she said, figuring it was her last chance to say as much. "I would have been proud to fight for you, Draco Malfoy. Not because of your father," she added brusquely. "Not because of your name. But because of who you are."

"Don't," he forced out, shaking his head, but she took another step closer.

"Could you have loved me like you loved Gryff?" she asked him, half-pleading. "Was it only ever because I was a man that you believed in me?"

"This isn't about me," he said, swallowing hard. "This isn't about us—"

"Isn't it?" she asked him. "Am I the person you trained or not? Am I the person you trust," she asked painfully, "or not?"

He stared at her, shaking his head, and she realized they were nearly chest to chest, her lungs filling somehow with his breath.

"Don't make me do this," he said quietly, but she shook her head.
"I have no secrets now," she told him. "You see me for what I am." She paused, swallowing, and then met his eye. "So my question is this," she murmured, "what kind of man are you, Captain?"

He closed the distance between them with a low growl, a sound that tore from his throat and buried itself in her mouth, sharing the breath of devastation between them.

"I thought so," she whispered against his lips.

Draco kissed her fully, firmly, fitting himself against her and wondering how he could possibly not have known, not have imagined the feel of her in his arms, the pressure of her lips against his as she snaked her arms around his neck, the warmth of her body flush against his.

She slid her hands down his chest, her fingers lingering at the spot she'd first drawn blood from the side of his ribs, and he slipped his hand under the loose fabric of her shirt, drawing it slowly up the bandage at her side to trace over the badge of her loyalty. He felt her breath stutter, the motion of her lungs filling unevenly between his palms, and slid the shirt over her head, looking down at her with wordless veneration.

His eye caught first on her shoulders; on the scars left from practice, and the muscle that had carved itself there, the mark of her dedication. He slid his hands up, drawing his thumbs over her clavicle, and then bent to press his lips to the side of her neck; to the nerve he'd once taught her to use as a weapon, feeling her shudder beneath his touch.

She inhaled sharply as his hands found her breasts, moaning a little as he drew his thumbs over the curves of them; he let his mouth travel slowly down, lower, walking her back as he bent his head and then laid her carefully on the cot, climbing over her to slowly trace his tongue over a nipple, first one, then the other; the parts of her she'd kept hidden to stay alive. She gasped, arching her hips up to meet his, and he felt her fingers pulling at the fabric of his shirt until he let her tear it from his back, both of them freeing captive breaths as skin met skin.

He had thought he wanted women soft and pliant, fragile and delicate, but he'd been wrong; feeling her—running his hands over cuts and scars and bruises, muscle and bone lined with consequence, shaped by strength and speed and discipline—he found himself spellbound by the sharpened angles of her beneath him, knowing that what he held between his fingers was the measure of a person who amounted to vastly more than prettiness alone. She was his soldier; every inch of her bore evidence of that, and he paid her back with worship, with adoration, taking lips and tongue and teeth to every part of her he could reach until he arrived at the fabric of her trousers, pausing as her breath caught in her lungs.

"Please," she whispered, and he peeled the fabric back, his heart thudding raucously in his throat as she lifted her hips to let him slowly pull the garment from her, slipping one leg free and then the other until she lay bare before him, her pulse wild below his touch.

She reached down, fumbling for his trousers, and he stood up, stepping out of them before rejoining her, positioning himself above her on the cot. They were breathing hard, staring at each other, and for a moment, neither of them moved.

"Captain," she said softly, and he caught her hand, pressing his lips to the inside of her wrist as he shook his head slowly.

"No," he murmured to her skin, and she swallowed heavily.

"Draco," she amended, her fingers tracing over his lips, and as her hips rose to meet his he slid
himself inside her, both of them inhaling sharply as he filled her.

He drew his hand down her torso, feeling the crevices of her abdomen pebble enticingly under his fingers as she dragged his lips down to hers; he met her kiss with the fervor that he restrained from the motion of his hips, his thrusts slow and careful as he caressed the wound on her waist. She whimpered, digging her nails into his back, and together they gradually built to something more; something neither hard nor fast but painstakingly measured, desperate, each of them clinging to the motion as though the inevitable parting would ruin them both.

She muffled a cry in the crook of his shoulder, biting down on the muscle of his neck; he shuddered shortly after, stifling a groan and lowering himself carefully against her as he blinked a flash of gold back from behind his lids, an echo of the brilliant spark in her eyes.

They lay intertwined for a moment, coming down from a dizzying height, when reality seemed to settle cruelly on his shoulders.

"I can't," he began, and she cut him off with a small shake of her head.

"I know," she said. "I'll go. Just—" she brought his lips to hers, kissing him softly, and then her hands dropped to his chest, bearing down against him. "Be safe, Captain," she whispered. "I think things are more dangerous than you believe."

He shivered, playing host to a chill of dread, and brushed a kiss against her hand before forcing himself to his feet, dressing with a bitter carelessness and then turning over his shoulder, watching her flinch as she raised her arms to pull her shirt over her head.

"Your friends," he murmured, reaching out to help her. "I hope you find them."

She grimaced as he drew his hands away, meeting his eye with the full, terrible blow of their impending loss.

"Go," she said, and he nodded, meeting her kiss one last time.

He bit down on her lip, drawing blood, and then tore himself away with the last taste of her.

"Get everyone ready," he shouted to Blaise, storming away from the tent without looking back, fighting to ignore the hollow ache in his stomach. "We're going to Hogwarts."

"What about Gryff?" Neville asked, frowning.

Draco shook his head. "Gryff's dead," he said flatly, and didn't stay to watch their faces fall.

Hermione was alone again.

She slipped out of the tent while the others were heading back on the road, disappearing amid the trees; from afar she watched Marcus, watched Justin and Neville, and saw them frown in confusion at the message that she was a woman, she was a liar this whole time, the man you trusted is gone until they followed, wearied and wary, as Malfoy led them to the castle in a celebrated procession of incongruous defeat.

Hermione held her breath, feeling the breeze fill the space between her fingers and considering where to run; it was a moment, a stillness, and then she was somehow intangibly certain that wherever the Second Army was going, she would be wise to follow.
It was odd, traveling without Harry's talking hat; she found she missed its disgruntled presence. Her thoughts collected wildly in her brain—all this terrible loss; the hat, the mage, the Court of Miracles, followed by a haunting chorus of *Harry Ron Draco, come back come back come back*—without an outlet for release, and she focused instead on being invisible as she watched the Second Army's arrival at the castle.

She concealed herself up high, fighting an audible gasp when she saw who had come out to greet them.

"Ah, Captain Malfoy," the Lord said, bearing the insignia of the First Army General. "Congratulations again on your victory against the Knights. Come," he beckoned, gesturing. "Commander Grindelwald is awaiting an audience."

"Thank you, General Riddle," Malfoy replied, nodding his head. Hermione noted he looked particularly drawn, his expression hauntingly somber. "I trust that you'll see to it that my soldiers are fed and given temporary quarters for our stay?"

"Of course," the Lord replied silkily, throwing an arm around Malfoy's shoulders to usher him inside. "They'll be well taken care of," he promised, disappearing with him inside the castle.

The moment the Lord had gone, Blaise stepped forward, but he was cut off with a sword to his throat from one of the castle guards.

"Excuse me," Blaise began, but the guard was followed by a cloaked figure; one that Hermione recognized as one of the creatures who'd fought with the Knights, prompting her to gasp.

"Take them inside," the guard said, removing his helmet to reveal a man who looked startlingly like Malfoy, his pale blond hair tied back from his face. "All of them."

Blaise's brow furrowed furiously. "But—"

"All of them," the blond man repeated gruffly, and Hermione, watching the cloaked creatures hover menacingly beside Neville, quickly leapt down from her perch, slipping inside the castle just before the heavy doors fell shut.

"Commander Grindelwald," Draco said, dropping to one knee as the old man stared down at him from his throne-like seat. "You sent for me?"

Grindelwald looked up at Tom, frowning. "Did I?" he asked, and Draco blinked, confused, as Tom shrugged, sealing the door shut behind him.

"Not exactly," Tom said, his teeth flashing against his lips as he smiled. "Seeing as you were supposed to be dead by now, Commander, I didn't think you'd be much inconvenienced."

"Tom," Grindelwald said, panic showing on his aged face as his eyes darted toward the barricaded doors. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Well, this isn't how I planned it," Tom lamented, raising a hand, "but you're an old man now, Gellert. Too old," he added, sighing falsely, "don't you think?"

"Tom!" Grindelwald shouted, struggling to his feet and storming towards him. "What are you—"

There was a flash of green light, and Draco leapt back onto his feet, his blood rushing in his ears as he watched Grindelwald collapse to the floor, falling limply as if the strings from his limbs had
"Now," Tom said, a glow pulsing above his palm as he turned expectantly to Draco. "Are you going to cooperate, or will I have to do things the hard way?"

Draco staggered back, reaching for his sword and then stumbling forward as Tom seemed to magically vanish it from his hand, Draco's fingers closing around empty air.

"Ah, rats," Tom murmured. "I had so hoped you'd be as much fun as your father."

Hermione ducked behind one of the castle suits of armor, trying to follow the blond man who had led them away; he had split off from the others, glancing over his shoulder, and met up with the man Hermione recognized as Severus.

"Have you figured it out?" the blond man asked. "His Lordship is growing impatient."

"As far as I can tell, the hat is simply a hat," Severus retorted darkly, and Hermione felt her eyes widen as she noticed him holding it in his hands. "No magical properties to it."

"The Dark Lord says the girl pulled the sword from it," the blond man informed him, and Severus shrugged.

"The sword is marked with the name of the Mage of Valour, but doesn't appear to have any other qualities," Severus replied, a comment which the blond man did not take well.

"Perhaps the items simply don't work for you," the blond man snapped disdainfully. "The girl used it against the dementors, after all, so—" he cut off, groaning. "Where's the sword now?"

"Safe," Severus supplied bluntly. "And as for the hat, I already took it to the Potter boy in the dungeons," he added monotonously, and Hermione's heart leapt alarmingly at the reference. "His Summons show that he's a Peverell descendent, after all—I thought he might be able to force it to show some of its properties, if it possessed any—"

"Well, see that the Dark Lord gets it immediately," the blond man cut in, turning on his heel and striding away. "No more disappointment, Severus," he warned, and Hermione snuck out from behind the suit of armor as the blond man disappeared, keeping her footfall silent as she snuck up on Severus.

The moment she reached his back, she tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me," she said sweetly, and as he turned, she threw a quick jab to his throat, loosening the hat from his hold and then striking again as he lost his balance, aiming a hard punch behind his ear and knocking him out cold.

"Nothing personal," she muttered as he collapsed on the ground, shoving the hat on her head and wandering down the corridor.

"You again," the hat said, still managing to sound disappointed. "About time, you little hellion."

"He said Harry's in the dungeons," Hermione murmured to it, breathing hard as she picked up the pace. "Where do I go?"

"Down," the hat judged flatly, and Hermione glanced over, spying a flight of stairs.

She flew down the many looming staircases, searching for the dungeons and abruptly concealing
herself behind the statue of a one-eyed crone as a cloaked figure floated by, leaving her to shiver before it even crossed her path.

"These again," the hat remarked unhappily. "Insufferable monsters."

Hermione paused, holding her breath, and the creature stopped, seeming to sniff out her presence; she closed her eyes, fighting the wash of despair and thinking of Harry, of Ron, of finding her family once again—and the creature, seemingly repulsed, gave a brisk shudder and kept moving, leaving her to sneak into a darkened corridor.

"This looks dungeon-y," the hat ruled, and Hermione nodded her agreement, sprinting forward.

"Harry," she whispered, running through a hallway lined with semi-concealed doors. "Harry, are you here?"

"Hermione?"

She came to an abrupt halt, turning to her left and finding a slim opening from which she could see his face peering behind a set of iron bars.

"Harry," she sighed with a mix of dread and relief, slipping one hand through the bars to take hold of his fingers. "Where's Ron?"

"Here," Ron's voice said from behind Harry, sounding vaguely awed. "Mione, no offense, but what the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"A fair assessment," the hat judged.

"You have to get out," Harry told her, his voice sharply anxious. "Something's about to go down between Grindelwald and the Dark Lord, and—"

"I'm not leaving," Hermione whispered back. "That Lord, whatever he is—he's got a friend of mine, and—"

"A friend?" Ron echoed. "Since when do you have other friends?"

"Gryff?" she heard over her shoulder, and turned to find Marcus looking at her through an opposite cell. "I'd know that awful hat anywhere," he muttered, and she took a step towards him, caught between the two cells. "What are you doing?"

"I'm—" she began, uncertain how he would react to her presence. "I'm just—I wish I had my sword," she muttered, eyeing the locks on the door.

"You and your sword," the hat commented disapprovingly. "Bet you think it makes you so manly and tough, don't you—"

"Hermione, that Lord you're talking about," Harry told her urgently. "Lord Voldemort—he's a mage, and a powerful one. You have to get out of here, Hermione, right now—"

"Oh god," Hermione whispered, realizing now who must be controlling the dementors. "It's a trap—I have to get to Malfoy," she gritted out, searching around for a key or a weapon and finding nothing. "Can you give me the sword back?" she asked the hat, desperately seeking a last resort. "You made it appear once—"

"Well, that depends," the hat cut in. "Are you planning to do something stupid?"
"Yes, most likely," Hermione confirmed urgently.

"Then yes," the hat told her. "Gryffindor's a cunt like that."

"Gryff, what's the plan here?" Hermione heard over her shoulder, catching Neville's face behind the bars. "You breaking us out?"

"Yes, I have to—have to break you out, and then go get Malfoy, and then—"

She stopped as something landed on her head with a loud thunk, nearly dizzying her.

"Wish there was an easier way than that," she muttered, pulling it out and slamming the blade against the locks on both Harry and Ron's cell and the cell containing the members of the Second Army.

"So you're a girl now, huh?" Marcus asked, shaking his head as he stared down at her. "I guess weirder things have happened."

"Like getting locked in a dungeon? Yeah, I'd say so," Ron snorted gracelessly, as Harry gave him a pointed nudge.

"We have to get out of here. Lord Voldemort," Harry explained, rushing through what information he had to share. "He's the heir of Slytherin, the Mage of Power—"

"He's trying to use the hat to find the Court of Miracles," Ron contributed. "He thought the hat would tell him where to find it—"

"Which I couldn't, of course," the hat muttered in her ear. "Because as I keep saying, it's not that kind of place. Not that anyone listens," it grumbled unhappily.

"It's not any kind of real place, you mean," Hermione sniffed, irritated, and then froze. "It's not a place at all," she realized, coming to a sudden halt. "OF COURSE," she shouted, forcibly quieting herself as she let out a sharp gasp of inspiration. "It's not a place at all—Marcus, put this on," she said, shoving the hat at him as he frowned. "The sword gave me something from the Mage of Valour, so then it might give you—"

"Ouch," Marcus said, rubbing his head as a small silver crown fell out of the hat. "This hat is real fuckin' rude, Gryff—"

"Gryff?" Ron echoed, making a face, and Hermione ignored him, grabbing the crown from Marcus.

"Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure," she read, and Harry's eyes widened.

"The Mage of Wisdom," he exclaimed, and Hermione grabbed the hat from Marcus, thrusting it in Justin's hands.

"Now you—"

"Holy balls," Justin said, rubbing his head as he pulled a decorative two-handled cup from the inside of the hat. "There's got to be a better way to do this—"

"Badger," Harry exclaimed victoriously, pointing to the etching on the cup. "The symbol of the Mage of Virtue—"

"They distributed their magics after they were betrayed," Ron said, thinking back through the story.
"So does that mean possessing these artifacts is enough to bring back the Court?"

"We still need all four," Hermione reminded him, frowning as Neville's possession of the hat came up empty. "We need one from the Mage of Power, too—"

"But this Lord thing's supposed to be Slytherin's heir," Neville said, his brow furrowed in confusion. "So wouldn't he be the fourth?"

"No," Harry cut in. "Hermione's right—legend is that the original four all gave their magics in equal parts to create the Court. There has to be something Lord Voldemort is missing," he murmured thoughtfully. "something a fourth person could conceivably pull from the hat—"

"Who's someone with power?" Hermione asked. "Someone with cunning?"

She paused, glancing around at the expectant faces as Blaise took a step forward, holding a hand out for the hat.

"May I?" he asked, and she held it out to him, holding her breath. They waited a moment, none of them speaking, and then Blaise let the hat fall back into his hands, reaching in and producing a locket of heavy gold that was branded with a serpentine S.

"Let's go get our Captain," he said firmly, and Hermione broke out in a triumphant smile.

"What did you do to my father?" Draco demanded, circling Tom. "Did he know about your assassination plan for Grindelwald? Is that why you had the Knights kill him?"

"Oh, Draco, you misunderstand," Tom crooned, a glow still hovering above his palm. "I assume you mean the dementors? Those aren't the Knights," he explained with a chuckle. "No, Draco, we are the Knights—"

He stepped back, waving a hand for the doors to open, and behind him, Lucius stepped into view, followed by a dozen other cloaked figures.

"Father," Draco gasped, taking a step towards him and then forcing himself to stop. "What is this?"

"This," Tom said, stepping in front of him, "is a revolution. Though, in fairness, now that I'm taking my rightful place as heir, I really have been thinking we need a better name—I'm leaning towards Death Eaters," he mused. "Has a certain aura of mortality and consumption that speaks to me on a deeply personal level."

"Taking your rightful place?" Draco echoed, taking a step back. "You're—you're mad—"

"Well, you know the story, don't you?" Tom pressed. "The heir of Slytherin, the Mage of Power—the Lord who would bring back the magics—"

"That's just a story," Draco sputtered. "Nobody actually believes those mages ever existed—"

"Well, in my experience, people are idiots," Tom informed him. "You included, by the way," he added slyly. "Your father tried to save you, you know—tried to keep you away from me while I used the Knights to destroy the First Army and leave Grindelwald defenseless from attack. But then you had to go and run around with the little girl-boy with the hat and kill off half my Knights," he sighed dramatically, tossing the glowing green flame in the air and catching it pointedly as he took a step towards Draco, "and now look what's happened—"
"Get away from him," a voice cut in sharply, and Tom frowned, turning towards the sound of the intrusion.

Draco blinked, startled, as Hermione and two men he'd never seen before stood in the doorway, her ruby-studded sword gleaming from where she held it in her hand. She caught his eye, giving him a hesitant half smile, and Lucius and the other Knights shifted towards her, providing a barricade between where she stood and where Tom and Draco remained.

"Ah," Tom said, tilting his head over his shoulder to glance warily at her and then turning back to Draco. "I see you weren't able to conjure up the stones to get rid of her, then," he murmured to Draco. "No matter," he determined brusquely, stalking towards her and waving Lucius and the others away. "I'll take care of this."

Tom leaned closer to Hermione's face, taunting her, and Draco's stomach lurched as he took a helpless step towards her.

"You don't actually think you can beat me, do you?" Tom said nastily.

Draco watched her mouth curl up in a smile.

"I don't have to beat you," she retorted sweetly, her grip tightening around her sword. "I just have to get in one good hit."

"NOW," the dark-haired man beside her shouted, and then the Second Army burst through the remaining doors, squaring off against the Knights as Draco took off at a run, taking hold of Tom's shoulder and aiming a blow at his jaw.

Tom countered with a snarl, drawing another jolt of magic to his palms as Draco darted aside, just missing a spell that blasted a hole in the marble floor. He burst forward, aiming for Tom's ear this time, but was forced aside again, lunging to the floor as he narrowly avoided another of Tom's curses.

"You're far more trouble that you're worth, Draco," Tom spat, conjuring another green glow to his palm and aiming it at Draco as he frantically scattered back on the floor. "I've had about enough, I'm afraid—"

He was cut off, ducking as Hermione drew her sword down behind him. "I thought I told you to stay away from him," she warned grimly, backing away as Tom spun to face her.

"Bad call, little thief," Tom taunted Hermione, toying with the glow of his hands. "You brought swords to a mage fight."

"Actually, I brought a sword," Hermione said, using the sword to parry the magic he threw at her, "but they brought a locket, a diadem, and a cup," she finished, the blade catching the spell and seeming to send it rippling through the air, carrying on the edge of the sword as behind her, Draco caught Blaise using magic to restrain one of the Knights against the wall. Draco blinked, staring, as Neville used magic to knock a Knight unconscious, and Justin drew some kind of protective shield around himself, avoiding the blow of a sword.

"Some trinkets," Tom sniffed, his eyes darting around to take in the spectacle of his Knights' battle with a dubious scoff. "Why should that matter?"

"Because this is the Court of Miracles," Hermione told him. "You know the story, don't you?"

"I am the story," Tom declared viciously. "I'm the heir," Tom said, hurling another spell at her,
"destined to return—"

Behind them, one of the men she'd brought with her brought down a pillar, trapping a Knight beneath it; Draco held up a hand, blocking his face from shards of rubble, and was astonished to see the motion had frozen the bits of marble in place, suspended like magic that had somehow been borne from the blood in his veins.

He stumbled to his feet, making his way towards Hermione; he caught her eye, gesturing, and she nodded once, a slow smile spreading over her lips.

"Oh, but that's only a piece of it," she informed Tom, the spell crashing into her blade this time and appearing to melt into the silver, permeating the metal with a green glow as if infusing it with venom. "They set their magic loose upon the world so that one day, others of righteous conviction could claim it in times of need, and that day—"

Draco threw a wild burst of magic, knocking Tom aside; as Tom shifted, adjusting his stance, Hermione lunged, smacking him in the side of the ribs and catching him, as she had once caught Draco, to leave a thin sliver of blood where the blade had been.

"—that day is today," she said fiercely, and Tom stared at her, freezing in place.

He touched his hand to the place where she'd nicked him, staring down in confusion as blood slipped from his finger; he looked up, meeting her eye, and opened his mouth to laugh.

"You missed," he snarled, collecting another glow of magic in his palm, and she smiled, holding up her sword.

"Did I?" she asked, and his face drained of color as he realized the sword, too, had returned to gleaming silver.

Tom staggered, falling to the side as his own curse sank into his bloodstream; he reached out, swaying as he tried to aim another blow at her, but merely collapsed at her feet, falling with a loud thud that echoed through the hall until only silence remained.

After the Dark Lord had fallen, Hermione could hardly manage to do more than stare. She swayed slightly, half-disbelieving, as Harry and Ron staggered towards her, wrapping their arms around her as she let her sword slip from her hand to clatter to the ground.

"That," Ron said, "was the coolest thing you've ever done."

"I know," she muttered, and Harry laughed, kissing her cheek.

"Looks like you have a few things to tell us," he said. "Like where you learned to do that," he said, gesturing to where Lord Voldemort lay on the ground, "and who, exactly, that is," he said, pointing to where Malfoy was staring at her from afar.

"It might be a long story," she admitted, her lips curling up in a smile as she forced herself to look away from him. "I hope you've got lots of time."

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance, sharing a conspiratorial smile.

"Nothing but time," they promised, taking a step back to join the others as they began rounding up the remaining Knights.
Hermione turned, moving to follow, when she heard a soft throat-clearing sound behind her.

"So," Malfoy ventured, and she swallowed, unexpectedly nervous as she turned to meet his eye. "You challenged me with a mage's sword," he began bluntly, crossing his arms as he stared down at her, "and you directly disobeyed orders; you impersonated a soldier, deceived your commanding officer, dishonored the Commander's Army, nearly destroyed a castle, and—"

She flinched, waiting apprehensively for the drop.

"—you saved us all," he concluded evenly, and she looked up with surprise, meeting his cool grey eyes. "Though, one of these days, you'll really have to stop rescuing me," he warned her. "It's starting to reflect badly on my reputation."

"I promise to stop rescuing you if you promise stop being in distress," she offered, and he smirked at her, shaking his head.

"You're incorrigible," he remarked. "How do you sleep at night?"

"Sore, usually," she said. "So not all that well."

He reached out, his thumb lingering on her cheek. "I could help with that," he murmured, and she smiled.

"Looks like you made a man out of me after all, Captain," she told him, and he stepped in close, pressing his forehead to hers.

"Best you not leave yet, then," he murmured, leaning down to brush his lips against hers. "I have a feeling I'll be needing you."

"Told you," the hat said.

"Told me what?" Hermione asked, glaring up at it.

"Everything," it sniffed. "All of it."

"Lovely," Hermione sighed. "And you're not pleased with me at all?"

"So self-congratulatory," the hat told her. "You little hussy."

"Thank goodness I kept you," she drawled. "Can you imagine if I had to live out the rest of my life with hats that actually knew when to be quiet?"

"Oh, fine," the hat muttered. "You did alright."

"Oh, marvelous, thank you—"

"—so valiant and unflinching—"

"—yes, okay, I get it—"

"—my little baby, off to destroy people—"

"—okay, that's enough—"

"You started it," the hat reminded her, and Hermione sighed.
"Said the magic hat to the Mage of Valour," she remarked, and the hat chuckled in a rare show of amusement.

"Indeed," it said fondly, tutting with affection. "Indeed."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Dedicated to Dr Sally, whom I adore and could not do without. Next is a sequel to Reunion; hope you have enjoyed these Disney one shots!
"Oh, blech, don't look," Pansy said, making an incoherent grumble of disgust and nudging Daphne. "Weasley's here."

"Pans," Daphne sighed. "You've been married to him for six years."

"I know," Pansy replied, looking smugly pleased with herself. "But old habits, you know."

"Pansy, can you take your daughter, please?" Ron muttered, struggling to maintain his hold on a wiggling red-haired toddler. "She's asking for you."

"Hello, sweetheart," Pansy cooed, holding her arms out. "Come here and sit with Mummy, Blaise —"

"I still," Blaise announced resentfully, "cannot believe you did that to me. Blaise Weasley," he said, making a face. "You're a demon."

"Blaise Theodora Weasley," Pansy added, waggling a finger at Theo as she pulled her daughter onto her lap. "Don't forget that."

"I can't," Theo assured her, shuddering. "It haunts my dreams."

"It's my fault," Ron assured them, shaking his head. "I should have known she was up to something
when she let me name Arthur."

"I told you I'd get to choose the next one," Pansy replied. "And it's my masterpiece," she added, tapping Blaise Theodora's nose. "Aren't you, sweetheart? You're Mummy's prettiest revenge, aren't you?"

"Where is Arthur, by the way?" Daphne asked. "Is he still playing with Alessia and Milo?"

"He's with Alessia," Harry said, walking into the kitchen. "I believe they're dressing Kreacher up. Last I saw he was wearing lipstick, which is quite frankly an improvement," he added, giving Daphne a congratulatory nod. "Alessia's very talented."

"Well, I have to say," Pansy remarked, looking up at Daphne and Theo, "I'm so relieved that you had twins. That way when Arthur inevitably seduces one of your children, he can have his pick of genders."

"Oh, Pansy," Hermione sighed, wandering in behind Harry with Rose on her hip. "Are you plotting already? They're five years old!"

"This is the difference between you and me, Granger," Pansy sniffed. "I have foresight."

"Says the woman who eloped after six months," Theo drawled. "Foresight indeed."

"Punch him," Pansy instructed her husband, who obliged with a jab to Theo's abdomen.

"Sorry, mate," Ron said, as Theo doubled over with an incoherent 'oof' of displeasure. "Wife says so. You know how it is."

"Careful," Theo warned. "You know how much I'm worth as an author now, don't you?"

"Still not as much as me," Draco reminded him, striding in to kiss his wife's cheek and carefully taking the baby from her arms. "Hello, my little Narcissa Rose," he told his daughter. "How's the most beautiful little girl in the world doing, hm?"

"Fine," Theo said. "Thanks for finally asking."

"Have some decency, Draco," Pansy added, glaring at him. "We all have daughters—"

"Not all of us," Blaise reminded them, shuddering. "And thank god, too."

"You didn't have sex in our house again, did you?" Harry demanded. "Tell Ginny I've had Kreacher keep her out of all the bathrooms. She can hold it."

"Are you still not having children?" Daphne asked, turning to Blaise. "I'm shocked, honestly. I thought for sure you'd be the first to insist your genes not go to waste."

"Yes, well, as it turns out, I rather prefer being able to fu- " He paused, sighing, as Pansy made a face, and Draco pointedly covered his daughter's ears. "I prefer being able to have congress," he amended emphatically, "whenever I'd like to, thanks."

"We have congress," Theo assured him, gesturing to his wife. "Daphne and I had congress on the kitchen counter this morning."

"The shower," Draco agreed, nodding, as Hermione smacked his arm. "What? You asked for it, you little deviant—"
"We did it in Potter's bathroom an hour ago," Pansy contributed, and Harry groaned.

"This is a somewhat important day, you idiots," he reminded them, just as Milo wandered into the kitchen and threw himself at Daphne's feet.

"MUM," he announced. "I'M BORED."

"Milo," Daphne sighed, suppressing a laugh as she crouched down to speak to him. "Weren't you playing with Scorp and James?"

"YES," he replied. "AND THEY'RE BORING."

"It astounds me that my son is so taken with yours," Draco told Harry, shaking his head. "They're fucking inseparable."

"FUCKING INSEPARABLE," Milo wailed, and Daphne groaned.

"Don't bother telling him not to swear," Theo said. "If he's anything like me—"

"He's yelling on the kitchen floor, Theo, he's exactly like you," Daphne said.

"—then it won't internalize anyway," Theo finished loudly, and Draco nodded his agreement.

"Milo, sweetheart, where's Scorpius?" Hermione asked him. "He's not excluding you, is he?"

"This again," Ron groaned, rolling his eyes. "Why is everything Spew, Mione?"

"Ronald, if I need to remind you that it's S.P.E.W.—"

"I'm here, Mother," Scorpius said, entering the room with James at his heels. "Auntie Ginny sent us to tell you that James's mum's nearly ready."

"Luna looks beautiful," James informed them gravely. "You will die."

"Look at these two weirdos," Pansy said with delight, leaning over to smack a kiss on James' stoically pensive forehead. "God, I can't get enough."

"Why does he call you Mother?" Daphne asked Hermione, amused. "Seems oddly pureblooded of you."

"Oh, I don't know why he does it," Hermione sighed, bending to kiss his cheek. "I was Mum for a while, but he seems to prefer Mother."

"I'm affording my mother a modicum of deference," Scorpius supplied in explanation, obviously quoting Hermione. "Also 'cause she's a princess."

"She is," Draco said, bouncing Rose on his hip. "That's true."

"That's very sweet of you, darling," Hermione said, giving Scorpius a squeeze.

"I call my mother by her name," James remarked, looking up at Harry beneath a furrowed brow. "Is that wrong?"

"Not at all," Harry told him, patting his head. "That's what she likes to be called."

"I don't think she would like being a princess," James added, nodding studiously. "I think she
would prefer to be a nargle."

"What she *is* is a total loon," Pansy said, turning to Harry. "She really just woke up this morning and decided she wanted to get married?"

"Yep," Harry confirmed, shrugging. "I asked her what she felt like doing today and she said she wanted to have 'a little wedding, if I wouldn't mind'—so, you know, here we are—"

"I THINK IT'S ABOUT TIME," Milo declared.

"I agree with Theo's spawn," Blaise commented, as Theo picked Milo up and threw him over one shoulder. "After all, you've been together seven years now, Potter. You have a *son*, for one thing," he added, gesturing to James, "and for Salazar's sake, even Ginny and I are married—"

"We just never thought it was important," Harry said, shrugging. "You know. Until this morning, I guess."

"And it isn't," Hermione said firmly, turning to Scorpius. "Marriage is a choice, sweetheart, just like any other institution."

"Yes, Mother," he agreed, reaching up for her hand.

"Is Teddy here?" Ron asked, looking around. "Thought I saw him earlier."

"I believe he's upstairs writing Victoire some poetry," Harry confirmed. "He asked my advice on rhymes, so naturally I sent him to Malfoy."


"Yes, provided Theo has absolutely no role in it," she agreed, stroking Blaise Theodora's red curls. "It'll be stunning. *And* stunningly expensive."

"Ha," Ron said, nudging Theo. "You're paying."

"Christ," Theo muttered. "You can take the Weasley out of the Burrow, but you can't take the utter unwillingness to pay for shit out of the Weasley—"

"SHIT," Milo said, and Theo growled, flipping him upside down.

"You're going to have to pay for that one," he told his son. "What do you think? A kiss for Rosie?" he prompted, playfully swinging him towards where Draco held his daughter.

"GROSS," wailed Milo, covering his eyes.

"Oi, there will be no kissing of my daughter, *ever*, and certainly not by your little tyrant of a son," Draco warned Theo. "Right, Rose?" he murmured to her. "You're daddy's perfect little princess, aren't you?"

"Well, *that* is sure to be problematic," Hermione remarked under her breath, and beside her, Daphne nodded her reluctant agreement.

"Harry?" came a voice at the door, and they all turned.

Luna stood beside Ginny, her turquoise gown clashing magnificently with the red of Ginny's beside her. Both women wore their hair loose down their backs, elf-made flower crowns gracing
their heads while they each sported radiant twin smiles.

"James said he preferred this color to white," Luna told Harry hesitantly, offering him a slow rotation to appreciate the gown. "Do you like it?"

He swallowed heavily, staring.

"That means yes," Scorpius told Luna. "Father does that when he looks at Mother, and then they go upstairs and—"

"Hush, darling, not the time," Hermione urged quietly, her cheeks flushed scarlet.

"Told you," Draco said, elbowing Blaise. "The congress is ongoing."

"Shall we?" Luna asked, and Harry nodded quickly, leaping to take her arm. "I've asked Kreacher to bring the others outside."

"Odd to think of anyone asking Kreacher to do anything," Ron commented. "But I suppose if he's going to love anyone, it's going to be Luna."

"Stop babbling," Pansy said. "I love you, but shush."

"Fair enough," Ron agreed, kissing her cheek, and they made their way outside.

Blaise hung back, waiting to take his wife's arm.

"Pretty as that dress looks on you, Ginevra, I think I'd prefer to see it on the floor," he whispered in her ear. "Broom cupboard later?"

"The minute the ceremony's over," she whispered back, and he slyly kissed her neck, leading her out to the garden.

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**Fifteen years after that**

_Malfoy Manor_

_July 1, 2025_

_8:30 p.m._

The Granger-Malfoys were known for their annual galas benefitting Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, supporting research by faculty in addition to facility improvements and scholarships for wizarding students in need of financial aid. The annual parties were initially spearheaded by Hermione Granger-Malfoy, head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, around the time that her husband, Draco Malfoy, took over his father's business ventures, incorporating them under the umbrella of his own highly philanthropic venture capitalist firm that later came to include his son, Scorpius Malfoy, upon completion of his exams.

Over the past seven years, the Granger-Malfoy galas had come to be known as the most remarkable affairs of the social season. They were exercises in refinement and charitable efforts, and this particular gala, which featured the additional facet of celebrating their daughter Narcissa Rose's exemplary performance on her N.E.W.T.s, was no exception.

As always, the guest list included Harry Potter, Head Auror at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, his wife, Luna Lovegood-Potter, notable magical journalist and owner of the publication _The Quibbler_, and their son, James Potter, who had recently taken a position as a clerk in the DIMC upon completing his N.E.W.T.s the year prior. Theodore Nott, celebrated novelist,
and his wife, highly sought-after design consultant Daphne Nott, were joined by their children, Daily Prophet correspondent Alessia and newly minted Auror Milo Nott. Weasley's Wizard Wheezes co-owner Ronald Weasley was joined by his wife, Pansy Weasley, his son Arthur Weasley, a rising star in the DMLE, and daughter Blaise Weasley, Healer-in-Training at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies. Famous Chaser-turned-Coach Ginny Weasley also attended, joined by her husband, Public Relations specialist Blaise Zabini, and their five year old daughter, Esme. Several Hogwarts faculty, including Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor Edward Lupin and Herbology Professor Neville Longbottom, were also in attendance, alongside Headmistress Minerva McGonagall.

The seventh annual Hogwarts Gala was a veritable who's-who of the Wizarding World, as always, from academicians to politicians to professionals; and so, it was particularly surprising when around halfway through the evening, there was a rather violent outburst.

At first it had begun in whispers; did you hear that?

Was that yelling I heard? Dear me, obscenities?

"Familial squabbles, I'm sure," Minister Shacklebolt assured the crowd, toasting them with his usual perfunctory nonchalance. "Nothing to worry about—"

But when, in addition to shouts of alarm, there came the unmistakable warlike sound of punches being thrown, it soon became obvious that all was not, in fact, well.

"Well," remarked Headmistress McGonagall, chuckling into her glass of wine as she turned to her companion, television personality Lee Jordan. "Now it's a party."

Two hours earlier
6:30 pm

It never failed to be strange to walk into Malfoy Manor, no matter how many times they'd all been there in the past. True, it was unrecognizable; Hermione had essentially had the house gutted—"I considered razing it to the ground and forcing Draco to live elsewhere, she'd admitted on one occasion, but it has quite a lovely set of gardens—but there was still the strange sensation of worlds colliding.

Harry made these visits to the Granger-Malfoy household quite often, and he'd certainly played host to the family a fair amount at Grimmauld Place (which was, similarly, a house that he had once intended to sell out of deference to Sirius' need to burn it to the ground, until he discovered that Kreacher and the rest of the house had fallen head over heels for Luna) but there was always something especially odd about Draco and Hermione's galas.

Particularly this one, which was filled with far more animosity than the last time they'd all been together.

"What's she doing here?" Pansy said flatly, her dark eyes narrowing, and Hermione groaned, grabbing hold of Pansy's arm and yanking her towards where Harry stood in the corner, quietly sipping a glass of Ogden's and wondering where his wife had gotten off to.

"Come on, Pansy," Hermione urged, her voice a harsh whisper as she snatched Harry's drink from between his fingers and shoved it into Pansy's hand. "This party is for Rose. I couldn't very well not invite her godmother, could I?"
Harry, noting that Hermione's cheeks looked particularly heated with temper, decided it would be best to keep quiet. When Pansy raised his drink to her lips and took a sip, he wisely opted not to protest.

"Well, then you shouldn't have invited me," Pansy snapped at Hermione, still glowering across the room. "I thought I made this clear that I was not to be anywhere near her," she added, draining the glass and shoving it back into Harry's hand.

"Another?" Harry asked Pansy, gesturing to the empty glass and taking a step, indicating his fervent wish to escape. Hermione gave him a warning glance.

"Don't you move," she hissed to him, and then turned back to Pansy. "I don't understand this," she continued, venturing into a mode that Harry had long ago learned not to challenge. "You know Rose would be devastated if you and Ron weren't here, Pansy. She admires you so much, and—"

"Yes, and on Rose's behalf, I will decline to make a scene," Pansy agreed, scowling. "But you should know I'm not happy about this, Granger."

"She's your best friend, Pansy," Hermione reminded her, as Harry looked down at the empty glass and wondered, momentarily, if it were worth it to summon Kreacher. "Can't you two just get over this?"

"She was my best friend. You're my best friend now, Granger," Pansy sniffed, and shrugged.

"You're welcome, by the way."

"Well, I can't be your best friend right now, Pansy," Hermione sighed impatiently, "as I have to go find my daughter. Here," she added, giving the other woman a shove towards Harry. "Be Harry's best friend."

Harry grimaced, catching the murderous flash in Pansy's eye as she looked across the room.

"Hermione," he ventured unhappily, "I really wish you wouldn't—"

"Just—distract her, okay?" Hermione told him. "At least until Ginny gets here, or—" She stopped.

"Oh, balls. Where did I put the—"

She trailed off, suddenly wandering away, and Pansy and Harry exchanged glances.

"So," he said, gesturing to where Daphne and Alessia were standing with Draco. "You two are still fighting, then?"

"God, Potter," Pansy muttered, rolling her eyes. "You're going to call that woman's spoiled princess of a daughter breaking off her engagement to my son without a word of explanation or apology a 'fight'? A fight was the time she borrowed a dress and took two months to return it," she muttered. "This," she clarified emphatically, "is utter fucking betrayal."

Harry sighed. "Is there any use saying that—"

"No, there isn't," Pansy barked, and then she took off, storming off to the refreshments table just as Blaise and Ginny walked through the Floo.

"Oh, Harry, thank god," Ginny sighed, and Harry looked down to see her clutching her daughter's hand. "Can you watch Esme for a few minutes?"

"Oh," Harry said, locking eyes with the little girl. "Um—"
"Thanks so much," Ginny breathed in relief, kissing the top of Esme's head. "Be back soon, okay, sweetheart? Mummy and Daddy just have to do something—"

"Each other," Blaise muttered to Harry. "Believe me. It's dire."

"Well, better Malfoy's house than mine," Harry permitted.

"—so Uncle Harry's going to play with you for a bit, okay?" Ginny finished, brushing her thumb across Esme's cheek. "Be back shortly, darling, I promise."

Esme nodded solemnly, and Blaise kissed the top of his daughter's head.

"Thanks, Potter," he said, saluting him. "Believe me, if it weren't completely, apocalyptically necessary, I would never—"

"Shut up," Ginny said. "Let's go."

"Right, bye," Blaise agreed, hurrying with her up the stairs.

Harry watched them go, sighing, and then glanced down at Esme, who was her father's miniature (down to the refinement of her nose and cheeks) in all but her mother's expression of mischief. She had something of a combative stance that screamed of Ginny Weasley, and for a moment it made him smile.

"Where's Mummy going?" Esme asked, glancing up at him.

Harry chewed the thought for a moment.

"Mummy and Daddy need to have some grown-up time," he told her. "But you'll be okay with me, won't you?"

"I don't know," Esme replied, her brow furrowing. "Will I?"

"I—" Harry stopped, frowning. "I think so. I hope so."

Esme sighed, dubious.

"Well, come on now," Harry told her, patting her shoulder. "I haven't done this in a while, but—"

"Done what?" Esme interrupted.

"Er. Play with children, I guess," Harry explained. "My son's all grown now. And before you, Rose was the youngest," he added, "but she's just finished with her N.E.W.T.s, so I suppose she's all grown now, too."

"What are newts?" Esme asked.

"A pun," Harry replied.

"What's a pun?" pressed Esme.

"Dad," James interrupted, suddenly materializing beside Harry and causing him to jump. "Do you have a minute?"

It was interesting, Harry thought, to look at his son as an adult. As a child, James had looked remarkably like Luna, carrying with him everything of hers save for the eyes, which were Lily's.
But as James had aged he'd lost the dirty blond tint of his hair, and now he looked quite like a very pensive version of Harry; albeit slightly wider-eyed, and far more prone to fidgeting.

"Um. Depends, I suppose," Harry told him, gesturing pointedly to Esme. "Will it entertain a five year old?"

"I don't think it will," James said, chewing his lip. "Do you know where Luna is?"

"I don't, actually," Harry replied, once again wishing he did; she had a far better way with children than he did. Similar senses of wonder, he supposed. "I'm sure she's around, though. Is everything okay?" he asked, nudging his glasses up his nose. "Something bothering you?"

"Nothing that can't wait," James assured him. "But, um. If you see Scorp, just tell him I'm having a nagging bout of wrackspurts, would you?"

"Sure," Harry said.

"What are wrackspurts?" Esme asked.

"A bit like nargles, only smaller," Harry told her.

"What are nargles?"

"They're—well, hold on a minute, please. James, I—" Harry stopped, turning to find that his son had disappeared. "Well, that was. Hm." He glanced down, sighing, and resumed his conversation with the little girl at his side. "Care for a beverage, I suppose?"

"What kind?" Esme asked.

"Well, let's see, shall we?" Harry said, offering her his hand. She took it, with all the sophistication of a Zabini heiress, and he led her past the champagne flutes and towards the kitchen, wandering down the hall and past the hired house elves who were levitating trays into the ballroom.

"Why do house elves not wear clothes?" Esme asked.

"Oh boy," Harry sighed. "That's a question for Aunt Hermione."

"Scorpius, I'm serious," Harry heard, and paused, hearing distress. "I really need your help, Scorp, please—"

"And I'd love to help you, Rose, just not right now," he heard Scorpius reply. "Listen, Mum's going to want this to be perfect and I've already got some problems with the caterer—I'll tell you one thing," he added, seeming to rapidly go off track, "that's the last time I hire a goblin to design a celebratory cake, and fuck all if florists in Diagon aren't charging me the value of my left nut just for white tulips—"

"Why are they upset?" Esme asked Harry, and he glanced down.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But it's rude to eavesdrop, so perhaps we shouldn't."

"Eavesdrop?" Esme asked.

"Listen to other people when they don't know we're here," Harry explained, and Esme nodded solemnly.

"Look, Rose, I'll help you as soon as this is over, okay?" Scorpius called over his shoulder, nearly
bumping into Harry as he left the room. "Oh, Uncle Harry, I'm so sorry—"

"Not to worry, Scorp," Harry assured him. "Know anywhere I can get some pumpkin juice?"

"Oh, sure," Scorpius said, waving down a passing elf. "Pumpkin juice, please," he instructed, looking increasingly like his father as he gave orders, though the slightly frazzled look of distress on his face belonged entirely to his mother. "Thank you—oh, and have you seen James?" he asked. "We're supposed to talk about something, but—"

"Wrackspurts," Harry supplied, and Scorpius made a face.

"Oh for heaven's sake, as if I won't know that means he's avoiding me," he grumbled, taking off down the corridor just as Rose emerged, her blonde hair set in loose ringlets down the back of a pretty gown that Harry realized, with an odd clang of recognition, was the same color as the one Hermione had worn to the Yule Ball.

"Oh, Uncle Harry," Rose said, wholly startled. "I just—um." She bit her lip, glancing around. "Have you seen my mother?"

"She's looking for you," Harry told her. "Upstairs, maybe?"

"Oh, right, Dad wanted an entrance," Rose sighed, shaking her head. "Thanks," she called over her shoulder, and went off in search of Hermione just as an elf snapped into being beside them, offering a glass of pumpkin juice to Esme with a low, reverent bow.

"Say thank you," Harry said, and Esme obliged, adding in a little curtsy that made the elf's cheeks flush pink with pleasure. "Good girl. Is it good?" he asked, as she took a sip.

Esme paused, considering it.

"Where do pumpkins get juice from?" she asked, after a moment.

Harry sighed.

It was sure to be an interesting night.

"Mum," Alessia whispered, nudging Daphne. "You don't think her looks can actually kill, can they?"

Daphne grimaced, looking up to watch Pansy scowl at her from across the room.

"No, they can't," Daphne assured her daughter. "If they could, we'd all be dead several times over, I'm sure."

"That's true," Draco confirmed, shaking his head. "I think we're safe." He took a sip of champagne, parsing his words out carefully. "Feud's still going, then?"

Daphne's mouth stiffened.

"You could say that," she confirmed, exchanging glares with Pansy across the room.

The whole thing was entirely Pansy's fault, regardless of what she'd been telling people behind Daphne's back. When Alessia had broken off her engagement with Arthur, there had been no need to villainize anyone, and yet Pansy had been the one to send that awful howler to Daphne's home, hadn't she? Daphne shuddered just thinking of it; of the horror in her daughter's eyes at learning just
what her favorite aunt thought of the situation.

"—MY SON IS DEVASTATED—DEVASTATED!—AND I WANT AN EXPLANATION FOR WHY YOUR DAUGHTER WOULD ABANDON HIM LIKE THIS WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A WORD AS TO WHY! THAT DAUGHTER OF YOURS IS SELFISH, DAPHNE GREENGRA

"Hush, darling," Daphne had whispered to a sobbing Alessia, who had overheard from upstairs. "She doesn't mean it, sweetheart, she's just upset for Arthur—"

But she could not forget the look of utter tragedy on her daughter's beautiful face, and she'd shown up the next day ready to be sure Pansy knew the extent of the damage she'd caused. Still, despite her best efforts, she'd gotten little more than a door slammed in her face—that, and a sheepish, unsatisfying "I'm so sorry" from Ron—and then Daphne Nott had looked at her moping daughter and decided that if it was a war Pansy Weasley wanted, a war was what she would damn well get.

Several months later, very little had changed.

"Why don't I take you to find Rose," Draco suggested to Alessia, taking a pointed step to block her from Pansy's view. "Or Blaise, even—"

"She's not speaking to me either," Alessia sighed. "Blaise, I mean. You know how she is. Taking her mum's side—not that I blame her," she added hastily. "But—you know." She looked around, toying with a wave of her hair. "Maybe I'll go find Arthur," she murmured, glancing around for him, and Daphne grimaced.

"Oh, darling, I don't know about that," she said gently. "Don't you think you might be making things a little difficult for him?"

Alessia shrugged. "He's my best friend, Mum," she told Daphne, unfazed. "He understands, even if his mother doesn't."

"I'm not so sure that's true," Daphne ventured tentatively. "I mean, you haven't actually told anyone why you broke it off, and I'm not sure it's worth antagon-

"I'm just going to get a drink, then," Alessia sighed grumpily, cutting her mother off and turning away to head for the table of champagne flutes.

"Well," Draco noted, watching her go. "That went well."

"It's been a bit of a difficult balance," Daphne said, glancing around. "I mean, I'm as much at a loss as anyone, and you know how fond Theo and I are of Arthur, so—"

"I know," Draco said, patting her shoulder. "And I'm sure things will get better soon."

Daphne, who knew Pansy's unparalleled ability to hold a grudge better than anyone, privately doubted it, but offered him a genial shrug in response.

"I should find Hermione," she suggested, glancing around. "I'm sure she must be up to her ears in details."

Hermione, too, was another delicate balance. They'd gotten especially close over the years, and with Hermione trying not to take sides, their friendship had suffered a bit. For one thing, Daphne knew it had been particularly difficult on Hermione to be the go-between; she was Alessia's godmother and namesake but she had a special fondness for Arthur, who was much like she'd been
in school. As the only Gryffindor and the first of their clan to be named Head Boy, Arthur had often come to Hermione for career counseling, and she'd taken him under her wing.

In truth, they'd certainly all suffered Arthur's disappointment at the engagement's abrupt end, and Daphne was no exception to that. But still, that was hardly cause for name-calling, and despite Daphne's own pain (and insuppressible curiosity), Alessia simply refused to give a reason, and Daphne resolved to stand by her daughter (something her own mother had not done), regardless of the ripple of dissatisfaction.

"Astoundingly, my perfectionist monster of a wife actually relinquished some control this time," Draco remarked fondly, drawing Daphne back to the conversation. "She gave Scorpius the reins for the evening, but I'm sure she'd like to see you regardless. Ah," he acknowledged vacantly, looking up as Minerva McGonagall walked in, accompanied by Teddy Lupin, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Lee Jordan. "Apologies, Daph, but—"

"Go ahead," Daphne assured him, aiming herself toward the stairs and looking for Hermione.

Luna quite enjoyed parties. She found they were excellent ecosystems for observation, which contributed to some of her more brilliant articles. Her latest—a piece on the mating rituals between bowtruckles in the southern hemisphere—had been based on some rather unfortunate methods of copulatory attempts that she'd had the great pleasure to witness the last time she and Harry had gone to a pub.

Though, speaking of Harry, she should really find him. He rather hated parties; for some reason, he didn't always share Luna's natural inclination towards human observation.

Probably an ill-effect of all the fighting Voldemort, she thought, stepping towards the stairs.

"Hi, Aunt Luna," someone said, interrupting her progress, and Luna turned, offering Blaise Theodora a small smile.

"Hello, Blaise," she offered warmly. "You look—"

She paused, considering it.

Blaise Theodora Weasley very much resembled her father, despite her obvious efforts to hide it. As a child she had possessed the most darling of ginger curls, her cheeks dusted with freckles, and she, rather tall for a girl, wore her father's lanky frame with a similar sense of gangling. Unlike her brother, who bore more of Pansy's coloring, Blaise Theodora was a Weasley through and through, and she fit right in amongst the clan of Weasley cousins.

Unfortunately, resembling a Weasley did not seem to be her goal. Since finishing school, Blaise had taken to dyeing her hair, wearing it in glossy black waves. She was taller than her mother but had taken efforts to hide it, slouching slightly, and unless Luna was very much mistaken, she had begun wearing Pansy's perfume as well.

She was, not surprisingly, utterly infested with wrackspurts.

"You look exactly like your mother," Luna finished, and Blaise preened triumphantly.

"Thank you," she said, and Luna nodded politely. "What are you doing up here?"

"Oh, Rose asked for my help with her gown," Luna replied. "She wanted the color to be just right, it seems. And then I suppose I got distracted," she murmured, glancing down below. "The view
from here is rather nice."


"You think they're flirting?" Luna asked, blinking, before glancing down again. "No, I don't think that's what that is."

"Isn't it?" Blaise countered brashly. "She's always just stringing him along, don't you think?"

"Oh, I don't think that's true," Luna murmured. "They've always been very close, you know. Since they were children."

"Yes," Blaise sighed, "I know. I'm a bit tired of the stories, really."

Luna gave Blaise another glance, recognizing another surge of something unpleasant. Perhaps her humors were imbalanced.

"Besides," Luna offered brightly, attempting to cheer her up, "I don't believe that's who Alessia's flirting with tonight." She looked down, eyeing a covert glance from below as Alessia sipped her champagne, her gaze flicking across the room. "Of course, I might be mistaken," she said quickly. "I'm told I often read people incorrectly. Do you see it?"

Blaise looked down, frowning, and then inhaled sharply.

"Oh my god," she gasped, her hand floating up to her mouth. "Oh my god—"

"What is it?" Luna asked, frowning. "It's only—"

"I have to run," Blaise sputtered hurriedly, gripping her arm. "Thanks so much, Aunt Luna, you're the best!"

"I—" Luna frowned. "I'm not—"

But then she was alone, and she suffered the distinct feeling that perhaps she had failed to notice something after all.

It was a lovely, lovely party.

Made lovelier, of course, by the fact that for once, Hermione had barely had to lift a finger.

"Darling," she told her son, reaching out to take Scorpius' arm as he made to blindly whiz past her. "Sweetheart, this is absolutely magnificent. I've never seen the house in such impeccable order."

"Oh, you're just saying that, Mother," he returned breathlessly, though the flush of pleasure in his cheeks said otherwise. "It's hardly up to your standards."

"Scorpius, believe me," Hermione assured him, "every gala we've ever thrown, I've been putting out fires behind the scenes. This is magnificent, darling," she said again, chucking his chin up fondly. "Be proud of what you've done."

He smiled hesitantly. "I'm just trying to get everything right," he told her. "I know you and Dad are counting on me, and I want everything to be perfect for Rose, and—"
"And it *is*, Scorp," Hermione assured him, frowning as a shadow of worry creased between his brows. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"Nothing," he assured her hastily, ducking his head and skirting her gaze. "I just—busy, you know. Just—details, and—"

"Scorpius," she sighed, shaking her head. "I'm your mother, and this isn't my first day. Is it James?" she pressed. "He didn't look quite himself when he arrived. Have you two had a disagreement?"


He grimaced, and Hermione sighed.

"Tell me," she beckoned firmly, and he looked down, his grey eyes—so very like his father's—fixing mournfully on his shoes.

Scorpius and James, practically inseparable since their respective births, had been living together for about two months. It had been difficult for Hermione, despite her fondness for James, to let her eldest out of her sight; granted, he'd been away at Hogwarts before then, but despite being practiced with distance, *that* arrangement had somehow felt very distinct. Knowing her son was in London was quite a new difficulty, especially since Scorpius saw Draco quite a lot more than he saw her. Since Lucius had passed his control of the Malfoy business enterprises over to Draco, Scorpius had been working for his father, even turning down an offer from Harry's department in the Ministry.

Which was a decision Hermione understood and supported, of course. It was a rather uninteresting clerkship, and she hadn't thought he would like it, having been accustomed to a certain level of autonomy as Prefect and Head Boy while at Hogwarts. Working for Draco permitted him far more access to interesting projects, and so Hermione had wholeheartedly agreed with his decision.

She was supremely proud of her son, without a doubt. She just wished he didn't look so stressed every time she saw him.

"James got an owl this morning," he confessed. "And I, um. I read it."

"I see," Hermione said slowly, carefully reserving judgment.

"It's—he got an offer," Scorpius said. "From Gringotts. They have an opening in their curse-breaking department, but he never—" he grimaced. "He never even told me he applied."

"Curse-breaking?" Hermione echoed, surprised. At the moment, James was working in her department, and she'd pegged him for a lifelong Ministry career. "Really?"

At that, Scorpius' eyes flared brilliantly, lifting his chin.

"Yes, right?" he said emphatically. "Isn't that the sort of thing you tell the person that you love? And since then he's been avoiding me, and I think he's going to take it, Mum," he continued frantically, "and I just—I don't know if he's just planning to leave, or—"

"Well," Hermione said, recognizing the growing panic in her son's face that, unfortunately, she was quite certain he had inherited from her. "I'm sure he's planning to discuss it with you, darling. He's rather, um." She paused, considering how to phrase it. "Private, I suppose. Maybe he's just trying to organize his thoughts first."

"He's never been 'private' with *me* before," Scorpius muttered. "We've always told each other
everything, and—" he paused, looking up. "And you and Dad tell each other everything, don't you?"

It was difficult not to laugh outright, but she managed it.

"Well, darling, your father and I have been married quite a long time," Hermione reminded him. "But at first we had a difficult time being honest with each other. I once abandoned him in the Astronomy Tower after I kissed him for the first time," she added. "So there was certainly quite a lot of room for improvement."

Scorpius merely wrung his hands, trapped amidst his thoughts.

"What if he doesn't ask me to come?" Scorpius asked nervously. "Or what if he does, Mum? Am I supposed to go with him?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, not wanting to admit the lurch in her chest at the thought of him leaving; to Egypt, where Bill had gone, or somewhere else entirely. "Would you want to?"

"I couldn't leave you," Scorpius insisted. "Not with the campaign next year—"

At that, Hermione felt an unexpected lurch, startled.

"Campaign," she echoed. "What?"

He shifted, looking sheepish.

"I heard Dad telling Uncle Harry at the office last week that you're running for Minister of Magic next year," Scorpius confessed guiltily. "I—that's why I want this party to be perfect, really," he admitted. "I want to make sure I do everything possible to help you, and—"

"Oh sweetheart," Hermione said, melting a little. "Darling, one party does not a campaign make—or break, for that matter. I thought you were putting a bit too much pressure on yourself," she confessed, shaking her head. "I suppose I should have just discussed it with you, hm?"

He shrugged, feigning antipathy. "You could have," he offered stiffly, and she smiled, seeing a bit of Draco in his obvious avoidance.

"I suppose I forget how grown up you've gotten," she said fondly, and his lips quirked up. "Well," she pronounced. "This is a conversation for you to have with James, but promise me that whenever you do have to decide, you'll do whatever's right for you, love. I'm rather a celebrated war hero," she reminded him, tapping his nose. "I think your father and your Uncle Harry and I can manage to scrape something together, even if you have to run off somewhere else in the world."

He smiled weakly. "Thanks Mother," he said. "I guess I forgot you don't actually need me to take care of you."

"Frankly, I don't know where that impulse came from," she assured him. "It's like you came out of my womb with a ten year plan."

He shrugged. "Hazards of being the Malfoy heir, I expect," he said. "And the son of a Granger, too."

"Poor thing," she chuckled, kissing his cheek.

"I think Rose is ready for you, by the way," Scorpius added, suddenly remembering. "She wanted
"Right, of course," Hermione agreed, glancing down the hall. "Oh, sweetheart?" she asked, pausing Scorpius before he left. "I'm proud of you."

He grinned. "Stop it, Mum."

She chucked his chin. "Never."

"Oh, I think her chances are very good indeed," Kingsley said to Draco in a low voice, and beside them, Minerva nodded her agreement. "Hermione's a bit socially liberal, perhaps, but I'm sure you can temper that with regard to her image."

"You're welcome to come on my show during the campaign if you'd like," Lee invited, grinning, and Minerva groaned loudly.

"What abominable tross have you offered up for consumption now, Jordan?" she demanded. "Is it still drunk histories you're doing, or that horrible harem show?"

Lee took a loud sip of wine, shaking his head. "Nope," he said. "It's a documentary series called 'Quidbitches: The Real Housewives of Quidditch,' and it's really quite humanizing, so—"

"If there is a polite way to say 'fuck off,' presume I said it," Draco informed him, turning as he felt a tap on his shoulder. "Oh, hello Teddy," he said, taking a step to widen the circle of conversation. "How are you?"

"Could I have a moment, Draco?" Teddy asked, and Draco looked up, noting his hair was fluctuating between its usual violent turquoise and a darker shade of teal that looked oddly familiar. "Just for a second," he offered, as Minerva nodded, shooing them away.

"Of course," Draco said, stepping aside to speak privately. "Is this about the grants for your N.E.W.T. students? Because I promise, Teddy, I'm working on it, but there's a bit of a snag with regard to the subject matter—anything involving creatures, you know, it's a big mess, which I'm sure Hermione will have a thing or two to say ab-"

"No, no, actually it's, um," Teddy swallowed, fidgeting. "Sort of personal."

"Ah, is it about Victoire?" Draco asked. "Because I don't believe she's coming tonight. Fortunately," he added, "as I think I can only stand so many broken relationships in a room, really—"

"Aha," Teddy said, laughing awkwardly. "Yes, true."

"Listen, it's been over a year," Draco said, gripping his shoulder. "And I think your reasons for ending it were valid, Teddy. You know this."

"Yes," Teddy agreed, his gaze flicking elsewhere. "But still, I wondered—"

"Hide the knives," Theo announced, materializing to throw an arm around Draco's shoulder. "Pansy's out for blood, by the look of it. Oh, Teddy," he said, nodding to him. "I always forget you're a proper adult now.

"I don't know about that," Teddy offered uncomfortably, and Theo chuckled. "True, I was hardly a proper adult myself at twenty-seven," he acknowledged, and Draco rolled his
"You still aren't," he assured him, and turned back to Teddy. "Sorry, I guess I kept interrupting you. What was it you were—"

"No girl this time?" Theo asked Teddy, teasing. "I feel like I've grown quite accustomed to seeing you with a new one every week."

"Well," Teddy said, clearing his throat. "Yes, I suppose I—"

"Oi, Malfoy," Harry interrupted, stooped slightly to accommodate holding the hand of Blaise and Ginny's daughter Esme. "Something's wrong with your son."

"Faulty genes," Theo agreed firmly. "Minus Hermione's."

"As ever, your input is hugely useful and important to me," Draco sniffed to Theo before arching a brow at Harry, shaking his head. "What's wrong with him?"

"He looks bothered," Harry said, as Esme glanced up.

"What does that mean?" she asked, and Harry paused, contemplating it.

"It means," he explained, "that something is making Scorpius upset, but I don't know what it is."

"Why not?" demanded Esme, and Harry sighed.

"Well, he hasn't told me, so—"

"He never tells me anything either," Draco grumbled, shaking his head. "He always tells Hermione first. Or you, even," he said, turning to Theo. "I still can't believe he came out to you before me."

"What does that mean?" Esme asked, and Harry quickly ushered her away, shaking his head warningly at Draco and scurrying off in the opposite direction.

"You shouldn't take it personally," Theo said, laughing into his champagne flute. "I mean, we weren't exactly thrilled to tell our fathers anything either, were we?"

"Sorry," Teddy said, nudging Draco and gesturing aside. "I have to—we'll talk later," he said hastily, and Draco nodded, watching him go before turning back to Theo.

"I hope you aren't suggesting we're like our fathers," he pointed out, "because I can't say that would be much a point of pride."

"I'm thinking wrong?" Draco echoed skeptically, and Theo shook his head, pursing his lips with impatience.

"Remember how we had no one, Draco?" he prompted. "No one but each other. But our kids
"have us," he said emphatically, gesturing. "All of us. We gave them that." He brought his drink to his lips, pausing before sipping it. "You brought your children into a world full of people they can trust," he said pointedly. "That's an accomplishment in itself, isn't it?"

Draco sighed.

"Still," he muttered. "I wish I wasn't always the last to know when my children have problems."

Theo shrugged. "You're his father," he said. "Scorp will come to you eventually. He always does."

"Does Milo come to you?" Draco asked, arching a brow, and Theo waved a hand.

"My son is very different from yours," he said pointedly. "You know. Vastly irresponsible. Sort of a general cad."

"Sounds familiar," Draco commented, and Theo sniffed his opposition.

"Don't know what you're talking about," he replied sing-songily, waving across the room to Kennilworthy Whisp. "Outsold him three to one last quarter," he murmured to Draco out of the side of his mouth, winking.

"You," Draco said to Theo, lifting his glass to toast him, "will always be the original cad."

Blaise Zabini loved his daughter.

He loved the way she smelled after a bath, and the way she asked a thousand questions a day, and he especially loved the way she liked to climb into his lap at every opportunity, just to sit in his arms and pretend to read alongside him.

He even loved being a father, despite how long he'd put it off. The reality, though, was simply that his life had unfolded vastly differently than he'd planned it, and though he loved his daughter, he desperately needed to make love to his wife.

"In here," Ginny hissed, yanking Blaise after her into one of the Malfoy guest rooms. "Don't you dare spend too much time on foreplay, either, or Hermione will kill us both—"

"As ever, I am your slave, darling," Blaise said, shoving her back onto the bed and dropping to his knees as she shimmied back on the mattress, hiking her dress up over her hips as he kissed the inside of her thigh.

They others had laughed when he'd told them Ginny was pregnant.

They'd laughed.

Though, to be fair, it was surprising.

Blaise's experience with fatherhood was distinctly different from that of his friends, who had all become fathers together. He remembered how he'd been silently amused when Ron had stumbled around like an Inferus until Arthur was sleeping through the night, or how Draco had once put his wand in the oven during the week Scorpius had had a terrible fever. He recalled Harry chasing James throughout the house, or Theo fretting about how, exactly, to plait Alessia's hair, but now that he was a father himself, he remembered more than everything the nights the young fathers had all sat together, exhausted, once all the children had finally been put to bed. There had been a collective weariness there, but a contentedness, too; and Blaise, foolishly, had mistaken it for
mundanity, and insisted he would never make the same mistake.

Now, of course, his friends' children were fully grown, and they themselves had reverted back to parties, to social events, to going out for drinks and wearing clothes that weren't tampered with glitter or peanut butter, and Blaise was having to experience fatherhood alone.

Esme had been an accident, naturally. What man opts to be a father when he's pushing forty? But they'd agreed that perhaps it was worth a try, and they'd always made it work before, and sure, Ginny traveled a lot with the team (she was a coach and consultant now, having grown tired of breaking bones) and over the years, Blaise had gathered quite a retinue of international clients; but still, he had always managed to join her before, and they were certain they could manage it now.

They'd forgotten five-year-olds were not quite so transportable, and so they were often apart, or occupied with their daughter when they were together.

"Mm, yes, Blaise, there," Ginny whimpered, as Blaise flicked his tongue over her clit. "Fuck, I've missed you—"

"BLAISE," they heard outside the door, and promptly froze. "Can you not be a bitch right now, please?"

"Keep going," Ginny whispered, and Blaise nodded, adjusting his shoulders and returning his attention to the devastatingly arousing taste of his wife's pretty cunt.

"I'm not being a bitch," snapped Pansy's daughter. "I'm just saying that if she's going to have the nerve to show up here, she shouldn't be here at the same time as him—"

"That's—shut up, Blaise," returned a male voice that Blaise presumed to be Arthur, Blaise Theodora's elder brother. "You have no idea what you're talking about, and anyway can you just not say anything? I don't even know how you found out—"

"You have to tell Mum. You have to."

"BLAISE, for fuck's sake—"

"Fuck," Blaise growled, as Ginny let out a sigh. "Is it just me, or—"

"No, it's distracting," Ginny agreed. "The name thing. Pansy's such a twat."

"Yes, right?"

"Look," they heard Blaise Theodora continue, her voice snottily false. "I know you're trying to pretend you're still friends with Alessia, but she's a prissy little cunt, Art, and you know it—"

"She's not a—" Arthur stammered, careening to a halt. "Don't call her that, Blaise!"

"I can't believe she would show her face here," Blaise Theodora continued stubbornly. "I really can't. It's—it's totally incomprehensible to me."

Internally, Blaise marveled that anyone could sound so similar to Pansy, and then paused for a moment to wonder in advance just how much Esme would turn out like Ginny. It was certainly evident already.

"You've always hated Alessia," Arthur sighed, sounding miserable. "And I don't know why, Blaise—"
"I wish he would stop saying her name," Blaise muttered, and Ginny propped herself up on her elbows, nodding her agreement.

"I think what's more confusing is why you've always loved her," Blaise Theodora informed her brother. "You're like a slave to her, Art! No matter what she does you're always following her around like her little house elf, bending over backwards to make her happy—"

"Just don't tell Mum, okay?" he cut in sharply. "You know things are bad enough already."

"Hey," Ginny said, snapping her fingers in Blaise's face. "Can we get back to sex, please? Just—" she sat up, tugging the clasp of his trousers apart. "There, okay?"

"My god, the romance," Blaise drawled, but obligingly shoved her back on the bed, half-shimmying out of his trousers. "You're such a lure, my crimson-haired siren—"

"Fine, I won't tell Mum," they heard Blaise Theodora say.

"Don't tell anyone!" Arthur protested. "You're not going to, are you?"

"Maybe," she replied wickedly. "Maybe not."

"BLAISE—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Blaise growled, sitting upright. "Can we try a different venue?"

"They have a wine cellar," Ginny said. "Pretty sure it's soundproof."

"Perfect," Blaise said, yanking her to her feet and re-zipping his trousers. "Then off to the wine cellar we go, my love."

"At some point," she reminded him, pulling her knickers back on, "we're going to have to talk."

He grimaced.

"Of course, my angel," he said, and she gave his arse a slap for emphasis, half-shoving him out the door.

"Look," Ron said, nudging Pansy. "Did you see Blaise and Ginny just run for the wine cellar?"

"God, they're so obvious," Pansy said, shaking her head. "As if we haven't all done it in there before."

"Could do it now, if you want," Ron offered, glancing at her, but knew she wasn't listening. His wife had her arms crossed tightly, her fingers tapping on her arms as she surveyed the party. "Look," he coaxed her gently, "both Daphne and Alessia have left the room. You can stop trying to pick their bones, you lovely vulture."

"You don't get it," Pansy snapped, not looking at him. "You're not his mother."

"No, strangely enough, but I'm his father," Ron assured her. "And it bothers me just as much as it bothers you."

Though he considered for a moment that perhaps that wasn't quite true.

He'd thought for a while that things weren't going to work out between Arthur and Alessia, truth be
told; though he'd never admit that to his wife, and certainly hadn't. The reality of the situation was that he started to see things in Arthur that he'd once seen in himself when he'd been in a relationship that wasn't working, and was privately rather relieved when the engagement had ended.

They were both too young, anyway.

Unfortunately, he figured there had been far more destruction from Pansy's view of it; her dreams were shattered, too, and she was as disappointed as Arthur, though Ron knew she would never admit it.

"Look," Ron said, pulling a very rigid Pansy under his arm, "I'm not trying to downplay the situation. I just think you'd be happier, love," he murmured, kissing the side of her neck, "if you could find a way to let it go."

He expected a snappy retort, but instead Pansy stiffened, tension settling in her spine.

It was never just about Arthur, Ron knew, and he felt again a sadness for his wife that he wasn't sure what to do with.

"She's—she wasn't even upset," Pansy forced out after a moment, and Ron wondered whether she meant Daphne or Alessia. "You know?"

"I know, Pans," he told her, giving her a squeeze. "I know."

She sighed.

"Well, this turned hormonal," she announced, shaking her head. "I'm going to find Luna. Or someone else chaotically neutral."

"Off you go, then," Ron agreed. "No murders, okay?"

"You take the fun out of everything," Pansy sniffed, but she kissed his cheek, passing her thumb over it fondly. "Bye, Weasley."

He grinned. "Bye, Weasley," he called after her, and she shook her head, disappearing around the corner just as his son appeared from the other side of the room. "Art," he called, waving him over. "You doing okay?"

"As well as to be expected, I suppose," Arthur replied, his gaze flicking into the corner. "Alessia tells me Mum's been stalking her prey again."

"You spoke to Alessia?" Ron asked, surprised, and Arthur shrugged.

"She's my best friend, Dad," he said. "I'll take talking to her over any of these stuffy what's-its."

"You're not—" Ron cleared his throat. "You're not still carrying a torch for her, are you?"

Arthur sighed, turning to face him. "Not everyone's you and Mum, you know," he said. "Some of us have to take what we can get."

"What does that mean?" Ron asked, and Arthur shrugged.

"Forget it—"

"No, tell me," Ron insisted, gripping his son's arm. "If this is bothering you—"
"Look," Arthur said. "She doesn't want me, okay? She's not—we didn't work together," he said, not entirely looking like he believed it, "but I still want to be friends. I'll get over her," he added. "Someday, I will, but—" Arthur paused. "I can't just lose her altogether, you know?"

Ron sighed.

"Did you know I thought I would end up with your Aunt Hermione?" he asked, and Arthur made a face.

"Impossible," he said. "You two? You'd—you'd have to have fought, like—"

"All the time," Ron confirmed, and Arthur made a face. "And we did. But for a while, I couldn't have pictured my life without her," he said, the first time he was saying it out loud since he'd confessed it to Pansy the first night they'd spent together. "She was so important to me that I think I was willing to take anything I could get."

He glanced aside, seeing if the words resonated with his son.

They seemed to.

"So," Arthur said, his dark eyes pensive. "What happened?"

Ron shrugged. "Life," he said. "We weren't really good together, and we found people who made us better. We were still a bit older than you,"

"We both decided we wanted to be friends," he clarified. "But I think if I hadn't been ready, she would have understood. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"But," he said, clearing his throat as his gaze darted nervously. "What if I lose her, Dad?"

"Oh, Arthur," Ron sighed. "You've been best friends since you were infants. I don't think she's going anywhere."

"Guess not," Arthur said, glancing at his hands, and they stood together for a few moments of silence, glancing around the room.

"Hey Dad?" Arthur asked, and Ron turned to look at him, nodding. "Can you not tell Mum we had this conversation?"

"Oh, not to worry," Ron assured him. "I'll be sure to keep your mother in her happy place."

Arthur fidgeted some more, taking a deep breath.

"Could you also," Arthur said hesitantly, "not let Blaise talk to her?"

Ron stared at him.

"Why not?" he asked.

Arthur swallowed. "It's—complicated," he said, and Ron frowned, quite certain he wasn't going to enjoy the end of that thought.

"Rose," Daphne heard; an imploring voice from behind a door. "Please. Just—five minutes?"

Oh no, she thought, recognizing a troubling sense of intimacy, in addition to a familiar voice; a voice she knew in its every iteration, having heard it every day of her life for the last nineteen
It was her son's voice.

"Milo," she heard Rose say, a girlish whisper of longing. "Now's really not the time."

"Then when is the time?" he demanded, with all of his father's brusque impatience. "If I can't tell you now that I want to be with you, then when can I?"

"I don't know," Rose said, with her father's indignation. "In about three hours? Mum and Dad will go right to bed anyway, if you just stay behind for a bit—"

Oh no, Daphne thought.

Why was it always her children?

"I'm tired of hiding, Rose," Milo said. "Aren't you? I don't see why—"

"Oh hell," Daphne erupted, shoving the door open and striding into the room to find her son with his dark head bent, holding adoringly to the fingertips of the little Malfoy darling. "Milo Draconius Nott, have you lost your godforsaken mind?"

Her son jumped slightly but hid the motion, tucking it within his slender limbs; Rose, for her part, turned deeply scarlet, the lovely flush in her cheeks blazing against the pastel of her gown.

"It's not what you think," Rose squeaked, pulling her hands free and locking them behind her back. "It's—we're not—"

Daphne arched a brow, expectantly dubious.

"Please don't tell my father," Rose finally exhaled, cringing, as Milo stepped in front of her.

"Hello, Mother," he opened grandly. "Might I say you look rather fetch- "

"Don't," she warned, pursing her lips. "This," she barked, flapping a hand to gesture wildly between them. "How long has this been going on?"

"I hardly think that's anyone's concern but ours," Milo retorted, just as Rose whimpered, "six months."

"Six—" Daphne paused, feeling her eyes widen. "Six months? Six months, Milo Nott?"

"Mother, unless you're going to send me to my room without dinner, I hardly see why this is at all necess- "

"Sweetheart, have you met that girl's father?" Daphne pressed. "Milo, I'm thrilled, you know I love Rose," she added, sparing a reassuring nod to her and smiling adoringly. "But Draco is going to skin you alive, my darling. When are you planning on telling him?"

"I," Rose began. "I, um—"

"I'll tell him right now," Milo announced, taking a bold stride forward, and Daphne shifted to block his path.

"Now? At the gala in his daughter's honor? I'd sooner kill you myself just to spare you," Daphne admonished him. "No, Rose, you'll have to tell your mother," she said, glancing over her son's
shoulder to address her. "Hermione is quite literally the only person that Draco won't curse right through the walls."

"I—I was trying to," Rose agreed, wringing her hands. "But I just—"

"Today," Daphne added firmly, as Rose blanched. "Unless it's not serious—in which case perhaps you should just end it, all things consider—"

"No," Milo said flatly. "I love her, Mum, end of story."

"Milo!" Rose gasped.

Daphne, blissfully relieved that her son was finally capable of loving a girl who was not another in a long parade of snotty brats he'd liked before, let out a jubilant crow of disbelief.

"Milo," she said, reaching up to take her son's face in her hands. "I couldn't be happier for you, sweetheart—I mean, you're going to die," she lamented seriously. "Draco will almost certainly kill you, but I'm thrilled, darling. Absolutely ecstatic. I'll miss you, of course, rest in peace, and I'm sure Draco will murder your father as well, but that was really a long time coming and I still have my looks, so—"

"Mum," Milo interrupted stiffly. "Oddly, this isn't helping."

"Oh, come here," Daphne wailed, yanking him and Rose into a tight embrace. "I don't know how this happened but it thrills me, truly, down to my bones—"

"Oh," she heard from behind her, and they all turned, finding James in the doorway. "I suppose none of you have seen my mother, have you?"

"Er," Milo said, as Daphne refused to release him. "No?"

"Everything okay, Jamie?" Rose asked him, and he shrugged.


"He's not dead," Milo noted, jutting his chin out as James slipped out of the room. "Uncle Draco didn't kill him—"

"Well, he is not bespoiling Draco's little princess," Daphne reminded him, rolling her eyes as Rose's face turned pale.

"Oh, but it's not—we aren't—"

"Rose, everyone's waiting for you downstairs, so—oh," Hermione said, appearing in the doorway and blinking with confusion. "What's this?"

"Everybody," Milo announced, "just stay calm."

Hermione Granger-Malfoy let out a loud, exhausted sigh.

"Oh, no," she murmured, and in the same moment, Daphne smiled.

Hermione hadn't exactly been expecting to find Daphne and Milo in her daughter's bedroom; but then, she supposed she shouldn't have been surprised.
"So this is who you've been writing to," Hermione noted, tapping her mouth as she looked from her daughter to Milo. "My goodness, Milo," she lamented, shaking her head. "Draco's going to kill you."

"That's what I said," Daphne agreed, striding over to stand beside Hermione. "I was hoping you might intervene."

"Well," Hermione said, thinking it over. "Do you think a dinner, perhaps?"

"Dinner could work," Daphne said, nodding. "Though do you think alcohol would make it better or worse?"

"I'll hide the knives, of course," Hermione assured her. "Steal his wand, too—"

"We can do Tuesday?" Daphne suggested. "Perhaps the six of us?"

"No, no, maybe not," Hermione countered. "Let's do the adults first, and then—"

"No," Milo said flatly, shaking his head. "I want to tell him tonight."

Hermione paused, staring at him. And then she promptly burst into laughter.

"No, Milo, sweetheart," she said, shaking her head. "Draco's been coming apart at the seams for weeks, darling, tonight's really not the time—"

"This party is for Rose, isn't it?" Milo demanded. "I want to dance with her. I want to hold her," he added, glancing at her. "And I want to stand beside her."

At Milo's declaration, Hermione watched her daughter's brown eyes light up, her mouth twisting up in a slow, tender smile that lit her face radiantly from the flush of her cheeks to the golden glow of her blonde hair.

*Rats,* Hermione thought fondly, catching the tell-tale signs of a girl who harbored far more than a little crush.

"It can wait," Rose told Milo softly, though Hermione watched her lean closer, clearly offering two entirely different intentions. "Can't it?"

"It could," Milo permitted, with all of Theo's gruffness. "But why? Is it so strange that I would fall in love with you?" he asked her, taking her hands in his. "Is that really such a crime that we have to hide it?"

"That's sort of sweet," Daphne whispered to Hermione, and she nodded.

"He inherited some of Theo's poeticism, it seems," she murmured back.

"I just—" Rose glanced nervously at her mother. "Daddy's clients are here, and—"

At that, Hermione threw up her hands, groaning. "How on earth," she lamented, "did I manage to raise two children who worry so much about their parents?"

"If you discover it, please share," Daphne told her. "Clearly my children are mostly interested in throwing a wrench into the workings of the universe."
Rose, for her part, still looked tormented. "Mum, I just—"

"Rose, your father is a grown man," Hermione informed her. "A difficult one, certainly," she permitted with a grimace, watching her daughter fidget, "but if this is serious between you and Milo, then—"

"Mum, can I talk to you?" Rose interrupted, wincing. "Alone?"

Beside her, Milo looked startled. "Rose," he said. "You aren't—are you having second thoughts? Or—"

"No, no," she assured him, shaking her head. "Nothing like that. I just—" she took a step closer, reaching out for him. "I just need to talk to my mother," she said, pleading slightly. "Okay?"

Hermione watched the motion of her daughter's fingers as they floated above Milo's chest; she watched, too, the way Milo's breathing seemed to stutter beneath Rose's hand; and then she took note of the way they leaned towards each other, but conspicuously didn't touch.

"Okay," he said, and looked up, nodding to his mother. "Should we go find Alessia?" he asked, clearing his throat of excess emotion. "I suppose it's been awhile since I've antagonized my sister, honestly."

"Come on, you welp," Daphne sighed, shaking her head. "Let me know when you want to talk to Draco," she murmured to Hermione, who nodded, and then Daphne and Milo slipped out the door, closing it behind them.

"So," Hermione began, taking a seat on her daughter's bed. "You and Milo."

"It's not what you think," Rose exhaled deeply, floating down beside Hermione. She cautiously slid her hand against the fabric of her gown, careful not to wrinkle it. "He's—I—we haven't—"

"You're not sleeping together," Hermione noted, and Rose instantly averted her gaze. "And you've been away at Hogwarts," she realized, frowning. "So how did you—"

"Christmas," Rose said hesitantly. "He, um. We kissed, and he—" she looked down, furiously toying with her fingers. "He wrote me letters. We wrote letters, I mean," she clarified, still avoiding Hermione's eye. "Every day, and—" she blinked, and Hermione saw tears in her daughter's eyes, wondering how she'd managed to miss it. "I've been in love with him for such a long time," Rose sniffed, dabbing at the corners of her eyes, "he was a Prefect, you know, and he was dating this girl two years above me—"

"I remember," Hermione murmured. Daphne had hated the girl; she couldn't remember her name.

"—and I never thought he would notice me," Rose continued, "but then—he just—"

She sniffed, burying a whimper in her hand, and Hermione sighed.

"Did I ever tell you," she said gently, "about how it happened with your father and me?"

Rose looked up, making a face. "You and Dad are perfect," she said. "Everything about you is perfect."

"Oh, far from it," Hermione said, unable to contain a scoff. "When I met your father, he was a prejudiced little tyrant. I slapped him once," she added, and Rose looked appropriately taken aback. "Third year. He deserved it."
"Really?"

"Really," Hermione confirmed. "But after the war, as he's told you many times, everything changed. But even then, I still felt like it would never work," she said. "And I was with someone else at the time—"

"No," Rose gasped. "Really?"

"Well, we'd just broken up," Hermione clarified. "But I was positive that your father hadn't noticed me at all, and then—" she shrugged. "Sometimes things just happen."

"So," Rose said tentatively. "How did you know it was right?"

"I think I just knew," Hermione said. "Granted, I was a bit older than you, and a bit more—" she felt her cheeks burn, and cleared her throat. "Experienced, I suppose—"

"Milo, um." Rose shifted uncomfortably. "He's experienced too, I think."

"Are you nervous?" Hermione asked her. "Is that what this is about?"

"Sort of," she admitted. "I mean, I knew once I told Dad it would be real, and I figured he would assume we were sleeping together anyway," she added guiltily, "and then I—well, I wouldn't really have an excuse—"

"Is he pressuring you?" Hermione asked, and Rose's eyes widened.

"No, no, not at all," she said. "The opposite, really. We just talk, mostly, and he says he's never been as comfortable with anyone as he is with me, and I just—I wanted to keep it a secret, because while it's secret, it's still just ours." She grimaced. "Does that make sense?"

"Well, sure," Hermione permitted. "But it's still yours even if other people know, sweetheart. And you don't need an excuse not to have sex," she added. "If you're not ready, then that's reason enough not to, don't you think? Milo's a good boy." She smiled. "He's like his father—loud. But he's kind, and patient, and loyal to the people he loves, and I'm sure he just wants to be with you." She reached out, tucking a lock of Rose's hair behind her ear. "Whatever parts of yourself you want to give him, let that be your decision and nobody else's."

Rose hesitantly permitted a smile, biting her lip.

"I love him," she said. "I love him, and I want—I want Daddy to know that I love him," she finished, and Hermione sighed, resting her cheek against her daughter's blonde hair.

"Then I'll tell him," she said firmly, "so that the two of you can have your night."

"Thanks, Mum," Rose whispered, and Hermione leaned back, eyeing her gown.

"Did you know," she offered, feeling nostalgic, "that this is the exact color of the dress I wore to the Yule Ball when I was at Hogwarts?"

"I know," Rose said sheepishly. "I asked Aunt Luna to pick the shade."

Hermione paused, finding a lump in her throat at that.

"That's really very—" she paused, feeling sentimental. "It's very sweet, darling."

Rose smiled.
"Dad said he always remembered you in it," she said, and Hermione threw an arm around her, leading her to the door.

"Did I ever tell you," she said, "that your father went to the Yule Ball with Aunt Pansy?"

"Oh my god," said Rose, and Hermione laughed.

"Yes," she confirmed, shaking her head. "Yes, I completely agree."

Listen, if Ginny Weasley wanted an orgasm, she'd have one. The physical aspect of the whole charade really wasn't the issue, despite how badly she was trying to fuck her husband in a very narrow wine cellar (you'd think, given the money, Draco and Hermione might have built a bigger one), and the fact that the arch of her foot was beginning to cramp. You might think it was about sex, but it wasn't.

The truth is she just wanted to be close to him, because she needed to tell him something rather important.

"There, yeah," she breathed encouragingly, though in all honesty, she was starting to go a little numb. She was distracted, too, hoping that Harry wasn't doing too badly with Esme. Obviously Harry had a son of his own, but James was a little oddball, and Esme could be very persistent when she set her mind to something—not unlike both her parents. "Mm, Blaise, yes—"

He shifted, adjusting his footing, and Ginny promptly let out a hiss of pain, a bottle digging into her spine.

"Ouch—"

"Sorry, sorry," he said hastily, and promptly bumped his forehead against hers.

They'd been a little out of rhythm lately, to say the least. Sex had always been the most natural thing between them and now it seemed like they needed a bit more practice, which they almost never had time for. They were just slightly out of sync.

"Just, um—" she shifted slightly in his arms, sending more of her weight backwards and pulling his hips towards her. "Like this?"

He paused, swallowing. "Yeah, uh—" He put his hand behind her head, one hand still holding her. "Right, so—"

"Fuck," Ginny sighed, shaking her head. "I don't think this is working."

"Oh thank god," Blaise muttered, letting out an exhausted sigh and letting his head fall against her shoulder. "I can't—it isn't—"

"I need to talk to you," she interrupted, and he looked up, swallowing.

"I should probably pull out, then," he said tentatively, and she permitted a peal of nervous laughter, her fingers tight around his shoulders.

"It's—it's not what you think," she said. "Or maybe it isn't, I don't know—"

"Ginevra," he sighed, brushing his lips against her cheek. "You've been acting strange since you got home. And this," he said, gesturing between them, "as much as I love your enthusiasm, feels a bit—" he hesitated. "Desperate? No." He shook his head. "Forced, I think."
"Forced," she agreed, slowly disentangling from him and lowering her feet to the ground. "I, um. I think I just needed to start with a distraction."

"Distractions aplenty," he said, buttoning his trousers as she adjusted her underwear. He paused for a moment, watching her, and then shook his head, reaching out to stroke the edge of her cheek with his thumb. "Listen," he offered quietly. "I know things have been hard lately."

She watched him, letting him continue.

"I promise I'll get the hang of it," he whispered to her, and when he met her eye, she realized he was pleading. "I know it seems like we don't work together anymore, but—"

"Blaise, do you think I'm leaving you?" she asked, astounded. "Have you lost your mind?"

He grimaced. "Well—"

"You idiot," she sighed, shaking her head and wrapping her arms around his neck. "Nothing like that, you goon. I just wanted to tell you I got a job offer."

"I—" he frowned. "What?"

"Kingsley told me that London's won the bid for the next World Cup," Ginny explained. "He asked me to be head of player relations, which would mean being based here for the next two years, if not more. With very little travel," she added. "I made a point to ask about that, and he promised."

"That's great," Blaise said, blinking in confusion. "I mean, if that's what you w-"

"As my husband, I want you to stay," she cut in, needing to continue without interruption. "With me. Stay with me. I want you to delegate to your underlings for a couple of years," she clarified with a sigh, "and take fewer international assignments so that we can be together with our daughter. I want us to move out of our flat and get a house with a garden, and I want to spend Saturdays in it drinking tea with you and having parties with our friends. But as the man who fell in love with the person I used to be," she continued, glancing away, "I want you to tell me that this doesn't mean that I'm giving up. That I'm settling down and getting boring," she sighed. "And I want you to tell me that you'll still want me—even if the things I want have become mundane."

She looked down, casting her eyes at her feet, and caught the motion of him shaking his head.

"Oh, Ginevra," he sighed, stepping forward to take her face in his hands. "Do you really think life with you could ever be mundane? You and Esme are my favorite adventure," he promised. "The best thing I've ever done."

She closed her eyes, breathing out a helpless sigh of relief, and he kissed her forehead.

"I've seen the world," he promised, his lips brushing fondly down her nose, "and out of all of it, I choose you."

"You promise?" she asked. "We always said we didn't want to be anchored in one place, so if this means you're giving up the life you love, then—"

"We also said we were never having kids," he reminded her, interrupting. "And anyway, you felt you needed to fuck me during a rather formal gala just to tell me good news," he added, "so I can only dream of what you'll do to preempt any future bad news. Ginevra," he sighed, kissing her lips this time, "honestly. How could life with you possibly be boring?"
"I just don't want you to give anything up for me," she murmured, and he shook his head.

"First of all, I'd gladly give everything up for you," he said, turning to open the cellar door, "and for another, if I'd known you were considering a job like that, I'd have encourag—"

"Oh, hello," said James, startling both Blaise and Ginny as he paused by the cellar door. "I don't suppose you two are available to chat, are you?"

Ginny frowned, adjusting her hair and flashing Blaise a questioning glance before turning back to the young man who reminded her so thoroughly of everything she loved about both Harry and Luna.

"Everything okay, James?"

"I just wondered if you had a moment to lend some advice. Were you choosing a bottle of wine?" he asked tangentially, looking over her shoulder. "Scorp took quite a long time with the selections for the evening, you know. I'm sure there's something better upstairs. Unless this is congress," he realized, and frowned. "Is this congress?"

"James," Ginny sighed, as Blaise smothered a laugh. "What's wrong?"

"Well," he began, and then promptly cut himself off as the sound of shouting came from above them. "What was that?"

"Don't know," Blaise said, frowning as the shouting grew louder. "Come on, let's find Esme," he said, grabbing Ginny's hand. "Just give us a minute, James, and then we'll—"

"I—okay," he said, as Blaise and Ginny took off in search of their daughter.

It never failed to amaze Pansy how she'd managed to become so invested in a group of people she'd detested so thoroughly for so much of her life. To think that she was approaching Loony Lovegood —after receiving counsel from Weasley, and begging Granger to be her best friend—and that she was resolutely not speaking to Daphne was nearly unimaginable, a true stroke of irony; though, in fairness, she'd learned long ago not to cling too firmly to the past.

"Hey," she said, finding Luna in the crowd. "Finally, someone sane."

The corners of Luna's mouth quirked up. "You're teasing," she guessed, and Pansy gave her something of a smirk.

"Only a little," she said. "But you're at least better than my alternatives."

And it was true, really. Pansy had grown rather fond of Luna over the years; she had a softness to her that was comforting, but at the same time, she was far more like what Pansy pretended to be than Pansy herself actually was. Luna was always so confident, so self-assured, that by contrast, it made Pansy feel like somewhat of a fraud.

After all, Pansy hadn't felt secure enough to just admit she'd been heartbroken about her son's broken engagement. Instead she'd drudged up a war, doing what she did best.

Surely Luna would never have done that, she sighed, as Luna turned to face her.

"Hey Pansy," Luna murmured, looking oddly distressed. "You know how I sometimes say the wrong thing?"
"No," Pansy drawled sarcastically. "You?"

"Yes, me," Luna confirmed gravely. "I'm afraid I may have said something I shouldn't have, unfortunately. You'll have to teach me one of these days," she added, glancing mournfully at Pansy. "It seems I'm still not very adept at interpreting my surroundings."

Pansy frowned, surprised.

"You seem a bit off, Lovegood," she remarked. "Did you accidentally kill someone?"

"Not that I know of," Luna said. "Though I suppose it's statistically possible."

"No, I—" Pansy glanced down, amused. "Maybe don't say things like that, Luna."

"You see?" Luna sighed. "I can never tell."

"Well, don't let it get you down," Pansy replied, glancing out over the crowd and wondering where everyone had gotten off to. "I'm not very good at saying the right things either."

"Oh," Luna said. "Do you mean how you hurt Daphne's feelings?"

"I—what?" Pansy asked, taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, perhaps I'm wrong," Luna remarked, "but it seems you and Daphne are both a little bit sad. Normally you are very complementary creatures," she added. "When you suffer, she seems to sort of—" she gestured with her hands. "Curl around you. But this time," she sighed, "you're both suffering, and I'm not quite sure either of you see it."

Pansy swallowed.

"Well," she said. "It's a bit more complicated than that."

"I suppose," Luna agreed, glancing at her. "Though perhaps it's just my usual lack of synchronicity with other people, but to tell you the truth, Pansy, I don't particularly see why."

Not wanting to give in, Pansy promptly cleared her throat, changing the subject.

"So," she said. "About the thing you fucked up. What was it that you said?"

Luna's pale cheeks flushed. "Well—"

They paused as the sound of shouting echoed from elsewhere in the house, and Luna frowned.

"Did you hear that?" she asked. "Or was it just in my head?"

"No, I heard it," Pansy murmured, turning towards the sound.

"Though, of course, it being in my head doesn't preclude reality," Luna murmured to herself, getting dragged slightly as Pansy grabbed her arm.

"Come on," Pansy said urgently. "I know that voice."

"So," Hermione said, having pulled Theo and Draco into Draco's study. "There's something I think you both should know, and Rose and I agreed it was probably best if I broke it to you myself."

"Be quiet until she's finished," Daphne added, though Theo noted she seemed to be speaking more
to Draco than to him, which was odd. "And please, be sane."

At that, Draco and Theo exchanged matching glances of suspicion.

"Why are you telling us?" Theo asked, as Daphne glanced apologetically at Hermione, shrugging in one of their secret wife exchanges. "Why not Rose?"

"Yes, Granger, precisely." Draco sniffed, making a face. "You know perfectly well that if Rose has anything to say, she can come to me."

"In this case, I think it's best if I handle it," Hermione assured him delicately, as Daphne nodded her agreement. "And don't argue with me."

"This," Theo pronounced, "cannot be good."

"It isn't," Daphne assured him. "Well." She cocked her head. "We'll see."

"Listen," Hermione announced, "I'm just going to come out with it." She took a deep breath and then let it out, shaking herself. "Draco," she told him, angling herself at him, "Rose and Milo have been seeing each other for the last six months, and it's very serious."

Theo stared at her for a moment, gauging whether it was a joke, and then turned to Draco, watching his face turn oddly pale.

"Darling," Hermione prompted. "Say something."

"Milo," Draco repeated vacantly, blinking. "Milo who?"

"Well," Daphne exhaled. "That's as good a response as any—"

"Milo Nott," Hermione informed her husband, sighing. "You know—your godson? The one whose birth you were present for?"

"Milo Nott," Draco echoed. "As in the son of Theodore Nott?"

Theo had to forcefully bite his tongue to keep from laughing aloud.

"You just hush," Daphne told him brusquely, tapping her mouth in warning, and he shook his head, tacitly agreeing despite the laughter threatening to crack his chest.

"Yes," Hermione confirmed curtly, glancing at Daphne.

"For the record," Daphne ventured, gesturing between herself and Hermione, "we're quite pleased. You know we adore Rose, and—"

"His son," Draco cut in fiercely, jabbing Theo in the ribs and blinking. "The one with the penis?"

"Yes," Hermione said, hands on her hips. "The one with the penis."

"The penis one," Draco said, dumbstruck, "is dating my Rose?"

Daphne reached over, handing Hermione her glass of champagne, which Hermione accepted.

"Yes," she sighed briskly, taking a sip. "Theo?" she asked, watching him hover somewhere near bursting. "Anything you'd like to add?"
"Hold on," he managed, staring at Draco, who was still muttering to himself.

"Is there—" Draco sputtered. "Are they—"

"Take your time, darling," Hermione assured him, taking another sip. "Sort it all out."

"Again," Daphne said, "we could not be more thrilled ab—"

"Granger!" Draco suddenly shouted, leaping to his feet. "Are you telling me that we could end up with a grandchild that is also Theo's?"

"Well, she'd have to pick someone, wouldn't she?" Hermione sighed impatiently, shaking her head. "Unless you have high hopes for a virgin birth—"

"I do!" Draco shouted. "The highest hopes!"

"—then I think you should be glad it's Theo's son," Hermione suggested primly, "considering how many other delinquents she could be with. He's smart, he has a promising future, and—"

Theo turned, watching Draco's head threaten to implode.

"MY SON," he shouted, "IS ALREADY WITH POTTER'S SON—"

"Oh, stop it," Hermione groaned. "You've been friends with Harry for years—"

"—AND NOW YOU ARE TELLING ME—"

"Draco, for heaven's sake—"

"—THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE—"

"Calm down, Draco—"

"—WHAT DO WE EVEN KNOW ABOUT HIM—"

"Draco," Daphne sighed. "For the love of god—"

"—ONLY THAT HE COMES FROM A LINE OF UNFETTERED DEPRAVITY—"

"That's true," Theo said giddily.

"DO NOT TALK TO ME RIGHT NOW," Draco roared, launching to his feet and beginning to pace the floor. "HOW DARE YOU—"

"How dare he what?" Hermione prompted. "Raise a son that would attract your daughter?"

"I AM DEEPLY INSULTED YOU WOULD EVEN SUGGEST THAT," Draco said, affronted. "GRANGER, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

"Me?" Hermione echoed furiously. "You're blaming this on me?"

"I WOULD LOVE TO BLAME SOMEONE ELSE, BUT I CAN'T," Draco informed her at the top of his lungs.

At that, Theo leaned back in his chair, thoroughly delighted. "This," he said, "is the best day ever. Best day of my life. I literally could not have dream-"
"We should go," Daphne cut him off hurriedly, grabbing Theo's arm and dragging him to the door. "Darling, you're going to make things so much worse—"

"Fine, fine," Theo said, turning back to Draco. "But just so you kn-

"OUT," Draco shouted, and Daphne gave Theo's arm a quick tug, yanking him into the corridor as Hermione was left to face her husband, shaking her head as she leaned forward to admonish him.

"You're making me miss all the fun, Daph," Theo told her, watching the door close behind them. "You realize this is my moment, don't you? Of everything I've ever done to him, this is—"

"Theo, please—"

"Uncle Theo," Blaise Theodora interrupted, suddenly appearing in front of him and startling both him and Daphne. "Can I have a moment?"

"Blaise," Daphne said, a little stiffly, though she forced an unsteady smile. "How are you, darling?"

"Fine," she said, though Theo noted she was wearing one of Pansy's more demonic looks. "But Uncle Theo," she continued, batting her lashes. "If you have a minute, I think there's something you should know."

"Draco," Hermione said tightly, "you do realize you're overreacting, don't you?"

"I am not," he snapped. "I have never in my life reacted with anything but enviable aplomb, Granger, you know this—"

"He wants to dance with her during the party," Hermione continued. "I told them that would be fine."

"You did what—"

"You forget being young and in love, Draco," his wife sighed, shaking her head. "You forget how much it matters to have a moment with the person you care about, and to not have to hide. I'm letting our daughter be happy, and you are not to come out until you've matured enough to do the same," she warned, brandishing a finger at him.

She turned to the door to leave and then paused, shaking her head, before turning towards him, taking a few steps to close the distance between them and brushing her lips against his cheek.

"I love you, you horrid, wonderful man," she whispered, "and I love how protective you are of our children. But this," she sighed. "This is about our daughter, so I'm afraid I'll have to take her side to let her be happy for the evening. And if that means locking you in here until you can behave," she warned, stepping back, "I won't hesitate to do it."

"But Granger—"

"Have you ever loved anyone like you love Milo?" she asked him. "I know you love Scorp, Draco, but Milo came first, and he's always been like a son to you. I know this isn't about him."

"Maybe it isn't," he growled, "but still—"

"He's a good egg, and he respects our daughter," she said. "I would rather her be in love with him than anyone else."
"MAYBE YOU'RE RIGHT," Draco growled in frustration, "BUT—"

"She's not a child, Draco," Hermione warned. "She's not your princess, she's a woman, and as far as I can tell, her choices are sound."

"But—"

She stepped forward again, kissing him, and for a second he held tight to her waist, desperately wishing he could stop time as he clung to her, the familiar smell of her hair filling him with both nostalgia and fear.

"She grew up so fast," he whispered to her, and Hermione rested her forehead against his, shaking her head.

"Don't I know it," she agreed, and sighed. "Come out when you're ready," she told him. "I believe she's out there with him already. You'll want to see her dress," she added, smiling. "It was her choice, but I think you'll like it."

Draco nodded, and then Hermione stepped back, slipping into the hall.

He waited a moment, gathering his thoughts.

He thought, specifically, of his daughter in her various stages; of the toddler who'd clung to his leg; of the child he'd taught to dance, to sing, to smile; of the teenager he'd learned was funny and clever and vivacious, and who was the best of him and the love of his life combined.

And eventually, recalling how much he quite enjoyed that little human, Draco stepped out of his office, taking a deep breath.

Draco paused at the outskirts of the room, watching as the young blonde woman in the center of the crowd accepted the offer of a young dark-haired man who bowed reverently, taking her hand in his. He watched, too, as the floaty periwinkle gown seemed to draw forth something from his memory; of watching another girl who'd once caught his eye, long before he would ever find it in him to tell her.

He was proud of how much his daughter looked like his wife, even if she bore more obvious traces of him. Rose may have his coloring, he thought, but she carried herself like her mother, and she warmed people like Hermione did, and he was honored to have spent a single moment of her life being the most important man in it—even if he no longer was.

But just as the thought occurred to him, Rose glanced up, catching his eye, and he gave her the broadest smile he could conjure; perhaps it wouldn't be enough, but he raised his glass, toasting her from afar.

She smiled, grateful, and he felt a warmth in his chest.

Perhaps he was still a little important.

"She looks so pretty," he heard beside him, and turned to find Alessia at his side. "Sorry about my brother," she added, shaking her head. "I'm sure you're going to murder him later."

Surprisingly, Draco managed a laugh.

"Don't tell him," Draco warned, "but I actually quite like him. He reminds me of the best man I ever knew," he said, permitting himself a smile. "You might know him."
"Surely you're not talking about my father," Alessia said with a laugh, and Draco smirked.

"Again," he said, "not that I'd ever admit."

Alessia fell silent at that, and then Draco looked over, noting something wistful about her expression.

"Is everything alright?" he asked her, and she grimaced.

"Actually," she sighed, "I think I have something I'm rather afraid to tell my father myself."

Draco realized then what Theo had meant earlier about giving their children a safe space, and he felt an odd sense of relief, wrapping an arm around his goddaughter.

"Come on," he coaxed her gently. "Maybe we can both think of a way to tell him."

Alessia gave him a weak half-smile.

"The thing is," she began, but stopped, the sound of shouting suddenly carrying from elsewhere in the house. "What's that?" she asked, and Draco frowned.

"Sounds like your dad," he said, and took off, gesturing for Alessia to follow.

"Is that yelling?" Esme asked, glancing up, and Harry frowned, hearing it too.

"Come on," he told her, picking her up and taking off at an awkward jog. "That sounds like your Uncle Theo."

He hurried into the kitchen just in time to catch the sound of Theo's words.

"YOU WERE HER TEACHER—"

"Theo, please—"

"—SHE IS NOT A TOY FOR YOU TO PLAY WITH, TEDDY, SHE IS MY DAUGHTER—"

"What's going on?" Harry asked, just as Daphne had to yank Theo back from lunging for Teddy's throat, his fists coiled tightly. "Theo," Harry snapped, stepping between them and using the hand that wasn't holding Esme to wrest them apart, protectively throwing an arm out in front of Teddy. "I understand you're angry about something but you will not lay a hand on my son—"

"He's been sleeping with Alessia," Theo spat furiously, angrier than Harry had ever seen him as the sound of footsteps hurried in behind him. "You had no right—"

"Esme, sweetheart," Ginny said, taking her from Harry's arms just as he registered Luna and Pansy's presence in the room, followed by Hermione, Draco, and Alessia. "Come here, darling, this is for grownups—"

"Why?" Esme whined, which Harry, for once, was pleased to not have to answer.

"It's—you don't understand," Teddy said frantically, still facing Theo. "I wasn't—"

"Daddy, please!" Alessia begged, running to him. "Please listen to him, Daddy, it's not what you think—"
"She is twenty years old," Theo said, his face ghostly pale as the words slipped angrily through his
tooth. "She's twenty, Teddy, she's seven years younger than you, and she was your student——"

"It didn't start at Hogwarts," Teddy said quickly. "It's—I swear, I—" he turned, his eyes wide as
they met Harry's. "I promise, Dad, I swear, I didn't take advantage of her like that——"

"Daddy, who told you?" Alessia asked Theo, and his eyes flicked to Blaise Theodora in the corner.
"Dad, come on, don't listen to her——"

"You should have told me," Theo snapped to Teddy. "A year, Teddy? A fucking year you've been
sneaking around with my daughter?"

"I—" Teddy grimaced. "With Arthur, and Victoire, I just didn't——"

"Mate," Draco said, taking Theo's arm. "Come on——"

"What's going on?" Scorpius asked, running into the kitchen. "I heard shouting——"

"Scorp, darling, come on," Hermione whispered, taking his arm and leading him out. "Let's just
cast a Muffliato, okay? Let them work this out——"

"Daddy, please, I love him," Alessia said, her eyes filling with tears as Ron, who'd walked in with
Arthur, glanced over at Pansy. "I know I should have told you—I should have told everyone, but
Arthur and I didn't—we just——"

"You knew about this?" Pansy asked her son quietly. "You knew?"

"It's not her fault, Mum," he replied, his voice equally hushed. "She was always honest with me, I
promise, but——"

"I can't just let this go, Teddy," Theo said, staring at him, and Harry realized with an odd sense of
enlightenment that Teddy's hair matched the precise shade of blue of Alessia's dress, and wondered
if perhaps Theo were not jumping to conclusions. "It's my job to protect my daughter, Teddy,"
Theo seethed, "so if you're just fucking around——"

Teddy, in response, wordlessly pulled something from his pocket, setting it down on the counter in
front of Alessia.

"I'm not fucking around," he told Theo, and glanced pointedly at Alessia before turning to walk
away, exiting the kitchen.

There was a collective exhale, and then Daphne spoke for the first time, her hand still tight around
her husband's arm.

"Is that——"

"Yes," Theo croaked unsteadily, staring at it. "It's a ring."

Alessia looked up, locking eyes with Arthur. "Art, I——"

"No, it's—it's fine," Arthur said, stumbling over his words. "I just—I have to——"

He turned, fleeing the room, and Ron went after him.

"Dad," Rose said, hurrying into the room with her hand in Milo's. "Are you——"
“I need to talk to my children,” Theo said flatly, and Milo and Alessia both froze. "Now."

Harry watched as across the room, Daphne and Pansy locked eyes.

"Blaise Theodora Weasley," Pansy said, turning to her daughter in the corner. "You and I need to have a talk." She paused, glancing again at Daphne. "And you," she added, slightly softer, and Daphne nodded her tentative agreement, heading towards her.

"Oh dear," Luna said, her fingers closing around Harry's elbow. "I think I may have set a rather unfortunate chain in motion."

"Actually," Harry said, watching Daphne join Pansy, the two women exchanging furtive glances. "I'm not so sure it's as unfortunate as you think."

Pansy led her daughter into Draco's study, letting Daphne close the door behind them.

"Blaise," she said, the moment the door closed. "You little shit-stirrer."

"Why's she here?" Blaise asked stiffly, glancing up at Daphne, and Pansy sighed.

"Because she's my best friend," Pansy said flatly, "and I'm afraid I haven't set a very good example for you by denying it."

"What does that mean?" Blaise protested, effervescently stubborn, and Daphne perched beside Pansy, waiting.

"Your mother," Pansy told Blaise, taking a deep breath, "is a bit of a difficult human being."

From the corner of her eye, she caught the motion of a smile from Daphne.

"It's very much my move to start a fight like the one you just caused," Pansy added, "but I would hope that the daughter I raised would have a kinder heart than that, Blaise."

"You always say kindness is soft," Blaise said, glancing at her feet. "I just thought it'd be funny."

"It rather wasn't," Daphne said quietly. "I'm afraid your Uncle Theo is really quite upset."

"So?" Blaise asked, not looking up. "He's always upset."

"Theo's usually all bark," Pansy permitted, shaking her head, "but I do think that if Harry hadn't been there, someone might have gotten hurt. There's a right and a wrong way to do things, Blaise," she added, "and this was the wrong way."

"But—"

"You wanted to get Alessia in trouble," Daphne commented gently. "Why?"

Blaise's face contorted. "Mum, she's not—"

"She's right," Pansy warned, shaking her head. "Out with it, Blaise."

Blaise scowled, her lip trembling.

"She's—because you—" her face contorted, and then she exploded. "Because you always act like you wish Alessia had been your daughter!" Blaise suddenly shouted, rising to her feet. "You always
said how much you adored her, because she was a Slytherin like you, and she's glamorous *like you*, and I'm—"

"You're my daughter," Pansy said, aghast, and Blaise let out a wail.

"It's not the same!" she sobbed. "You always make fun of my house, Mum, and you always say I look just like dad—"

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Pansy asked, startled. "I love that man, Blaise—"

"Yes, but—but you have so much more in common with Alessia," Blaise continued, sniffing, "and you always said so, and I heard you—I heard you telling Dad you were so disappointed she wasn't going to be in our family—"

"Well I *was*, sweetheart, but not to replace you!" Pansy said, alarmed. "Blaise, darling, you're my daughter, I love you—"

"Yes, but do you *like* me?" Blaise asked her, her eyes wide. "When Arthur and Alessia broke up you started spending time with me instead of Alessia, and—and I *liked* it, and—"

"Oh, sweetheart," Pansy said, rising to her feet and pulling her daughter into her chest. "I didn't mean to neglect you." She felt a wretched sense of guilt, realizing how much she'd let her daughter down. "I promise you, darling, I've never once wished for you to be anything but you."

She let Blaise cry into her dress for a moment, shaking in her arms.

"I just," Blaise sniffed eventually. "I want you to be proud of me, Mum—"

"I *am*," Pansy said. "I'm *so* proud of you, darling. Of how much better a person you are than me," she added, cupping her daughter's face in her hands. "Of how hard you work, and how much brighter you make the world. And I'm glad for everything you are, because sweetheart, there is more than enough trouble in the world." She swallowed, feeling a crushing blow of remorse, before looking up, meeting Daphne's eye. "I'm sorry, Blaise, that I haven't been the best example of showing you how to put love first."

At that, Blaise pulled away, noting the glance between Pansy and Daphne.

"I think you should talk," she said, wiping at her eyes and taking a step towards the door. "And Aunt Daphne, I'm sorry," she added. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay, Blaise," Daphne assured her. "I'm afraid none of us have been very exemplary, but we can change that. Can't we?" she asked, and Pansy nodded as Blaise gave a teary smile, walking quietly to the door and leaving them alone in the room.

There was a beat of silence, and then -

"Clearly we can't fight anymore," Pansy told Daphne flatly. "I'm a horrid mum when you're not around."

"That's not true," Daphne protested, though Pansy rolled her eyes. "No, really, that's not true at all," she insisted, but Pansy shook her head.

"You knew, didn't you?" Pansy asked. "When Blaise started dyeing her hair, you were the first one who said something. I should have noticed." She grimaced. "I should have done something."
Daphne shook her head. "She idolizes you," she permitted. "But you've never neglected her, Pansy. It was never anything like that."

"Still," Pansy sighed. "It seems she's inherited my insecurity."

"To be fair, she gets it from both sides," Daphne commented wryly, and Pansy made a face, noting the truth in that. "And anyway, it seems my children inherited my selfishness, so there's no winning in this parenting game."

"God, we should have had Hermione raise our children," Pansy muttered, burying her face in her hands. "They're so stable."

"Give them a couple more years," Daphne reminded her, shaking her head. "There's still time for total collapse."

Pansy managed something of a shaky laugh, and Daphne gave her a tentative smile.

"I need you," Pansy confessed. "You balance me. I'm driving Ron insane, and I'm driving my children to deviance."

"I need you, too," Daphne replied without hesitation. "I need to scream to you about my miscreant children running around with people they shouldn't."

"So should we end this, then?" Pansy asked, gesturing to the space between them. "Can we?"

Daphne took a step closer, wrapping her arms around Pansy.

"Welcome back," she said, and Pansy breathed a sigh of relief, holding tight to her best friend.

"So," Theo said, conjuring sternness. "You've both kept your mother and me completely in the dark so that you could both cause a scene at a Malfoy gala."

"Seems legit," Milo commented, and Theo scowled.

"Don't," he snapped, and rubbed his temple, pacing in front of his children. "You realize, don't you, that you both behaved rather fucking irresponsibly this evening?"

"Says the man who tried to punch someone," Alessia pointed out, and Theo held up a hand.

"Do not get smart with me right now, Alessia," he warned. "You know this was something I should have heard from you."

"Why am I here?" Milo asked brusquely. "I've done nothing."

"Oh, you've done nothing, Milo?" Theo echoed. "You missed the episode of Draco's brain exploding earlier—"

"Again," Alessia said, sighing loudly, "you were—"

"You're my daughter!" Theo snapped, rounding on her. "You are my daughter," he repeated. "You're my baby. I saw you walk, I saw you talk, I saw you learn everything you know, and if I think someone is taking advantage of you, I will tear them to pieces. I've learned NOTHING from this," he added at a shout, brandishing a finger at her, "and I'll do it all again if I ever have reason to suspect you're being treated badly. I don't care how long we've known Teddy," he added furiously. "When I see a man that much older than you parading around with different women
and then I hear he's been sleeping with my daughter—"

"They weren't real," Alessia grumbled. "He just—I told him I wasn't ready to tell people. It's my fault."

"You're damn right it is!" Theo retorted, and then paused, stopping in front of James. "You," he realized, startled. "When did you get here? You're not my kid."

"No," James agreed. "But you looked like you were dispensing advice, and everyone else is busy."

"Fine," Theo permitted roughly, gesturing to the twins. "But these two first."

"Fair," James said, nodding.

"Again," Milo insisted. "I've not done anything, I'm not even sleeping with Rose, so—"

"You're not?" Alessia asked, turning to him. "But you're a filthy slut, aren't you?"

"She says, ironically," Milo snapped at his sister, as Theo groaned, letting his head fall back.

"First piece of advice," he told James, "do everything in your power not to have twins."

"Noted," James agreed.

"Listen, it's the secrecy here that bothers me," Theo told the other two. "Trust me," he added, "speaking as someone who didn't tell the person I loved how I felt until it was almost too late, I recommend you say everything you need to say sooner rather than later."

"You wrote Mum a book," Milo muttered. "We don't all have that kind of time."

"I've seen those piles of ceaseless word vomit you call letters," Alessia told him. "All you're missing is professional binding."

"YOU ARE THE WORST," Milo growled to her, and Theo sighed.

"You two," he said, pointing at both of them, "need to realize that life is short. That love is rare, and if it's real, you have to be open about it. It's in all this fucking secrecy that conflict festers," he added, waving a hand.

"Is that a book title?" Milo asked, which Theo ignored, despite privately considering that it wasn't a bad idea.

"Alessia, if you love Teddy—"

"I do," she insisted. "But with the whole Arthur thing—"

"Yes, and on that note, you need to take some time away from Arthur," Theo warned. "Let him grieve, Alessia. Let all of us grieve, your mother especially. She put on a front for you, but she was sad, and she lost her friend over this. You owe her an apology."

Alessia hung her head. "I know."

"And you," Theo said, turning sharply to Milo, "do not fuck this up with Rose."

"I won't," he said. "I swear, Dad. I won't."
"Good," Theo said. "I'll kill you myself if you do," he added. "That girl is a fucking angel."

"I KNOW!" Milo barked.

"And as for you," Theo said, turning to James and then pausing, vacantly opening and closing his mouth. "What was it you needed?"

"What was the thing?" James asked, blinking. "That thing about telling the people you love how you feel?"

"That if you can't just tell someone you love them," Daphne interrupted, and Theo turned, smiling in relief at the sight of her, "then it doesn't mean anything." She sidled up to Theo, slipping an arm around his waist. "Right?"

"Yes," Theo said, kissing her forehead. "Take a lesson from me, kids. Don't bother hiding how you feel, it'll only lead to shouting."

"You guys are disgustingly perfect," Milo muttered. "It's gross."

"I'm going to go find Teddy," Alessia said, picking up the ring and sauntering out of the room. "Since unless he's fled the country," she added over her shoulder, "I think I'll be marrying him."

"If you break this one off, you're paying for the deposits!" Theo yelled after her, as Milo came to his feet.

"I'm going to go flirt the pants off Rose," he announced. "Not literally," he assured his mother. "Anyway, she's in a dress."

"Just go," Daphne sighed, shaking her head, and she and Theo looked down at James.

"And as for you?" Theo prompted, and James looked up, smiling his insufferable Potter smile.

"I'm going to go tell my boyfriend I love him," he said, shrugging, "and we'll see what happens after that, I guess."

"Excellent," Theo said, and as James slipped from the room, he turned to Daphne, finally alone. "And you," he murmured, leaning down to kiss her. "Are you all squared away?"

"Oh, very nearly," she confirmed against his lips, pulling at his tie. "A little congress, my good man?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he said, clearing off the counter and setting her on top of it.

"Well," Ron remarked to Arthur, "I guess I was a bit too hasty when I said we shouldn't tell your mother."

"I should have known Blaise was going to say something." Arthur grumbled, and Ron shrugged.

"The women of this family are mad," he assured him. "Both your mother and Aunt Ginny. It's inescapable. Blaise was fucked from the start."

"Fair," Arthur said, shrugging. "Is it bad that I was glad Uncle Theo tried to hit him?" he asked, and Ron tried his damndest to prevent a laugh.

"I suppose it must have been hard on you to keep it a secret," he said, and paused. "Why did you,
"You know," Ron said, sighing. "Your mother was the last person I thought I'd find myself involved with. But do you know how long it took to fall in love with her once I did?"

Arthur shrugged.

"About twenty minutes," Ron said. "I married her after six months."

"Dad, that's—" Arthur paused, frowning. "Deeply irresponsible of you."

"Yeah, well, I've done worse things, but that's neither here nor there," Ron said. "The point is, I spent years wondering why things weren't working with Hermione, and then the minute I opened myself to the possibility of someone else, I found the world's most perfect, imperfect person." He looked up, catching her oncoming form, and smiled. "And thank god, too."

"What are you prattling on about, Weasley?" she sniffed, though she leaned her cheek against his chest as he slid his arm around her. "Not boring our son, are you?"

Arthur smiled faintly.

"I'm a bit bored," he admitted, and glanced across the room. "And that girl over there's quite pretty, isn't she?"

"She's in my house," Blaise Theodora said, suddenly appearing at Ron's other side. "She was three years above me."

"A Hufflepuff," Pansy noted. "We could use more of that in the family, don't you think?"

Blaise beamed, and Ron kissed her forehead.

"Jesus, Mum, don't get ahead of yourself," Arthur said, rolling his eyes, and then he took off, approaching the girl and tapping her on the shoulder.

"What a little dick," Pansy said fondly, and Ron laughed.

"He gets it from his mother," he assured her, as Pansy promptly backhanded him in the chest.

"Why was everyone shouting?" Esme asked, looking up at Blaise.

"Because they're all lunatics," he replied, and Esme nodded sagely.

"Give me one minute, will you?" Ginny asked, kissing her husband's cheek. "Going to go find Kingsley to tell him I'll take the job."

"Excellent," Blaise said, picking up Esme. "Mummy and Daddy are going to buy a new house, Esme."

"Can I come?" she asked, very seriously.

"I will consider it," he confirmed, and Ginny laughed, turning to look for Kingsley.
She paused, scanning the room. She noted Arthur talking to a girl, and Ron standing a bit further off, smiling his approval; beside him, Pansy toasted her daughter, both appearing to be gossiping delightedly about someone else in the room. Draco and Hermione stood arm in arm, fondly watching their daughter dance with Milo, and she saw Teddy bend to kiss Alessia, the ring on her finger flashing as she slipped her hand around his cheek.

Ginny also saw a flash of pale blond from the corner of her eye, and despite seeing Kingsley across the room, she followed it, catching Scorpius as he let his head fall against the wall.

"You doing okay, Scorp?" she asked, and he jumped.

"Is there something I can get you, Aunt Ginny?" he asked her. "Do you need a drink, or—"

"You're more neurotic than usual," she noted, frowning. "What's wrong? Oh, wait," she realized, blinking. "Is this why James is asking everyone for advice?"

Scorpius groaned. "Is he?" he asked, looking pained. "It's just—it's a job offer, and I guess he's hesitant to tell me, so—"

"Ah, job offer," Ginny said. "I can relate."

Scorpius blinked. "Really?"

"Come on, Scorp, I'm not that old," Ginny said, shaking her head. "I still encounter life-changing decisions, you know."

"I didn't mean—" he grimaced. "I just—"

"Look, Scorp, I know you're a very serious kind of dude," Ginny told him, slipping an arm around his waist, "but you should know that not every decision you make has to change your whole future. It's okay to be young while you're young," she told him, and he chewed his lip, thinking it over.

"Don't be offended," he said slowly, "but—"

"Do I regret having a kid late in life?" she guessed, and he nodded slowly, looking sheepish. "No, not at all," she said, realizing how much she meant it as she said it. "Sure, I did it differently than your parents did, but not everybody follows the same path. I'm glad I have Esme now," she added. "I had all this adventure while I was playing professionally, but the truth is that the best adventures of my life are still happening to me. Watching my daughter grow, helping her learn," she explained. "That's my favorite job right now," she admitted slowly, "but I'm not sure it would have been ten years ago."

Scorpius nodded, processing it.

"I have a job here," he said slowly. "Dad says I have a bright future."

"And you do," Ginny confirmed. "But your bright future doesn't have an end. Life has lots of stops and starts," she added, reaching back to squeeze his shoulder. "You know what I mean?"

"Kind of," he said, though he still looked a bit pained, and Ginny laughed, kissing his cheek.

"Nothing's ever too late, Scorp," she said firmly. "It's never, ever too late to have the life you want."

At that, he finally permitted a smile.
"Thanks Aunt Ginny," he said, and looked up, catching James' eye. "I'm going to go tell the love of my life that I'll travel the world with him, if he wants."

"That's a good lad," she agreed, and gave him a nudge, smiling as he went. "And I," she murmured to herself, aiming herself at Kingsley, "will similarly start anew."

"Did James ever find you?" Harry asked, his arm slung comfortably around his wife's shoulders. "He seems to be struggling with something."

"He looks cured now," Luna noted, nodding as she watched him approach Scorpius. "He had some wrackspurts earlier, but I'd say they're gone now. He got a job, you know," she added, turning to Harry. "Gringotts hired him as a curse-breaker."

"Really?" Harry asked, surprised. "He never told me."

"He never told me, either," Luna agreed. "But he thinks I don't know about the books Bill's given him over the years, or the fact that Gringotts called me for a reference."

"You?" Harry asked, surprised. "He's James Potter, what sort of reference do they need?"

"Well, that's how I know he got it," she said, laughing, and they watched as their son threw his arms around Scorpius, his fingers coiled tightly in the blond man's robes. "And now, I suspect," she judged, tapping her mouth, "that Scorpius is likely going with him."

"You're so observant," Harry said, though by the look of it, he agreed. "Notice anyone having congress?" he joked.

"I still have my suspicions," Luna permitted, "though I've been advised not to voice them. What about you?" she asked, turning to him. "I saw you spent most of the evening with Esme."

"Yes," Harry said, watching Blaise dance with her on his toes and indulging a smile. "She's sort of wonderful."

"And," Luna noted, "you called Teddy your son tonight."

"I did, didn't I?" Harry asked, watching Theo walk over to offer Teddy his hand, shaking it with an apologetic smile. "I suppose I'm feeling parental." He turned to Luna, considering her. "You wouldn't want another one, would you?"

Her brow furrowed. "Another baby?"

"We could adopt one," Harry suggested. "Maybe one that's Esme's age?"

"That could be nice," Luna permitted. "I think Kreacher misses having children in the house."

"Ah, yes," Harry said, laughing. "Kreacher hasn't had his nails done in ages."

"They're all so grown up," Luna commented, watching Theo and Daphne walk over to Ron and Pansy, laughing at something, as Draco and Hermione joined them, followed by Blaise, Esme, and Ginny. "Don't you think?"

Harry laughed.

"Come on," he said, slipping her hand in his and pulling her towards their friends. "You've done enough observing for the evening, love."
"Did anyone see where Minerva and Lee got off to?" Luna asked innocently, as Daphne and Pansy exchanged conspiratorial glances.

"Not this again," Theo groaned, making room for them in the circle. "Not suspected congress, is it?"

"What's that mean?" Esme asked, and they all laughed.

"Nothing," they told her, and Harry smiled.

All was well.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: coming up soon—a Dramione honeymoon for Sally's birthday, a Harlots AU for Aurora's birthday, and a new series, Sex Diaries. Thanks, as always, for reading!
S.P.E.W.

Pairing: Theomione bromance (Theo x Hermione friendship)

Universe: Goblet of Fire, Year 4 AU

Rating: T for language

Summary: I suggested in an ask on Tumblr that perhaps if Theo and Hermione had been friends while they were at Hogwarts, he might have been a contributing member of S.P.E.W. Then I wrote a little drabble about it for clausumcormeum, to clear my head before returning to my many, many current drafts.

"You coming?" Draco asked.

Theo grimaced, glancing between Draco's two stooges.

What? Draco had protested their first year, feigning ignorance when Theo had asked why Crabbe and Goyle were in their train compartment. They do what they're told.

Didn't realize that was important, Theo commented unhappily, and Draco shrugged.

Is, he said simply.

"Nah," Theo said. "I've got some things to finish up."

Draco frowned.

"You've been finished with Snape's parchment for ages," he said. "What things?"

Crabbe's thick brow rose, expectant.

Theo couldn't decide if he loathed him, or simply wished he were dead.

"Other things," Theo supplied. "See you later."

Draco shrugged. "Bye, then," he said, and turned towards the Great Hall as Theo approached the corridor, deciding at the last second to head to the library.

He turned the corner, aiming for the stairs, when he collided with something—a box, he realized faintly, and behind it, a head of frizzy brown hair.

"Oops," said Hermione Granger, as the contents of the box scattered across the floor.

"Sorry. Evanesco," she murmured, returning what appeared to be a series of brightly-colored badges to the box she'd been carrying. She looked up, seeming like she wanted to say something, but decided against it; her mouth tightened with whatever withheld thing had been on her tongue but she ducked her head, budging around him.
"Hey," Theo said, stopping her to glance into the box. "What's this?"

She sighed. "You'll only laugh," she said, and turned to leave.

Theo frowned.

"Maybe I won't," he said brusquely, stepping after her. "I hardly think I'm that predictable."

She arched a brow.

"I should think you are, actually," she told him, her gaze dropping conspicuously to his Slytherin tie before returning, meeting his eye with irritation. "So why don't you just call me a mudblood and be done with it, then, Nott?"

"Hey," Theo snapped, scowling. "Don't tell me what to do. What's in there?" he demanded, peering into the box. "What's spew?"

Hermione groaned aloud.

"It's S-P-E-W," she enunciated crisply, "and it stands for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare. But I haven't got all day, Nott, so—"

"Elfish welfare?" Theo echoed, puzzled. "Are they unwell?"

"Well—" she trailed off, blinking. "I mean, yes. Obviously."

"Don't patronize me, Granger," Theo scoffed. "If they're unwell, I want to see literature on the subject. I want to see a mission statement," he began. "A manifesto, a series of relevant published works, statistics, if you have them—"

"Right here," she said, and slipped a piece of parchment free from the box's contents, though she looked consummately befuddled as she handed it to him. "I mean, I assume you're mocking me, but —"

"Assume nothing," Theo retorted. "Assumptions are an idiot's endeavor."

She frowned. "You mean a fool's errand?"

He rolled his eyes. "Christ, Granger, contain yourself," he muttered, skimming the manifesto. "So what's this? You want a change in the legal status of house elves?" He looked up. "Not from creature to human, surely?"

"I—" she stared at him. "Well, yes!"

He tilted his head, considering it. "But that would necessitate—what, voting rights?" he asked. "Rights to own property?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Wages, I presume," he murmured to himself, and glanced at her. "Plus health benefits? Holidays?"

"I mean, that's a fundamental—"

"What about childcare?" he asked, and paused. "Do elves even have children?"

She huffed, agitated. "I would assume—"
"Assuming again," he tutted, flipping to the back of the parchment. "Pretty fucking beneath you, Granger."

"What?" she demanded, taken aback, which he ignored.

"This would positively infuriate my father," Theo commented, humming thoughtfully. "I'd be willing to bet my fortune that he'd have a full psychotic break if one of our elves asked for medical coverage."

Hermione sighed, withering slightly at that. "Well, like I said, I didn't think you'd be—"

"Who's involved in this?" Theo cut in loudly. "Potter and Weasley?"

"I haven't actually asked them yet," Hermione said, fidgeting, "but yes, I think, so—"

"I'd hoped not," Theo commented, feeling his expression sour, "as I would think that neither Weasley nor Potter possess the necessary intelligence to comprehend the heading, much less the content. Though, I suppose their involvement would only further unnerve my father," he realized thoughtfully. "So it's not entirely a loss."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What are you—"

"Well, what's our plan?" Theo pressed. "I see a whole lot of ideological word-vomit, Granger," he added, waving the manifesto around, "but hardly any concrete ideas. What are we doing, what are we selling, who are we petitioning—"

"Um," Hermione said, chewing her lip. "I didn't—I wasn't quite—"

"I want competent leadership," Theo informed her. "I require it. Are you a competent leader?"

She stared at him.

"I—" she paused, and then stomped her foot. "Yes, Nott, I am!"

"Well, good, then," Theo ruled, glancing back at the box. "I can have a green one, yeah? Matches my eyes," he explained, gesturing to them. "I like to keep a consistent aesthetic, if you don't mind."

She seemed torn, her brow deeply furrowed.

"It's two sickles to join," she told him dazedly, and he dug into his pocket, feeling around for spare change.

"Here," he said, dropping them in her hand. "Now. What's step one?"

"Recruitment," she suggested, and he made a face.

"No," he said flatly. "I don't know if you know this about me, but I hate people."

She seemed unsurprised.

"I don't really care for them either," she admitted, and he nodded.

"Good. So no recruitment. Something else," he suggested, and for a moment she bit her lip, thinking.

"Well," she said, and looked up. "You can't knit, can you?"
Theo scoffed loudly.
"Granger," he said. "Anything you can do, I can do better."

"Nobody wants to join," Hermione complained, throwing down the box. "Not even Harry and Ron are very helpful."

"Eh, who needs 'em," Theo said, his tongue caught between his teeth as he focused intently on a recalcitrant loop stitch. "No offense, but it's not like they're even that good at their current hobbies."

"What hobbies?" Hermione asked.

"You know," Theo said, shrugging. "Living. Breathing. Existing—"

"You should be nicer to them, you know," she sighed. "There's no reason for you to be such an unbearable prick all the time, Nott."

"Yes, actually, there is," Theo corrected. "And anyway, this isn't about friendship."

"It isn't?" Hermione asked. "Then what's it about?"

Theo sighed, setting down his knitting.

"Elves," he began, and paused. "Sorry, hold that thought. Primarily, it's rebellion against the establishment," he amended, enumerating on his fingers, "then mutiny against my father, then the promotion of chaos by intellectuals against the mindless sheep of damaging, consumer-driven ideologies, plus the eventual overthrow of current institutions—oh, and I'm obviously including the vitriolic opposition to ongoing regimes of prejudice and oppression in that, as well as any natural, entropic inclination towards anarchy—and then elves—"

"Your priorities," Hermione said, pursing her lips. "They're suspect."

"Well, your knitting is lumpy," Theo reminded her. "So we've all got flaws."

"It's not lumpy!" she said, brutally offended. "It's—it's just—"

"It's lumpy," he repeated firmly, picking up the socks he'd been working on. "But it's fine, Granger, you're permitted your shortcomings."

She opened her mouth to argue and then stopped, catching sight of someone behind them.

"Granger," Theo heard Draco drawl, "what are you—"

He stopped.

"Theo?" he ventured, bewildered, and Theo turned.

"Yes?" he asked, innocently, as Draco stared in confusion.

"What," Draco began, "on earth are you doing?"

"I'm clearly knitting, Draco," Theo sniffed, as Draco's pale brow furrowed, aggressively bemused. "You've obviously been spending too much time with Crabbe and Goyle," Theo added slyly, turning back to the table. "It's beginning to affect your capacity for simple deduction."
Across from him, Hermione stifled a giggle. Theo, knowing Draco as he did, assumed the other boy's pale cheeks were burning, and hid a smile of his own.

"What the fuck?" Draco said eventually.

"It's a bit warm right here, isn't it? Full of hot air," Theo announced, smirking. "Come on, Granger," he sniffed to Hermione, flicking his wand for his knitting materials to follow. "These socks aren't going to knit themselves."

She grinned.

"See you, Malfoy," she sang, following Theo out of the library as Draco remained, mouth open, to stare after them in silence.

"So, you're clearly cross with Malfoy," Hermione remarked, handing Theo one of her lumpy hats as they made their way down to the kitchen. "Why?"

"I'm not cross with him, Granger, I'm not a child," Theo retorted. "Besides, it's not like he needs to question me about my activities when he's always off with those buffoonish twits he calls friends, so—"

"Mm, so you're jealous, then," Hermione commented, making her swotty little tsk-ing sound. "I thought you were above that sort of thing, Nott."

"What, above basic human emotion?" Theo echoed, scoffing. "How rude of you, Granger. And anyway, I'm not jealous. I just don't like them," he delivered flatly. "That's all."

"You like Malfoy, though," Hermione noted, toying with her hair. "He's your only other friend, isn't he?"

"Other friend, Granger?" Theo prompted dubiously, glancing at her. "Are you counting yourself among my friends now?"

She paused abruptly, turning to face him.

"What do you think we are?" she asked.


"We're hardly equals," Hermione said, and then she rolled her eyes, rather obnoxiously.

"See this?" Theo asked, gesturing to her. "This is why you're not my friend."

She sighed.

"If you say so," she said, reaching out to tickle the pear.

"You know, if you stare any harder, you'll burn a hole through her," Theo commented, watching Draco follow Hermione's motion across the room.

"I'm not staring at her," Draco said, and then frowned. "Staring at who?"

Theo eyed him skeptically.
"I'm not," Draco insisted, and turned back to the table. "What's this you're knitting now?" he demanded gruffly, changing the subject.

"A jumper," Theo said, holding it up. "To be honest, I think I have a future in elfin fashions. I really nail the angles of the should—"

"Stop," Draco groaned. "You're not actually enjoying this, are you?"

"Of course not," Theo assured him. "I got a howler from my father, though. He got one of our newsletters."

"I didn't know Granger was doing newsletters," Draco muttered. "You'd think she'd know not to send one to your father."

"She isn't," Theo said smartly. "I am."

Draco sighed.

"You know you're just asking for trouble," he remarked, shaking his head.

"Am I?" Theo asked. "Huh. I rather thought I was luring it in, but if all I'm doing is asking, then—"

He stopped as Hermione offered him a small wave across the Great Hall, and Draco, who'd once again been staring, promptly averted his gaze.

"You know," Theo told Draco, waving back to Hermione. "I think she might actually like you if you could just manage to control your more dickish impulses."

"Shut up," Draco muttered, his cheeks flushing violently as he scowled.

"You think Malfoy would join?" Hermione asked, handing a pamphlet to a villager and sighing as they gave her a viciously dirty look. "I think we need more members."

"I don't think he'd provide much," Theo said, lazily waving his wand to stick a few pamphlets to the display outside the Three Broomsticks. "He's not so keen on upsetting his dad. Also, he's hardly any contributing factor for morale, honestly."

Hermione nodded. "Still," she lamented. "He's popular—for whatever inane reason," she muttered under her breath, and Theo nodded his fervent agreement, "so maybe more people would listen to him—"

"Potter's popular," Theo commented, pinning a badge to a tree. "He hasn't had much luck."

"Well, he's not really trying," Hermione sighed. "And anyway, he's got the tournament, so—"

"Ah, right," Theo said. "So he could die any minute, then." She glanced at him, snottily displeased. "What?" he prompted, returning her glare with a scowl. "I mean, rest in peace, obviously, he'll be missed or whatever—"

"Nott," Hermione groaned. "Do you ever wonder if maybe people would like you more if you weren't such a prat all the time?"

"Nope," he said. "Do you wonder if people would like you more if you weren't such a swot all the time, Granger?"
She paused, considering it.

"Yes," she said, almost sadly. "But I'm not sure I can help it."

Theo sighed, kicking himself.

"Eh, fuck 'em. Come on," he said, giving her shoulder a nudge. "Let's try the Hog's Head. Lots of lunatics there."

She smiled weakly.

"Okay," she agreed.

"You do realize that your sheets are changed, your fires lit, your classrooms cleaned, and your food cooked by a group of magical creatures who are unpaid and enslav—"

Theo stopped, groaning.

"Oh my god," he said. "I sound just like her, don't I?"

"Yeah," Daphne agreed, grimacing. "I mean. No offense, but kinda."

He wondered, briefly, when the hell that had happened; but in the end he simply shrugged, deciding it not worth the study.

"Well?" he demanded, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are you in?"

Pansy paused, glancing at Daphne.

"Do you have blue badges?" she asked. "Like, a pretty blue," she added. "Something feminine, you know?"

"Teal," Daphne suggested, nodding her agreement. "Do you have teal?"

Theo, to his utter disbelief, felt himself crack a smile.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, we do."

"I can't believe it," Hermione whispered, staring out at the classroom. A dozen or so heads lounged in the chairs, waiting expectantly for the meeting to start. "How did you manage this?"

Theo looked up, catching sight of Draco as he slunk quietly into the corner.

Notably, he was absent two bullies, which Theo made a mental note to politely not comment on later.

"Magic, Granger," Theo replied briskly, and turned. "Now, are you going to start this fucking meeting or what?"

She took a deep breath, preparing herself, and shifted to face the others.

"Hello," she began. "As most of you know, I'm Hermione Granger, president of this organization, and this is Theo Nott, vice president. And this—" she paused, glancing around the room before landing on Theo with a smile. "This is S.P.E.W."
a/n: Special thanks to Sally for the rush edit before I wandered out the door. Hope you like it, clausumcorneum! More stories coming this weekend.
Vive le Tour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vive Le Tour

Pairing: Mulcibery (Darian Mulciber x Caleb Avery), background Nottpott (Theo Nott x Harry Potter)

Universe: Muggle AU, time is a construct

Rating: M for language, sex

Summary: Darian Mulciber has won the Tour de France for the last five years as the lead for Team Slytherin, along with rising sprinting star Theo Nott. Little does anyone know, though, that Mulciber and his nemesis Caleb Avery have quite a complicated history—and right from the start, both Tour contenders know that it's going to be a long, long ride to Paris.

(Mr Blake is a professional cyclist, so I couldn't resist this AU; this isn't his genre of racing, but come on, who doesn't love the Tour? … okay, most people, true, but even if you don't, there's at least Luna and Lee to look forward to.)

STAGE ONE:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for tuning into this year's Tour de France broadcast, hosted by myself, Lee Jordan, and my colleague, Luna Lovegood."

Luna: "Hello, muggles!

Lee: "I can't promise that's not an offensive term, but I can promise that we've got a great first stage for you today! As you can see, wearing the number one in the green-and-silver jersey of Team Slytherin is Darian Mulciber, the returning champion of last year's coveted yellow jersey. What can we expect from him this year, Luna?"

Luna: "Madness!"

Lee: "Yes, of course, always! And nearby with Team TMR—bearing the initials of billionaire owner Tom Marvolo Riddle—is Caleb Avery, a new favorite this year! He won big last year in the Classics, dominating both Paris-Nice and Paris-Roubaix, but has not been present in the Tour since he was previously Darian Mulciber's domestique on Team Slytherin. Care to explain to the audience what a domestique is, Luna?"

Luna: "Like a house elf for bikes!"

Lee: "Yes, quite right, a domestique is a rider who works for the benefit of his team and leader, rather than trying to win the race himself. The fact is, of course, that quite a lot of energy can be saved by riding in the slipstream, and Caleb Avery was Darian Mulciber's favorite super-domestique for, what, about four years?"
Luna: "Wrackspurts!"

Lee: "I agree, it's definitely going to be something to watch as Mulciber and Avery face off in cycling's most prominent venue for the first time since Avery joined Team TMR. And how about our sprinters? Team Slytherin is positively stacked this year with both yellow jersey contender Mulciber and sprinter Theo Nott, who won four stages at this year's Giro d'Italia and seems to be coming into his own. No telling, of course, whether Nott will be a match for Harry Potter of Phoenix-Hogwarts, who snatched up the green jersey last year for the points competition in the Tour, but only time will tell. I, for one, predict that it will be a close race indeed by the time they cross that finish line in Paris."

Luna: "The sexual tension is palpable!"

Lee: "Ah, Luna. Luna, Luna, Luna. You just say the damndest things."

oOo

He hasn't spoken to me yet. Sure, he's surrounded by his team and I'm surrounded by mine and there's not exactly what I'd call privacy, but still. There's a certain amount of respect reserved for the previous yellow jersey winner, and it's just like him to completely disregard every facet of cycling etiquette.

He was always fond of chaos, really. Not like me. I like order, regularity, strategy. Not to say I won't attack when the time is right—unlike fucking Karkaroff, who's always playing it safe, the little shit—but I was always a little more rigid than he was. Caleb was fucking transcendent on a bike and that's what I loved most, I think. Sure, his power output was off the charts, and he had quads like a fucking horse—but man, did he look like he was having fun. Even after he inevitably got dropped and I kept going, he always had that smile on his face. That look of satisfaction. I loved to win—loved how I felt in yellow—but Caleb loved to bike.

No wonder I fell in love with him.

oOo

Three Years Ago

"Personal best," Caleb announced, grinning, as he came out of the hotel room's bathroom, brushing his teeth and checking the stats from his power meter. "Maybe," he began, spitting into the sink, "I should just fuck off as your domestique and become a sprinter for myself."

"Keep dreaming, Avery," Darian said from his twin bed, rolling his eyes. "One stage win does not a sprinter make."

"You're just jealous that I'm in yellow to start the race," Caleb said, running his hand through his damp curls and falling into the bed at the other end of the room with a laugh. "Not to worry, Mulciber," he assured him, closing his eyes. "You'll put me to shame in the time trials."

"I know I will," Darian agreed, trying not to let his gaze linger as Caleb shifted on the bed, the towel around his waist slipping to reveal the muscle of his upper thigh. "Not to mention that you can't climb for shit, Avery."

Caleb grinned, his eyes fluttering open as he shifted upright.

"You don't have to pretend, you know," he commented, and Darian swallowed, glancing at him.
"What?" he asked neutrally.

Caleb's tongue slid out from between his lips, passing over them and accommodating another golden smile.

"I know you think I'm a cycling god," Caleb joked, slipping under the covers and tossing the towel aside.

Darian watched it fall.

Imagined him, bare under the sheets, and swallowed.

"Keep dreaming, Avery," he forced out again, compelling himself to sleep.

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**STAGE TWO:**

*Individual Time Trials*

*Audio Broadcast*

**Lee:** "Well, the individual time trials are without a doubt *ultra*-competitive among these teams, and what a way to start! In the time trials, each individual competes *alone* for a timed race—which means what, Luna?"

**Luna:** "Mayhem!"

**Lee:** "Yes, exactly, mayhem, and *also* it means that it requires a separate set of skills from, say, the mountain stages. Now, seeing as Team Slytherin's Thorfinn Rowle managed to scrape out a win yesterday, should we expect total domination from the boys in green-and-silver? Presumably team leader Darian Mulciber will not be reaching *quite* so early to clinch the yellow jersey, but do we suspect it sparks up old rivalries, noting that one of his domestiques once again clinches a first stage win in the Tour de France?"

**Luna:** "I hope so!"

**Lee:** "Well, hope springs eternal in Dusseldorf today, Luna, especially for Team TMR, who came out hoping for a win. Do we think Caleb Avery can best Darian Mulciber for the best time trial of the day?"

**Luna:** "When is a door not a door?"

**Lee:** "When it's ajar! Well said, Luna. Well said indeed."

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*I absolutely loathe time trials.*

Sure, cycling is an individual sport, but I've never actually enjoyed doing it by myself. So little of it is spent alone, really. Training is done in groups—in pairs, at least—and I rarely do anything by myself; not like Darian. Maybe that's what made him such a better cyclist. He likes the solitude of winning: I always watched the focus on his face when he took the lead, leaving everyone else in his dust. He's most comfortable on his own. Critics mock him for the way he's always looking down, the way he never takes his eyes off his own bike, but that's the winner in him. The victor. Darian Mulciber is riding entirely for Darian Mulciber, and there could be an attack from a rider or a herd of storming buffaloes and Darian Mulciber will still find a way to win, because he is never
distracted. Never deterred.

I hate time trials. There's nobody here but me.

I wonder if that's how Darian feels now that I'm gone.

oOo

Three Years Ago

"Practically threw that yellow jersey out the window, didn't you?" Darian asked, shaking his head as Caleb fell on the duvet with a groan. "Maybe stay a domestique for a while, or go back to your sprinting dreams—"

"Can you not mock me right now, Mulciber?" Caleb retorted, scowling. "Better watch it, or I won't ride into the wind for you tomorrow."

"You will," Darian said, arching a brow. "You always do."

"Maybe I won't," Caleb shot back. "I mean, if you're going to be so helplessly smarmy about it, then I don't see why I should."

"Aside from the paycheck?" Darian asked, and Caleb shrugged. "Is there some other reward you're working for?"

Caleb looked up, eyeing the muscle of Darian's chest. He was surprisingly muscular for a cyclist, Caleb thought, but appealingly so. Even with the strident, violently oppressive suntan on his arms and legs, Darian's musculature had a certain intriguing appeal.

"Maybe there is," Caleb murmured.

Darian didn't notice.

STAGE THREE:
Medium Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Well, I think we're all still recovering from yesterday's surprise as Caleb Avery, a notoriously weak time trialist, managed to snatch the yellow jersey out from under Team Slytherin with an impressive first place finish, edging out Darian Mulciber for the stage win by less than half a second, my word, and—OH MY, LOOK AT THAT! THERE'S BEEN A CRASH TEN METERS FROM THE FINISH!"

Luna: "Somebody check for dementors!"

Lee: "It appears that Theo Nott on Team Slytherin attempted to muscle his way past Potter from Phoenix-Hogwarts, only to be met with Potter's elbow! My word, that's quite a finish to today's stage! A questionable one, for sure—and it looks like Caleb Avery holds onto his early yellow jersey lead, but will it last?"

Luna: "Nothing yellow can stay!"

Lee: "I agree wholeheartedly, Luna. It seems Mulciber and Team Slytherin have their work cut out for them on this one!"
"Hey, you fucker," Theo snarled, grabbing Harry's shoulder and dragging him back. "What the fuck was that? You could have killed us both—"

"It's a race, Nott," Harry replied, sounding bored. "It's the fucking Tour, and you didn't have the lane."

"Like hell I didn't!" Theo shouted, giving him a shove. "You know the rules, Potter, you know I could have you dismissed from the race if I request race analysis," he threw out wildly, "just on the basis of fucking safety—"

"Do it, then," Harry said, shrugging. "Go ahead."

Theo gaped at him. "You can't be serious."

"You're the one who's not serious," Harry returned, arching a brow. "You get rid of me, Nott, and you've got no one worth racing. Are you really telling me you'd take your win by default?"

"I will if you're going to fucking cheat!" Theo snarled, clenching a fist.

Harry shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I didn't cheat," he said flatly, and turned. "Suck my dick, Nott," he tossed over his shoulder, and Theo scowled.

"LICK MY BALLS, POTTER!" he shouted, and then he, too, turned in the opposite direction, stomping away from the other man and throwing his helmet into the team car.

Caleb's tense today. I can see it on his face. Wearing the yellow jersey makes him a target for the entire field, and he's never much enjoyed that. I doubt he's enjoying it now. Sure, he managed to hold onto his win, but it won't be long. I know him. He'll break in the mountains.

I will break him in the mountains.

He still wears his curls long. When he takes off his helmet they're matted close to his head from sweat and he rakes his hand through them.

I wonder if he thinks about my hands.

STAGE FOUR:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Things are quiet in the peloton today. Do you think the main field is tired, Luna?"

Luna: "Goodnight, moon!"

Lee: "There's still much left in the tour, but at least we'll h- OH MY, AND LOOK AT THIS! THERE'S BEEN ANOTHER ATTACK!"

Luna: "Holy nargles!"
Lee: "Darian Mulciber and Thorfinn Rowle have broken away from the peloton, and—OH, AND IT LOOKS LIKE CALEB AVERY IS FOLLOWING! AVERY IS FOLLOWING WITH ROOKWOOD! My, oh my, this is an exciting stage, never a dull moment during the Tour, and—OH MY, AVERY HAS A TECHNICAL! HE'S SIGNALING FOR THE TEAM CAR! Avery needs help and Mulciber is not slowing down, he and Rowle are going for it!"

Luna: "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!"

Lee: "It looks like Avery's about to lose his yellow jersey!"

oOo

"My tire blew," Caleb shouted into his radio. "Get me Dolohov's bike now, or I'm going to fucking lose this to Mulciber—"

"It's only the fourth stage," Tom replied coolly, his voice low in Caleb's earpiece. "You'll get it back. Just wait for the team car."

"This is Darian Mulciber we're talking about," Caleb yelled, growling aloud as the last of the peloton's riders whizzed past him. "We don't have the luxury of giving him even a second's advantage!"

"Rookwood, stay on Mulciber," Tom said. "Keep him out of a stage win."

"On it," Augustus agreed over the mic, and Caleb let out a primally urgent shout, slamming a fist into the window of the team car as he dragged behind the fray.

oOo

I hate losing to him.

More than that, though, I hate seeing Rowle in my place.

STAGE FIVE:
Medium Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Alright, well, this is shaping up to be a rather exciting day for the climbers! Who do we think is looking good for a polka dot jersey, Luna?"

Luna: "Godric Gryffindor!"

Lee: "Ah, Luna. What funny things live in that enigmatic little head of yours. And what do we have to say about the ongoing battle between Caleb Avery and Darian Mulciber? It appeared there was some sort of interaction between them for a moment when Avery decided to attack yellow jersey Mulciber on the climb—rather unorthodox, wouldn't you say?"

Luna: "The unorthest of doxies!"

Lee: "Meanwhile, Potter and Nott are holding on at the back of the peloton, but with tomorrow's sprint stage, who knows what their rivalry has in store? Never a dull day at the Tour de France!"

Luna: "Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure!"
Lee: "Never a truer word!"

oOo

"What the fuck?" Darian hissed as he climbed down from the podium, catching sight of Caleb and dragging him behind one of the trailers. "You're really going to attack on a climb, Avery? Have you lost your mind?"

"Oh, fuck off," Caleb said, snatching his arm from Darian's grip. "I'm not the same cyclist I was when I trained with you. Don't make the mistake of underestimating me," he warned, which Darian did not take particularly well.

"Don't act like that's what this is about," he said grimly, and Caleb's mouth tightened.

"What's it about, then, Darian?" he prompted, crossing his arms expectantly.

At that, Darian stared at him, blinking, and abruptly realized with a dissatisfied lurch that this was the first time they had spoken in three years.

"You don't get to walk away from my team—from me," Darian stammered furiously, "and then come back here just to disrespect the yellow jersey—"

"You and that jersey aren't the fucking same, Darian," Caleb snapped, cutting him off. "You attacked me first, in case you forgot, and just because you have it now—" he trailed off, the muscle clenching around his jaw, and shook his head, deciding something for himself. "And anyway," he added, his teeth slicing against his lip, "I didn't fucking walk away from you."

Darian swallowed a mouthful of rage.

"You look shit in that jersey," he said, and then he pivoted away, not looking back.

oOo

Three Years Ago

"Can you get this knot out?" Caleb complained, reaching for his left shoulder. "I called for a trainer but I don't know, Dippet's being a little shit—"

"Yeah, fine," Darian said, sitting up and gesturing for Caleb to sit on the floor. Caleb let out a sigh of relief, settling himself between Darian's legs and leaning back against the mattress as Darian worked the knuckles of his fist into Caleb's shoulder.

"Ouch," Caleb hissed, inhaling sharply. "Fuck, can't you be gentle?"

"Nope," Darian said, and replaced his hand with his elbow, pushing down hard. "Hold still," Darian instructed, his free hand holding Caleb in place as he slowly rotated his elbow. "I said hold still," he repeated, as Caleb squirmed under the pressure, letting out a grunt of pain. "I need this gone if you're going to be any use to me tomorrow."

"So fucking selfish," Caleb forced out, his eyes watering. "This hurts, Darian—"


He paused, waiting, and Caleb took a deep breath in; then let it out, shakily, before Darian slowly removed the pressure from his shoulder.
"How's that?" he asked, watching Caleb roll his neck out; first to the right, then back, looking up at Darian as the light from the hotel bathroom illuminated the curve of his throat.

"You," Caleb said, licking his lips, "are a fucking arsehole."

Darian shrugged, trying not to focus on Caleb's head against the inside of his thigh.

"Yeah," he agreed. "But it's better now, right?"

Caleb's hand slid up from the floor, rising up the outside of Darian's ankle. Darian jumped, startled, and Caleb laughed, his thumb working into the muscle of his calf.

"I'm going to get you back for that," Caleb warned, and Darian held his breath as Caleb slowly drew his hand up further, trailing the length of the muscle. "How are the quads?" Caleb asked neutrally, and Darian, speechless, merely nodded.

Caleb turned, resting his hands on Darian's legs and then shifting, pressing his lips to the curve of Darian's thigh. Darian shakily let out a breath, and Caleb's blue eyes met his, expectant.

"We should go to sleep," Darian said hurriedly. "Sprint stage tomorrow." He shoved himself back on the bed, scrambling away. "Goodnight," he said, throwing himself under the duvet and shivering, forcing his eyes shut, until eventually Caleb stood to turn off the light.

"Goodnight," Caleb murmured, extinguishing it.

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**STAGE SIX:**

Flat Stage

*Audio Broadcast*

Lee: "Darian Mulciber is looking focused this morning; he's known for rarely looking up from his bike, of course, but there seems an extra level of intensity to him today! This is, of course, a sprinter stage—lots of points to be had for the green jersey, so Team Slytherin is divided in its goals. Do you agree, Luna?"

Luna: "Are thestrals winged?"

Lee: "No idea! In any case, Theo Nott might require some help from his team, but knowing his aggressive style, most of Team Slytherin will be dedicated to keeping Mulciber on track with the yellow jersey. Meanwhile, Team TMR will be looking to advance Avery's position as much as possible before the mountain stages—OH, AND IT LOOKS LIKE POTTER'S TAKEN OFF! POTTER HAS BROKEN AWAY FROM THE PELOTON WITH NEARLY 30 KILOMETERS TO THE FINISH!"

Luna: "Like a stag in the night!"

Lee: "If Potter takes this all the way—OH AND LOOK, NOTT'S JOINED HIM IN THE BREAKAWAY! He's not going to let Potter take all the glory today!"

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"Okay, fuck you," Theo panted, catching up to Harry and flipping him off as they rode, at breakneck pace, along the French country roads. "You could have waited, but no, you had to break off THIRTY KILOMETERS in advance—"
"You're going to tire yourself out," Harry warned him. "You can't keep this pace up this long."

"Like hell I can't!" Theo snarled, unzipping the top of his speedsuit and glaring askance at Harry. "If you can do it, Potter, I'm fucking doing it too."

"You realize this is catastrophically unwise," Harry warned, and Theo glared at him.

"Do you want to do this alone," Theo snapped, "or do you want an actual sprint at the finish?"

Harry paused, tossing his water bottle aside and then leading into the wind, turning over his shoulder.

"Switch in 5k," he yelled.

"Fuck you," Theo returned, which Harry took for agreement.

Once, before everything happened—at the beginning of our careers when Caleb and I attacked early in the Tour. Too early, as many people said, too risky for a couple of inexperienced cyclists, and the voices in our radios kept telling us to hang back—that there was no way we were going to take it from the French champion, the favorite. It didn't matter. I felt good and strong and powerful and Caleb was by my side, and so we took the stage and we took the race and we took what was ours, and I loved him then. I didn't know it was love. I didn't know any better. We were young and unaccustomed to winning and still learning to fly, and all we knew was that we could trust each other. He knew the feel of me on his wheel like the back of his hand; I knew that when it was time to claim victory, I would always look for him. Even with the champagne and the attention and the kisses from the girls and the photographs and the thrill of slipping on that yellow jersey for the first time—the unmistakable euphoria of learning that the sweetest of victories took the form of garishly colored spandex—it was Caleb I looked for in the crowd.

I loved him then, I know it.

I just didn't know it at the time.

STAGE SEVEN:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Harry Potter is, of course, a favorite for the day, a notably eccentric rider who thrills audiences with his aggressive finishes. He's far more than a sprinter—the man can certainly climb—but it is a beautiful thing to watch him in action. What do you think, Luna?"

Luna: "OTP!"

Lee: "Yes, of course, and there's no forgetting about Theo Nott, who's ridden beautifully these past few stages. He seems to have a fire lit under him—"

Luna: "A goblet of fire!"

Lee: "—indeed, and it is remarkable how fast the first week's stages have been with him vying with Potter for the lead in the points competition."
"We're going to have to take him soon," Augustus commented, jutting his chin up to reference where Darian was surrounded by the green jerseys of Team Slytherin. "If he holds onto the yellow going into the Alps, we might be fucked."

"Speak for yourself, Rookwood," Caleb said gruffly, though he knew the other man was right; Darian had always been a better climber. A better bike-handler. He could descend better than Caleb ever could—not to mention that Caleb, having been without a good enough team the past few Tours, was out of practice with the altitude of the Alps.

Still, though, he persisted with the pretense. "We're fine," Caleb muttered, though Augustus remained skeptical. "Just be ready to attack."

"You're going to have to do that soon," Augustus reminded him. "Nott's going to want the sprint win, which means Team Slytherin is split—"

"This isn't my first day, Rookwood!" Caleb spat, and Augustus shrugged.

"Just seems like you're not really here to play," Augustus remarked. "You were Mulciber's domestique, weren't you?" he asked, though he clearly knew the answer. "Seems like you should know his weaknesses better."

Caleb grimaced.

"I know his weaknesses just fine," he muttered, staring at the curve of Darian's spine.

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Three Years Ago

Darian was lying on his stomach when Caleb came in; the trainer had just been there, probably working on his glutes. Maybe his hip flexors. Darian always had some immobility in his hips; went stiff easily.

Caleb cleared his throat, forcing the thought from his mind.

"Hey," he said, falling beside Darian on the twin bed, nudging him over. "Hungry?"

Darian shook his head.

"I'm good," he muttered, turning to squint up at Caleb. "You're energized," he commented.

"Haven't hit the mountains yet," Caleb said, shrugging. "We're still in my sweet spot. Besides," he added casually, lying down on his side, "what's not to be energized about? It's seven stages in and you've already got the yellow locked down."

"Not yet," Darian muttered. He was sort of superstitious; always worried about jinxing things. Never enjoyed the promise of a good thing until it was firmly in his grasp. "I could still die tomorrow."

"So true," Caleb agreed, and before he could stop himself, he had reached out, tracing circles on the bare skin between Darian's shoulder blades.

He felt Darian inhale sharply.
He waited, but it seemed Darian was holding his breath.

"What are you doing?" Darian asked, his voice muffled into the duvet.

Caleb, rather than answer, shifted on the bed, dragging himself closer to Darian. He waited, but when Darian didn't move, he bent his head, brushing his lips against the top of Darian's spine. Darian shuddered, but didn't pull away.

Caleb, emboldened, rolled onto his hands and knees, positioning himself over Darian's back and moving without hesitation, placing his knees on either side of Darian's hips. He dragged his lips down carefully, pausing on each notch of Darian's vertebrae and slowly, slowly working his way down until his fingers were digging into Darian's waist, his throat going perilously dry as he kissed the skin of Darian's back.

The hand on Darian's waist slipped under, loosening the towel around his waist, and then Darian seemed to wake from a trance, slapping Caleb's hand away and twisting around, his arm outstretched against Caleb's chest.

"What are you doing?" he asked again, his dark eyes wide and panicked.

"Nothing," Caleb said, brushing a curl from his forehead and praying he looked normal—or at least didn't look as shattered as he felt.

"Don't," Darian muttered uneasily, not looking at him. "I'm not—I can't—"

"Don't die tomorrow," Caleb said quietly. Darian blinked, once, and then nodded.

"Fine," he said, and let his head fall back, closing his eyes with a sigh.

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STAGE EIGHT:
Medium Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Well, yesterday's surprise upset—Avery taking the yellow jersey from right beneath Mulciber's nose, attacking with a surprising vigor on a flat stage, of all things—obviously we have a lot to watch here in the early mountain stages. What would you say is the trickiest thing about this climb, Luna?"

Luna: "Werewolves!"

Lee: "So true, not to mention a high risk of technicals due to the rain today—always a risk of blowing a tire when weather is a factor! I daresay we have a few soggy cyclists on our hands today, and they do not look happy."

oOo

I hate rain.

I hate rain because it invades me. Pounds on my back, stabs at my eyes, soaks through my skinsuit and settles uncomfortably as I slip all over the narrow seat of my bike. Nobody likes rain, but I handle it badly. There's nothing fun about it. I get moody and all of my frustrations—the discomfort of spending hours and hours hunched over the handles of my road bike—seem so much worse when I'm soaked through, shaking, my fingers slipping all over my handlebar tape.
I hate rain because Caleb doesn't mind it. He would always come back from a ride in the rain laughing, whipping those curls around and shaking off like a dog, pawing at my face and taunting me for my surly misery. Cheer up, he'd say, and I wouldn't, because I hate rain, because I hate what it does to me, how it makes me feel.

I hate rain because of Caleb.

oOo

Maybe it was coincidence.

That seemed unlikely.

Whatever reason there'd been for it, Caleb's appearance on Darian's right had made him uncomfortable, and there wasn't a convenient escape. There was no reason to attack; not in the rain, not when the peloton would essentially all get the same time, not when there was no tangible victory to be won. Darian wanted to pull away—far away—but he didn't.

"Do you remember?" Caleb asked as Darian removed his glasses, wiping the beads of precipitation from the lids of his eyes.

He fought to suppress a shiver at the memory.

How could he forget?

"Remember what?" Darian lied gruffly, and Caleb said nothing.

He only bent his head, watching the revolution of his front wheel, and licked the falling droplets from his lips.

STAGE NINE:
High Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Rain continues today high in the mountains, making for a difficult descent. Mulciber's playing it safe for the most part, hasn't been challenging Avery yet—probably a smart decision, given how much is left of the race and how perilous this particular climb will be. I'm sure Team Slytherin will be gearing up to take the leader's jersey back soon, though, don't you think, Luna?"

Luna: "Cycling is fun, but have you ever seen quidditch?"

Lee: "Is that something Team Slytherin excels in as well?"

Luna: "Oh, Lee. You just never have any idea what you're talking about."

oOo

Darian's tired. I can see it in the way he dismounts his bike, the way he grips the seat of it and bends his head, exhausted. He looks frustrated. He looks discouraged. He looks fine in green and silver but I know he looks better in yellow. He knows it, too.

And then, cruelly, I remember that he looks best in nothing at all.

oOo
"Come on," Caleb groaned, banging on the doors and shivering. "I get that you're the yellow jersey and all, but I'm fucking freezing out here—"

"Fine," Darian said, yanking the door open and shaking his head as Caleb darted in, luxuriating in the heat from Darian's shower. "Fucking rain," he muttered, the towel wrapped around his waist as he slicked his wet hair back, picking up his toothbrush.

"Are you really going to brush your teeth right now?" Caleb asked, shaking his head as Darian slid some toothpaste onto his toothbrush. "I need to shower, you dickhead."

"Then shower," Darian told him, rolling his eyes as he started brushing. Molars first, Caleb knew, and a slow, meticulous process around to his canines. "Not like I haven't seen your dick before."

"Well, then you asked for it," Caleb said, bending to remove his kit. The spandex stuck to his thighs and he struggled, peeling the fabric from his right leg first, and then his left.

When he looked up again, Darian had paused, watching, but the moment Caleb looked up, Darian directed his attention to the ceiling. He continued to brush his teeth, pretending not to have been caught, and then he spat into the sink, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before looking up, locking eyes with Caleb.

His brow furrowed. "What?"

Caleb took two long strides to close the distance between them, pausing in front of Darian and then taking the toothbrush from his hand, dropping it into the glass beside the hotel sink.

"Don't move," he said, and Darian didn't.

And then Caleb placed his hands lightly on Darian's hips, backing him against the bathroom wall. Darian's eyes widened, startled, but Caleb didn't give him time to think; he raised one hand to Darian's face and kissed him. Not too forceful; not too soft. Enough for Darian to know it wasn't a mistake. Enough for Darian to know what he wanted.

Caleb knew his hands were cold on Darian's heated skin and he felt the thrill of temperature clashing and fear and curiosity as it coursed through him, radiating between them both. Caleb slid his tongue between Darian's lips, licking the taste of spearmint toothpaste from them, and Darian's tightly clenched jaw finally parted, his hands falling to Caleb's chest.

Then Caleb made a mistake. He slid his hand down from Darian's hip, nudging the towel to the floor, and then there was nothing between them.

"We can't," Darian said, shoving Caleb away without warning. "Stop."

Caleb took a step back, dizzied.

"Okay," he said, and then, like he were in some kind of horrific dream, he got in the shower, turning the heat all the way up and scrubbing himself raw.

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**STAGE TEN:**

Flat Stage

*Audio Broadcast*
Lee: "Well, it looks like this stage is going to come down to the sprint between Theo Nott from Team Slytherin and Viktor Krum from Team Durmstrang—Krum, of course, being himself quite a threat, although quite heavy for a sprinter, and so often dropped during the mountain stages; but with about 200 meters to go I would say that they both have a chance of—OH, OH MY WORD, POTTER HAS TAKEN OFF!"

Luna: "Harry Potter!"

Lee: "Harry Potter of Phoenix-Hogwarts has taken off and with only meters to go he is edging out both Krum and Nott—Nott is furious, look at his face, he's pushing as hard as he can but he's worked too hard against Krum—he's got nothing left, and it looks like—POTTER HAS IT! LOOK AT THAT PHOTO FINISH! POTTER TAKES THE STAGE!"

oOo

"You fucking did that on purpose!" Theo growled, chasing after Harry as he stepped down from the podium, tossing the pointless bouquet aside and rubbing at the back of his neck with a towel. "I'm talking to you, motherfucker—"

"Are you accusing me of biding my time to let you and Krum tire each other out?" Harry asked, not turning around. "Because if so, then no. I didn't do it on purpose," he suggested drily, "it just worked out."

"God, you're annoying," Theo snapped, reaching him and giving him a shove. "You're not going to keep the green jersey, you know. I'm coming for you, Potter."

"So you keep saying," Harry reminded him. "Let me know how that works out for you, Nott."

"Krum's not a threat," Theo said brusquely, brandishing a finger in Harry's face. "I'm a threat."

"I know," Harry replied, giving him a sparing once-over. "Just not much of one yet," he said with a shrug, turning to walk away.

Theo gaped after him, speechless, and then let out an incoherent growl.

"Fuck you!" he shouted, after a ridiculous delay.

Harry turned, blowing an irreverent kiss over his shoulder and climbing onto his team's bus.

oOo

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STAGE ELEVEN:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Team Slytherin has done an excellent job so far of placing themselves at the front of the
peloton while Team TMR seems to be protecting their yellow jersey rider, Caleb Avery. How do you think Avery is feeling right now, Luna?"

Luna: "Hungry!"

Lee: "Yes, so true, hungry for the win, I'm sure, which would be a first for both Avery and his team, Team TMR. We spoke to owner Tom Riddle this morning and he seems quite certain his team is going to manage a win; says he's not even worried about Team Slytherin! What do you think about that, Luna?"

Luna: "I hope he's got lots of horcruxes!"

Lee: "Which are?"

Luna: "A means to cheat death!"

Lee: "Well, cheat death when you can, but never cheat in cycling, as I always say! In any case, it has been a pleasure to watch Team TMR, and best of luck to them as they continue to vie against a very, very competitive field."

"There's a split ahead," Tom said in Caleb's ear, speaking into the team radio. "Take whichever line Mulciber takes."

"You're assuming nobody decides to attack from Team Slytherin," Caleb muttered back, and he heard Tom scoff.

"I'm not assuming," Tom said. "They're playing it safe right now. They're not going to chance attacking and even if they do, it'll be Mulciber who does it, so stay in Mulciber's lane."

"Could be Rowle," Caleb said, glancing at him. "Looks hungry for a stage win."

"No," Tom said, his voice clipped. "Their resources are split between Mulciber and Nott and they already lost a domestique in the peloton crash yesterday. Just stay with him," he snapped venomously. "Is that too difficult, Avery?"

Caleb's mouth tightened.

"Well?" Tom drawled.

"Fine," Caleb said tartly. "I'll stay with Mulciber."

"I can't be this close to him."

This isn't a distance I'm accustomed to. I used to be his teammate. We were inseparable. We stayed in the same hotel rooms, worked with the same trainers, stayed on the same schedule and used the same training plans. I'm used to being attached to his hip—or else miles away, years apart, keeping my distance.

Darian does this thing when he rides; he takes a moment to center himself. Like meditation, almost. It's like there's magic in the burning of his muscles and he takes a second to feel it, to savor it, to luxuriate in the pain and turn it into something better. Something bigger. I don't feel like a winner
when I'm near him; I feel like a fraud. An imposter. I feel pain and it's just pain, and that's that. Darian feels pain and turns it into power.

He bends his head, doing that centering thing, and I can't be this close to him.

I watch the line of his neck and remember how it feels under my tongue.

I can't be this close to him.

_____________________

**STAGE TWELVE:**
High Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "And here we are, just getting into the mountain stages! This is of course brutal, especially for our sprinters, who just have to hang on through the difficult climbs. But, of course, this is bound to be interesting for our yellow jersey contenders; Avery still in the lead, with Team Slytherin's Darian Mulciber only seconds behind. In a mountain stage like this one, that could mean one strong attack, or Avery could just as easily lose it with a poor choice, or worse, a technical mistake in the mountains."

Luna: "Or even worse, a basilisk!"

Lee: "Basilisks, flat tires. Equally nightmarish!"

oOo

"Hey," Harry said, sidling up to Theo, who scowled.

"What are you doing?" Theo demanded. "I don't want to talk to you."

"Fine," Harry said, and moved to speed up before Theo shot a hand out, growling, as he yanked him back by the pocket of his skinsuit.

"Stop," Theo muttered. "Just—don't say anything."

"Nice weather," Harry commented. Theo groaned.

"I said *don't say anyth-""

"I hate climbs," Harry interrupted, shaking his head. "I hate being inhumanly fast one day and then being relegated to the back of the pack another. I know I'm supposed to call this a rest, or something," he said, as Theo rolled his eyes, slaving away up the climb, "but I hate it."

"I hate you," Theo reminded him.

"Yeah," Harry said, glancing at him. "Right, well. I hate climbs, snakes, and you."

"Snakes?" Theo asked, gesturing to the one on his jersey. "Seriously?"

Harry shrugged.

"No legs," he explained. "Can't bike. Stupid choice," he added, "for a bike team."

"Phoenixes can't fucking bike," Theo reminded him.
Harry shrugged again.

"Nice weather," he commented.

Theo reached up, wiping sweat as it trickled into his eyes.

"Yeah," he conceded. "Yeah. It is."

---

**STAGE THIRTEEN: High Mountain Stage Audio Broadcast**

Lee: "It's another day in the mountains, and judging by the motion within Team Slytherin's formation, it looks like they're getting ready for an attack, and—OH, THERE THEY GO! Rowle and Mulciber take the lead on the attack, pushing past Avery, and will he be able to follow?"

Luna: "And will there by any Snorkack sightings?"

Lee: "Impossible to say, and equally impossible is the chance that Avery will catch Mulciber! Team Slytherin positioned themselves perfectly to block Team TMR into the peloton, and it looks like Rowle and Mulciber will take the breakaway to the finish! Darian Mulciber is going to take the yellow jersey back from Caleb Avery, and from the looks of it, there's not a thing Team TMR can do to stop him!"

---

**oOo**

*I knew this would happen. Caleb can never focus in the mountains. The climbs are strenuous and he needs someone to keep him on track. To make him keep pushing. I've seen him talk to Rookwood and I know they're both bored; they're not paying attention. Caleb's discipline has always been lacking, and he won't catch me on a climb. Certainly won't catch me on a descent.*

*I knew this would happen. Mountain stages are Caleb's weakness.*

*Mountain stages, and me.*

---

**oOo**

*Three Years Ago*

Darian turned off the shower, listening, but he heard no sign of Caleb's entry. Instead he stood for a while, letting the drops slide down the contours of his shoulders and arms and torso, and thought about Caleb's kiss. It had come out of nowhere.

It *had* come out of nowhere—hadn't it?

Sure, there had been the touches—the kisses on his backs and legs, if you wanted to call them that, though Darian decidedly didn't—but those were easy to laugh off. To ignore. They spent all day on the bike; they lost their minds off of them, it seemed.

The kiss, though. That was different. Caleb's tongue in his mouth was *different*, and—

Darian shut his eyes.

He heard the hotel room door open, then, and knew Caleb was in the room. On the other side of
the bathroom door. Probably taking off his skinsuit, peeling it off slowly, reaching for the knot on his shoulder. Probably closing his eyes while he massaged it, basking in the pain.

Then Darian pictured Caleb falling onto his bed, laying on his back. Pictured him bare on the duvet, limbs spread out, worn out and exhausted from the day's impossible climb. Pictured his curls splayed across the white pillow case. Pictured the way his tongue slid across his lips.

Darian lowered his hand, sliding it against his abdomen and down to his throbbing cock.

He'd wanted to come quickly, to get it over with—to never admit to anyone what he'd been doing and pretending he could forget he'd ever done it—but that wasn't to be.

"Darian?" Caleb asked, and opened the door, catching sight of Darian with his hand on his dick in the reflection of the bathroom mirror.

Darian shut his eyes again, feeling his cheeks burn, and listened to the sound of Caleb's footsteps.

Listened, intently, as Caleb stepped into the hotel shower.

"Let me help you with that," Caleb suggested, and backed Darian against the shower wall, the corners of his mouth quirking up as Darian let out a startled hiss, his bare shoulders hitting the cold surface.

Caleb shoved Darian's hand away, replacing it with his, and began to stroke him, steadily, without any hesitation or gentleness, his own cock bare and hard and pressed against Darian's hip. It was quiet except for the sound of their breathing—panting harder than they had up the fucking Alps—and then Caleb dropped to his knees, sliding his lips along Darian's cock.

"Fuck," Darian hissed, tightening his fingers in Caleb's curls. Caleb sucked hard, from base to tip, and Darian shuddered.

"Stop?" Caleb asked, flicking his tongue over Darian's tip.

Darian swallowed.

"Keep going," he gritted out, and Caleb's lips tilted up in a smile.

---

**STAGE FOURTEEN:**
Medium Mountain Stage

*Audio Broadcast*

**Lee:** "Well, some slightly lower stages here, Luna, but still a series of difficult days ahead for our riders after fourteen stages of some of the toughest rides in Europe. What do you think will be the key here, physical fitness? Mental stamina?"

**Luna:** "Wit and wisdom!"

**Lee:** "Ah yes, certainly strategy will be key over the course of these stages, as surely Caleb Avery and Team TMR will be doing everything they can to regain possession of the yellow jersey from Darian Mulciber and Team Slytherin!"

oOo

*Three Years Ago*
"Fuck," Darian said, shoving Caleb into the hotel room after two failed tries with the key card and wrestling him back onto the bed. "I thought we'd never get out of there."

"Slow down," Caleb admonished him, grabbing Darian by the collar of his t-shirt and rolling over him, straddling him on the bed before unzipping his own hoodie and clumsily tossing it aside. "It's not like we don't have all night."

"We don't have all night," Darian reminded him, muttering it into his mouth as Caleb leaned forward, catching the words on his tongue. "We need to fucking sleep, Caleb, this is still the goddamn Tour—"

"You've had the yellow jersey," Caleb began, pausing to kiss Darian again, "for fourteen fucking stages. I don't really think you're in danger of losing it."

"Still," Darian insisted, rolling over him and brusquely shoving Caleb's arms above his head. "As much as I enjoy seeing you like this," he murmured, his gaze raking indulgently over Caleb's face, "I'm still here to win a race. We," he corrected, kissing Caleb's neck, "are still here to win a race."

Caleb sighed, letting his head fall to the side.

"Fine," he said, not sure why he found himself so disappointed. "Maybe we should just go to sleep, then."

Darian grimaced, noting Caleb's sudden turn, but he withdrew without comment, shifting onto his side before falling back beside Caleb on the bed.

"We should," he muttered, closing his eyes. "Whatever this is," he exhaled heavily, "it's not—we can't—"

He trailed off, and Caleb felt something weigh heavily in his chest.

He turned onto his side, taking Darian's face in his hand and tilting it towards him.

"You look tired," Caleb said quietly, running his thumb along Darian's jaw.

Darian's mouth twitched.

"You wear me out," he whispered, kissing the palm of Caleb's hand.

oOo

"Mulciber looks tired," Augustus noted, gesturing to him.

Caleb's breath caught in his throat.

You wear me out, he heard, but forced himself to say nothing, focusing instead on the burdensome purgatory of the climb.

STAGE FIFTEEN:
Medium Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Well, after a bit of an unsuccessful attack by Team TMR, Caleb Avery and Augustus Rookwood have been drawn back into the peloton, which means that Darian Mulciber and Team
Slytherin hold onto their victory for another day as the King of the Mountain competition continues. It's looking like the ever-reliable Team Slytherin will be able to hold onto the yellow, barring any terrible misfortunes!

**Luna:** "Hopefully no premature deaths!"

**Lee:** "Agreed wholeheartedly, Luna, well said!"

---

**Caleb's not happy.**

*Of course, I suppose I wouldn't be either if I'd just wasted the effort of a climbing attack for nothing, but it looks worse than that. Bigger, I think, than that. I guess I don't have a right to claim I know him anymore, but I don't recognize this version of him. It seems drawn and worn out and pushed to the brink, and I know it's not the riding. Sure, the mountain stages are difficult, but I've seen Caleb lose before. I've seen him pushed to his breaking point. I've seen him crash. I've seen him bloodied and battered and yet still laughing, still glinting gold, but now, for some reason, he seems tarnished. He's got an undisputed second place in the most competitive cycling event in the world, and he looks miserable. Rookwood's a shitty domestique; his rhythm's all off, he pulls like a lumbering plough horse, and by the way Caleb looks at him, I don't think Caleb trusts him.*

Caleb's not happy.

*And I'm not either, as it turns out.*

---

"Hey," Darian said, climbing down from the podium. Caleb looked up, surprised.

"Hey," he said, his brow furrowing. "Everything okay?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Darian said, pointedly arching a brow, and Caleb's mouth twisted unhappily.

"Don't do this," he warned, shaking his head. "This," he said, gesturing between them. "Whatever this is. Don't do it."

Darian rolled his eyes. "Care, you mean?"

"Pretend you care," Caleb corrected, running a hand through his hair. "You've got your fucking yellow jersey, anyway. For now," he added brusquely, but Darian brushed past the taunt, reaching for Caleb's arm.

"We were friends once," Darian reminded him, holding tight. "I'm allowed to ask if you're okay."

For a moment, Caleb stared at him, disbelieving; then he yanked his arm away, turning to leave, and paused.

"We were never fucking friends, Darian," Caleb forced out, hurling the words over his shoulder. "I was your domestique, and then we were—" he trailed off, looking pained. "We were never friends," he repeated flatly, and then he walked away, not bothering to look over his shoulder.

---

**STAGE SIXTEEN:**
Lee: "Some inclement weather today, unfortunately, so we're missing those beautiful mountain views—but as ever, the race to Paris continues! Mulciber has gradually increased his yellow jersey lead with the help of his excellent team, which is filled with high caliber domestiques—Thorfinn Rowle in particular, who seems to be Mulciber's lead-out of choice."

Luna: "He's so very shiny!"

Lee: "He is shiny, and quite a gem on Team Slytherin. Darian Mulciber is a gifted cyclist on his own, certainly, but seeing as there's nobody on Team TMR to rival Rowle's skills as a super-domestique, I daresay Caleb Avery has his hands full if he wants to reclaim his yellow jersey!"

---

"I want Rowle taken out," Tom said into the radio, and Caleb looked up, locking eyes with Augustus at his side and fighting an audible reaction.

"What do you mean?" Augustus asked carefully, and Tom made an impatient scoffing sound.

"Force an error," Tom said listlessly, as if such a thing were so easily done. "Weather's bad," he added. "Could easily blow a tire."

"This is a descent," Caleb snapped emphatically. "A technical could cause a crash—could hurt a lot of riders," he added, but he could hear Tom's dispassionate shrug.

"This is the fucking Tour de France, Avery," Tom reminded him. "I don't pay you to look pretty. I pay you to win, and I think there's a better chance of that if we remove Rowle from the equation. Or Mulciber himself," he added thoughtfully.

Beside Caleb, Augustus shrugged. "He's not wrong," he muttered, and Caleb scowled.

"You can't just take out a rider, Tom—especially not the yellow jersey rider," Caleb growled into his radio. "There are cameras, and a fuck-ton of other people who would notice—"

"Better be subtle, then," Tom commented. "And pick things up, would you? I'm tired of seeing Dippet's logo," he said, yawning. "Looks shit in yellow."

---

Three Years Ago

"Wait," Caleb gasped, his fingers tight against the back of Darian's neck. "If you don't want to do this—if this isn't—"

"I want this," Darian said gruffly, and turned him, slamming Caleb's chest against the wall and then, in an incongruous moment of affection, sliding his lips along the side of Caleb's throat. "I want this. I want you," he added hungrily, and Caleb leaned back against his chest, barely managing to stand.

"Darian," he ground out, shaking, and Darian paused, his hands on Caleb's hips.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, his voice uncharacteristically gentle, and Caleb shook his head, turning to face him.
"I want you to fuck me," Caleb confessed. "But—" he swallowed. "I can't get back on that bike tomorrow and keep doing this shit if you're going to wake up and tell me it was a mistake."

Darian blinked, swiping his tongue over his swollen lips.

"This isn't a mistake," he said hoarsely. "Caleb, you're not a fucking mistake—"

"Prove it, then," Caleb said, digging his fingers into Darian's chest, and Darian nodded, reaching forward to snatch a kiss from Caleb's parted lips.

---

**STAGE SEVENTEEN:**
High Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Things are picking up on the descent today as the peloton is preceded by the breakaway, including Mulciber and Rowle from Team Slytherin as well as Rookwood, Avery, and Dolohov from Team TMR, and then of course the rest of the field as we get down to—OH! LUNA, DID YOU SEE THAT? A TERRIBLE CRASH! SOMEONE'S DOWN! WHO IS IT?"

Luna: "A cyclist!"

Lee: "MY GOD, ROWLE IS DOWN! HE'S DOWN AND HE'S NOT GETTING UP! Mulciber is of course being pressured to continue but Thorfinn Rowle is down and he's bleeding, ladies and gentlemen—this is not a sport for the faint of heart, I'll tell you that! Thorfinn Rowle looks unable to stand and the crash has backed up the remainder of the peloton—oh my word, what an utter mess—"

Luna: "Quick, somebody summon a house elf!"

---

"You fucking dickhead," Darian shouted, tearing off his helmet and shoving Caleb in the chest. "You fucker, you forced a mechanical—you should be fucking disqualified for that—"

"I didn't do anything," Caleb said coldly, his blue eyes abnormally hard. "If Rowle's tire blew, that's not my fault. This is cycling, Mulciber, sometimes shit happens—"

"SHIT LIKE THIS DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN," Darian roared, grabbing Caleb by the parted collar of his skinsuit and shoving him back against one of the media trailers. "I don't know what kind of fucking revenge plot you had in mind for this race, Caleb, but Rowle could have been killed—I could have been killed—"

"I know that," Caleb spat. "I told you. This wasn't my doing."

Darian stared at him, breathless, and curled his hands into fists, beating them against Caleb's chest.

"How could you do this," he rasped, shaking his head. "How?"

Caleb didn't blink.

"It was him or you, Darian," he said, his voice barely audible.

Darian released him, taking several horrified steps back.
"What?" Darian said, feeling his face go pale. "What does that—"

"Darian," Caleb sighed, reaching for him, but Darian shoved his hand away, shaking his head.

"Who are you?" he demanded, and Caleb's face contorted, pained.

"Darian, please," Caleb said, "just—"

But he must have known by the look on Darian's face that the words, whatever they were going to be, weren't worth saying.

For a moment they stared at each other, breathing hard, and then Darian finally raked a hand through his hair, his face hardening in anger.

"You should have just let it be me," Darian snarled, snatching his helmet from the ground and storming away.

oOo

Three Years Ago

He came with Caleb's name on his tongue; saw the blue of his eyes, even behind closed lids. Collapsed against him and let out a breath, nothing but skin and sweat between them.

Caleb's hand rose, stroking the hair at the base of his skull.

"What the fuck are we doing?" Darian asked, the words seeping into the crook of Caleb's neck.

"Well," Caleb said, closing his eyes. "We certainly aren't biking."

oOo

STAGE EIGHTEEN:
High Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Well, Luna, it looks like this year's Tour has taken an interesting turn now that Thorfinn Rowle is out with a fractured Talus and a broken kneecap. It's almost as though you can feel the loss of energy from Team Slytherin, and this climb has been a slog indeed, leaving Mulciber vulnerable now not only to Avery and Team TMR but also Karkaroff on Team Durmstrang, who's held onto a pretty steady third place through the mountain stages. Any thoughts on what Darian Mulciber can count on accomplishing without his preferred domestique?"

Luna: "Search for the Hallows!"

Lee: "Yes, the options are numerous, but for now it seems his best bet is just to keep his head down—as he always does—and try to keep from being distracted. Rumor has it that Team TMR is in some way responsible for Rowle's crash in the mountains yesterday, but Team Slytherin—and specifically Darian Mulciber—have declined to push for any formal investigation by the UCI. Care to comment, Luna?"

Luna: "They're in love!"

Lee: "Ah, Luna. You always keep things light."

oOo
He could have said something. He could have questioned whether it was appropriate—whether it was safe—for Rookwood to have pressured Rowle like that; to attack when the ground was wet and the road was narrow and the descent was steep. He could have demanded judgment on high, and it would have been well within his rights to do it.

He could have said something. He could have blamed me. He could have blamed me personally and he would have been at least partially right. He's the one in yellow; that's a hallowed position. He could have had me yanked from this race on suspicion alone.

He could have said something, but he didn't.

Why?

oOo

_Three Years Ago_

"Do you think we'll get tired of it?" Darian asked, his chin resting in the dip of Caleb's shoulder.

"What, sex?" Caleb prompted. "Evidence proves that unlikely."


"The muscle stiffness," Caleb muttered, and nudged Darian's chest. "Your chin is in my shoulder knot."

"Good," Darian said, and dug it in, laughing again as Caleb growled in pain. "I'm fixing it."

"I guess the question is will you ever get tired of winning," Caleb corrected, shoving him away. "I don't think I'll ever stop wanting to ride, but, you know." He shrugged. "The monotony of racing is—"

"Monotonous?" Darian guessed, and Caleb grimaced.

"I don't get the glory, you know," he reminded Darian. "I get all the work but none of the teddy bears and champagne."

Darian hesitated at that, pausing, and Caleb shifted.

"Not that I'm jealous of you," Caleb assured him quickly. "I love riding with you. For you," he amended.

Something twitched at Darian's mouth.

"You love it?" he asked, and Caleb blinked.

"I love—" he began, and faltered. "It," he pronounced, clearing his throat. "Yes. I love it."

Darian rolled onto his back, closing his eyes.

"Right," he exhaled, and Caleb watched his chest rise and fall; watched his heart thud beneath his ribs.

"I won't get tired of it," Caleb promised, but by the time he said the words—by the time they fell asleep, shoulders touching—he realized that wasn't at all what Darian had asked.
STAGE NINETEEN:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "We're finally out of the mountains, which means another stage for our sprinters! Harry Potter of Phoenix-Hogwarts and Theo Nott of Team Slytherin are neck-and-neck for the green jersey with it currently in Potter's hands, but one good sprint from Nott could take it, doubling the win for Team Slytherin!"

Luna: "House Cup Champions!"

Lee: "Of course, that's assuming that Mulciber doesn't continue to fall behind—Avery and Team TMR are relentlessly attacking, taking advantage of Rowle's absence, and the gap from first to second is shrinking dangerously. Only a matter of seconds now!"

Luna: "Where's a time-turner when you need one?!"

Lee: "Oh, Mulciber looks to be falling behind! He'll need to join the final sprint to keep his lead on Avery!"

oOo

"I'm going to lose my lead," Darian panted, struggling to keep in the breakaway as he glanced over at Theo, who'd been gearing up for the final sprint. "I'll have to win the time trial tomorrow but—but I don't know," he muttered under his breath, his chin dropping. "I don't know if I can do that, or—"

Theo grimaced, glancing over his shoulder at Harry, and sighed.

"I'll do it," Theo said, and Darian blinked dazedly, glancing at him with confusion. "I'll be your lead-out," he clarified. "Just keep on my wheel until you can break off for the final sprint. If you finish with the sprinters, then—"

"No," Darian ground out, shaking his head. "No—you'll lose the sprint if you do that, Nott, and you'll lose the points. I'm not going to let you lose your shot at the green jersey—"

"Well, fuck you if you haven't noticed you're in goddamn yellow," Theo reminded him, jutting his chin out to reference Darian's jersey. "That's sort of more fucking important than the points competition. And you're the team leader," he added, "and I'm rested from the mountain stages, so if you can stay on my wheel, I can keep you in the lead."

It took a moment, the gears in Darian's head turning slower than the ones on his front wheel.

"Are you sure?" Darian asked, blinking in disbelief. "That's—Nott, that's—"

"Selfless?" Theo prompted. "Heroic? I know," he sighed dramatically, and punched on his pedals, speeding up. "Get on my wheel," he yelled, glancing over his shoulder, and Darian nodded gratefully, accepting his teammate's lead.

oOo

"Well," Harry said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I thought I would see you at the sprint finish, but—"
"Mulgiber needed a lead-out," Theo supplied, not looking at him. "And I really don't need you to
rub it in, thanks," he added, pointedly flicking Harry's green jersey.

Harry cleared his throat carefully, delicately opting not to comment on Theo's admirable moral
fortitude.

"Well," he said, changing the subject. "I was hoping for, you know. A showdown."

Theo arched a brow. "A showdown?" he echoed, skeptical.

"Yeah," Harry said, shrugging. "I mean, like I said. You're my only real threat, so—"

"Well," Theo cut in, turning the words over on his tongue. "There's always the sprint in Paris."

"True," Harry agreed. "I mean, the green jersey's locked in, it's definitely mine—"

"But the final stage is the sprinter's wet dream," Theo reminded him briskly. "So," he pronounced
conclusively. "If I win in Paris, that's kind of the only thing that matters."

"That's literally false," Harry informed him, shaking his head, "but sure, I guess." He shrugged. "I
could do that."

"Paris, then," Theo said, extending a hand. "Race you there?"

Harry looked down, eyeing the proffered palm, and took it, his thumb brushing carefully over
Theo's knuckles.

"Race you there," he agreed, as Theo's gaze fell to his lips.

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**STAGE TWENTY:**

*Individual Time Trial*

*Audio Broadcast*

Lee: "And we're back to the time trials! After so many outstanding stages—and so many ups and
downs, too!—we're finally rounding out this year's Tour de France. It looks like Darian Mulciber
and Team Slytherin will take the yellow jersey this year, as Mulciber managed to edge out a win
over Avery yesterday and held onto his lead with a lead in today's time trials to finish with his sixth
Tour de France title. I can't say it's much of a surprise, but Team TMR certainly gave Team
Slytherin a run for their money, wouldn't you say?"

Luna: "I don't trust Tom Riddle."

Lee: "Well, that's fun. In any case, I wonder what's in store for the dynamic between Avery and
Mulciber. There's been no indication of any love lost between them despite both performing
brilliantly throughout the Tour, but still—can't help wondering what it's been like for those two
after so much time apart. What do you think happened, Luna?"

Luna: "I think they fell in love, but were too stubborn to admit their feelings!"

Lee: "I was thinking something more like the issues Team Slytherin had re-signing Avery to the
team when his contract ended, or perhaps the financial gain and the promise of being the lead
when he was recruited by Tom Riddle, but—"

Luna: "Nope, it's the love thing!"
"Can't believe the Tour's over tomorrow," Caleb murmured, resting his chin on Darian's chest. "Seems like hell every year, but it goes by so fucking fast."

"Hell will be back for us soon enough," Darian reminded him, chuckling. "The Vuelta's in less than a month."

"God," Caleb groaned. "Why do we do this again?"

Darian laughed, the motion of it vibrating against Caleb's mouth.

"The perks," he said slyly, and yanked Caleb up, rolling over him in the too-small twin bed.

"Hey," Caleb said, his hands on Darian's hips as the other man bent, kissing his neck. "What are we going to do when the Tour ends?"

"Eat pizza," Darian said, shrugging, before shifting lower, trailing kisses down Caleb's torso. "Fuck again in the mornings."

"Okay, but—" Caleb sat up with difficulty, nudging Darian away. "What do we do about, you know," he said, gesturing between them. "This?"

Darian's brow furrowed.

"I told you," he said. "We can fuck in the morning. And later at night," he added thoughtfully, but Caleb shook his head, frustrated.

"You realize eventually people will figure this out," Caleb told him. "The team. Dippet. The media," he said emphatically. "Your sponsors could pull out, Darian—"

"Unlike me," he said with a grin, and Caleb groaned.

"Come on, Darian, be serious—"

"Who says they have to find out?" Darian prompted. "I mean, is this even serious?" he added, looking away. "I don't see why we have to talk about this."

"I just—" Caleb hesitated. "I know there could be repercussions, and—"

"Repercussions," Darian repeated, and Caleb could see instantly he'd made a mistake; Darian withdrew, retreating to the opposite end of the bed. "Like what?"

"Like I said," Caleb said hurriedly. "You don't know how the owners will react, or your sponsors, Darian, and—"

"Is it really me you're worried about, Caleb?" Darian cut in harshly, and Caleb gaped at him.

"Of course it's—"

"Dippet told me your contract is up after the Tour," Darian said, his tone worryingly indifferent. "Told me that other owners are vying for you to be their lead. Is this about you not wanting to be a
"domestique anymore?" he asked, and Caleb stared, disbelieving. "Because I get it. I get that you never intended to play second fiddle to me your entire career, Caleb, but if this is what this is about, just tell me—"

"It was one meeting," Caleb cut in, frustrated. "One fucking meeting, Darian, and I just wanted to hear him out, so—"

"A meeting," Darian echoed, and Caleb kicked himself again. "I didn't know you actually entertained the thought."

A blanket of ominous silence fell over them.

"I get it," Darian said, swallowing. "If you're with me, your avenues close. Lower salary, no sponsors, no prize money. Without me—"

"No," Caleb said, shaking his head. "Darian, no, that's not—I wasn't—"

"It's just sex, Caleb," Darian told him, launching to his feet and reaching for his underwear. "We're just fucking, and you have to do what's right for your career."

"Darian," Caleb said, panicked. "This isn't what I want, I swear—"

"Tell me right now," Darian said, rounding on him. "Tell me right now you wouldn't take a better contract if you were offered one. A different team," he accused, swallowing heavily. "A better paycheck. A chance to be the lead. Tell me right now you'd turn it down to stay with me," he demanded, and Caleb stared, frozen.

"I—" he began, and faltered. "Darian, that doesn't mean—"

"That's all I needed to know," Darian said coldly.

oOo

Three years ago I made a mistake. I didn't tell you how I felt. I let you walk away.

Three years ago you fucked this up. You let me believe a lie. You pushed me out the door.

Three years ago we let this die. We were too proud to fight for it. We were too selfish to try.

But now it's three years later, and you look so exhausted, and so proud and so brilliant and so relieved, standing alone on that podium, and all I want to do is hold you. Press my lips to all your little knots and tangles. I should have been at your side, and you at mine. For me, the Tour is nothing without you. Cycling is nothing without you. I have been, done, felt nothing without you—but now it's three years later, and I feel everything all at once.

And now, of course, too late, I am helpless to the truth: that I have loved you, Darian Mulciber, for every day we've been apart.

oOo

"What do you mean you quit?" Tom demanded, staring down Caleb. "You can't quit. I signed you for five years."

"Well, sue me, then," Caleb retorted carelessly. "If you don't let me walk away after the final stage tomorrow, then I'll just tell the UCI that you coerced me into recklessly endangering the lives of
multiple cyclists." He shrugged. "We'll see how it goes from there."

"That will only hurt you," Tom informed him bluntly, his eyes narrowing. "The UCI needs my money more than it needs your license."

"Fine—I don't care," Caleb said, shaking his head, and despite the costs, he found he really didn't. "When I took this deal, I had no idea what you were going to ask me to do. What you were going to force me to do," he added, his mouth tightening. "If I'd known, I would never have agreed to race for you."

At that, Tom rose to his feet, furious. "When I came to you with an offer, you told me you wanted to win," Tom hissed. "You told me you could win—"

"And I can," Caleb agreed, "but not like this. Not the way you want me to. Say we parted amicably if you want," he permitted, shrugging. "Say you fired me. I don't care. You seem a capable liar," he added, not bothering to conceal his distaste. "I trust you to craft a lie that suits you, whatever lie it is."

Abruptly, Tom's features went cold.

"I can ruin you," Tom warned. "This will be the end of your career, Avery."

Caleb's chest constricted at the thought, but he'd always known there would be a sacrifice.

"Fine," he said, and turned, walking away.

"AVERY!" Tom shouted. "DON'T YOU TURN YOUR FUCKING BACK ON ME!"

Caleb paused, pondering how to tell a narcissistic billionaire that nothing he offered held any real value, and let Tom rant at his back.

"I picked you up when you had nothing," Tom continued, incensed. "I made you a leader when no other team would! When Dippet let you out of your contract, who did you come to, Avery?"

"YOU FUCKING CAME TO ME!"

Finding nothing worth saying, Caleb opted instead to keep walking.

"AVERY! AVERY—"

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**STAGE TWENTY-ONE:**

Flat Stage

*Audio Broadcast*

**Lee:** "And now, of course, the final stage of the Tour: the epic sprint to Paris around the Champs-Élysées! The winner has been decided, as we know—Darian Mulciber of Team Slytherin has won his sixth yellow jersey in the Tour de France, followed by Caleb Avery of Team TMR and Igor Karkaroff of Team Durmstrang. And the green jersey of the points competition will be awarded to Harry Potter of Phoenix-Hogwarts, but not before we get to watch one final sprint as they take the end of the Tour to Paris!"

**Luna:** "Bouillabaisse!"

**Lee:** "Bless you! And now here they come, the sprinters! Harry Potter, of course, and Theo Nott of Team Slytherin are neck and neck—oh, they're certainly going for it! This is an all out battle, ladies
and gentlemen, as the two best sprinters in the race are headed for the finish! Luna, does it get any better than this?"

**Luna:** "Vive le Tour!"

**Lee:** "I couldn't have said it better myself! Vive le Tour, indeed!"

**oOo**

"If I win this," Theo grunted, bent furiously over his handlebars, "pretty sure you have to blow me."

"How about dinner," Harry panted, muscling full-bodied towards the finish. "On me."

"On you?" Theo echoed. "Is that supposed to be a euphemism?"

"If you want to fuck me so badly, Nott, just say so," Harry muttered, giving it one last push.

But Theo, who saw the opening for a win, merely took off, laughing as he crossed the finish line and sat up in the saddle, throwing both arms in the air victoriously. He paused, slowing past the line, and then turned to acknowledge Harry, giving him a wink.

"Hey Potter," he said, and raised his hands, cupping them around his mouth. "I want to fuck you," he mouthed.


**oOo**

Darian took a seat, contemplating his words before finally glancing up at the flashing cameras, giving them a tentative smile.

"There's no easy way to say this," he began. "You've all come to mean so much to me throughout my career, and I'm honored more than I can say to have won this jersey today. After a lot of thought on the matter, I have decided to announce my retirement from the sport of professional cycling," he said, pausing to accommodate the murmur of discontent from the crowd, "effective immediately. I know there has been some speculation as to whether I would race in the Vuelta this year, but I think the time has come for me and this sport to part ways. There's so many young guys out there who have talent, and drive, and passion, and I leave it in their hands."

He paused, waiting, and someone in the crowd stood up.

"Darian, this is Lee Jordan with NBC Sports," said Lee, "and I just wanted to ask you: does this decision have anything to do with Caleb Avery choosing to part ways with Team TMR at the conclusion of the Tour?"

"Wait," Darian said, frowning. "What?"

"Caleb Avery is currently without a contract," Lee Jordan clarified. "Being that he was once your super-domestique, will you be recommending him to take your place as the leader of Team Slytherin?"

"I—" Darian paused, glancing around. "Sorry," he said, disentangling himself from his microphone, "hold on—I have to—"
"Aww, OTP!" said a dreamy, feminine voice from the crowd, and Darian sprinted away, searching for Caleb in the midst of the media circus.

"Avery!" he shouted, looking for the TMR jerseys. "Caleb!"

"What?" Caleb said, barrelling into him from around the corner. "Oh," he said, registering Darian's presence, and paused. "Yes?" he prompted, and Darian frowned, realizing he didn't know exactly what he wanted to say.

"You left Tom Riddle's team," Darian said slowly.

"Yes," Caleb agreed, "and you retired from cycling."

"How did you know that?" Darian asked hazily, and Caleb held up his phone.

"Team Stream," he said, gesturing to the app notification on the screen. Darian frowned.

"You have notifications set for me?" he asked. Caleb shrugged.

"Yeah," he said.

"Still?" Darian asked, blinking.

Caleb shrugged again.

"Yeah," he repeated, and Darian shoved him back against a media trailer, holding him by the collar and then stretching his fingers out, settling his palms against Caleb's chest.

"Why'd you quit?" Darian asked, as Caleb seemed to hold his breath.

"Tom Riddle's kind of a psychopathic arsehole," Caleb supplied casually. "Why'd you retire?"

Darian paused, swallowing.

"I don't love it anymore," he confessed. "I don't think I ever loved it after you were gone. Or before you. Actually, I don't think I love cycling," he clarified slowly, and Caleb waited, staring expectantly at Darian's face. "I think I just love you," Darian finished.

Caleb let out a breath; a long one, as if he'd been holding it for a long time, and then he grabbed Darian's face and held it between his palms, running his thumb across his lips.

"I've been waiting a long time to hear you say that," he admitted. "Minus the 'I think' part."

"Fine, so I know I love you," Darian amended gruffly. "What of it?"

Caleb lifted his chin, drawing their lips together, and let a pleasant, unrestricted laugh escape into Darian's mouth.

"Tell me again when we're naked," he suggested, "and I'll say it back while I make you come."

Darian let his tongue dart between his lips, satisfied, and savored the taste of the promise.

oOo

I remember this day three years ago.

It was the hollowest of victories then; I knew I'd be coming home to an empty hotel room. An empty
bed. A vacancy where Caleb used to be. I would have a yellow jersey and a small fortune where there used to be his laughter, his dirty kits. His humor, his loyalty, his—

Not love, I'd told myself. Or maybe there was love, and I just didn't give it room to take root.

Today is much the same kind of day—I started it alone, same as before, only perhaps it doesn't have to end that way. Caleb caught up to me in the peloton while the rest of my team was cheering and drinking champagne, and at the sight of him, things seemed to make sense again. He rode beside me in silence and I let him, because we used to do it all the time. We used to fall in sync with each other without a word, and today we did it again. Easily. Naturally. Like breathing.

Caleb and me; maybe we'll never grow out of it. Maybe we'll never forget.

Maybe it's just like riding a bike.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: for Aurora (who enjoys the Tour), Sally (who enjoys Mulcibery), and nymphadoraholtzmann (who enjoys making sports gay). Thanks for reading! Also, FYI, I started publishing the promised HP sex diaries as a separate fic because it does have some angst, so if you're interested, you can now find them (story called Modern Romance) in my works.
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode I

Pairing: `\_(ツ)_/¯`

Universe: Post-Hogwarts, Sequel to The Real World: Hogwarts (Ch. 35-59)

Rating: M for truly unsettling language

Summary: It's December 1st, and that means the Olivie Advent! There will be a brief post every day until December 24th in this, the totally unnecessary sequel to last year's event that literally nobody was clamoring for, and which is my great pleasure to present to you now.

In sum: it's 2002, and Lee Jordan and his crew have returned for a reunion series, five years after the filming of The Real World: Hogwarts.

[Camera pans the office of the Minister for Magic, coming to rest unsteadily on where Kingsley Shacklebolt sits at his desk, poring over a series of documents. He frowns slightly, visibly bemused, and then glances up at host Lee Jordan.]

Kingsley: "What exactly is this again?"

Lee: "Ah, right, you're new to this. Look, basically all we do is—"

Kingsley: [interrupting] "I understand the basic premise of a reality show, Lee. But why are these other people here?"

Rita: [disdainfully] "I agree entirely with the intimations of your tone—"

Gilderoy: [excitedly] "—and I have a wand!"

[He pulls out something that has clearly been purchased at a muggle magic shop and flicks it once, prompting a small sign that says 'BANG' to eject from the end of it.]

Kingsley: "Oh… that's very, um…"

Rita: "Sad?"
Kingsley: "More like—"
Rita: "Sad."
Kingsley: "Well, I just—"
Rita: "SAD."

Gilderoy: [gleefully] "Sad!"
Kingsley: [uncomfortably] "Yes, well, I guess that's the word, then."
Lee: "There were some legal issues involved."

[Gilderoy puts on an abnormally large top hat, nodding smugly.]
Kingsley: "Still addled, then, is he?"
Gilderoy: [loudly] "I had a rabbit but I lost him!"

Kingsley: "Oh boy."
Rita: [stiffly] "As you can see, being involved in this whole thing is an insult to me and an affront to journalism—"
Lee: [sighing] "Once again, Rita, if you really feel that way, you're welcome to leave."
Rita: [brusquely] "Will I get paid?"
Lee: "No."
Rita: "Then you completely misunderstand the entire purpose of me being here."

[Gilderoy leans over Lee, peering intently at her.]
Gilderoy: "You have lovely breasts."
Rita: [sniffing affectedly] "Yes. I know."
Kingsley: "Er, so, as to the details of the show—"
Gilderoy: "Would you like an autograph?"

[He clambers onto Kingsley's desk.]
Kingsley: "I—no thank you, Gilderoy—Gilderoy, please don't touch th- no, no the plant is fine, Gilderoy, please don't tickle its—really, Gilderoy, I would prefer—yes, thank you, good, sit right there, yes—" [Gilderoy lies face down on the floor, muttering something that sounds distinctly like 'tits' as Kingsley returns his attention to Lee.] "Anyway, Lee, as I was saying—this is somewhat different from how it was handled before, yes?"
Lee: "Well, we, um—" [He coughs, looking exceedingly guilty.] "Our budget has, er, increased, and so we were able to afford these highly esteemed interview—"
Luna: [interrupting] "Really? But I thought you said the budget was cut?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna perched precipitously on the edge of Kingsley's desk, blinking
owlishly at Lee.

Kingsley: [leaping back, aghast] "Holy hell, how did you get in here?"

Lee: [wearily] "Personally, I've stopped asking."

Luna: [gestures vacantly into the corner] "I was over there." [She turns back to Lee.] "Anyway, I distinctly remember you saying that your budget had been vastly diminished, because I was thinking to myself that nobody in their right mind would want to undergo this monstrous process again, and if they did, then surely it would end up being diminished in some way, as all sequels are —"

Rita: [to Lee] "Excuse me? You lied to me?"

Kingsley: [to Luna] "I'm serious, how did you get in here? The security wards are virtually invulnerable to penetration —"

Gilderoy: [to himself] "Penetration!"

Luna: [ignoring everyone] "—and then, Lee, I definitely recall you mentioning that you were going to have to settle for the first twat-faced cuntbasket who would agree to take the job —"

Lee: [cutting in hastily] "No, no, I wouldn't—that really doesn't sound like me —"

Luna: "Yes, you did, Lee. I'm quite certain that you did. And then, of course, you got Rita, because other than nasty tell-alls she really doesn't have anything but time on her hands —"

Rita: [disdainfully] "Excuse me, little girl, but who let you in here?"

Kingsley: "SERIOUSLY. WHO LET YOU IN HERE?"

Luna: "—but when she did so poorly with all the test audiences in your target demographics of 'idiots, goons, and blithering jizz-pots' you decided you'd have to include someone like Gilderoy, who has at least held onto his looks —"

[Gilderoy preens in the metallic reflection from Kingsley's desk leg.]

Luna: "—so then you said, 'fine, hire the bollocky cockswallows and see if I care,' and then —"

[Lee turns abruptly to the camera, throwing his hands in the air.]

Lee: "LET'S JUST INTRODUCE THE CAST, SHALL WE?"

[Scene cuts to individual interviews.]

Harry: "Er, okay, this again?"

Rita: "Yes. Go ahead, Mr Potty —"

Harry: "It's actually Potter."

Rita: "Hm? Oh, sorry. Mr Pots, you were saying?"

Harry: "We've met, like, several times."

Rita: "I'm sure we have, Mr Poncho."
Harry: "It isn't—" [Sighs.] "Okay, well, I was saying my name is Harry Pot-

Gilderoy: [thunderously] "Harry Potsticker!"

Harry: "I—yeah, fine."

Rita: "And you are, what now? A custodian? Some sort of person who cleans gutters, was it?"

Harry: "I—what? No, I'm an Auror."

Rita: "Right, so, you're some sort of filthy sludge-handler, then?"

Gilderoy: [clapping his hands together] "Oh, that's just adorable."

Harry: "It's—is it?"

Rita: "Well, that seems about all we have time for—"

Harry: "What? But I thought you said—"

Rita: "MOVING ON."

[Scene cuts to Draco, Theo, and Blaise.]

Draco: [distractedly, as he scribbles on a piece of parchment] "Yes, hello, I'm still Draco Malfoy —"

Theo: "And I'm Theo Nott. Draco and I work in the Department of Magical Contracts and Tortfeasor Comeuppance, and our projects consist of—"

Draco: [loudly] "What rhymes with 'terrible hairdo'?"

Theo: "Bearable cashew."

Blaise: "Eh, mate. Not your best."

Theo: "Listen, it's not like we have much going on, you shit. All he does is write his stupid poetry. I'm out of words!"

Blaise: [shrugging] "Fair."

Rita: "Who are you again?"

Blaise: "I'm Blaise Zabini."

[Gilderoy produces a cucumber from one of his pockets, trilling excitedly.]

Rita: "And what do you do for the Ministry, Mr Zabini?"

Draco: [glancing up from scribbling on his parchment] "Who, Blaise?"

Theo: "Blaise, you mean?"

Blaise: "Are you talking to me?"

Rita: "I—yes. I thought that was obvious."
Draco: "Wasn't."
Theo: "Nope, not clear."
Blaise: "Sorry, did you mean me?"
Rita: "Yes, Blaise, what is it you do here?"
Draco: "What, here?"
Theo: "Here, you mean?"
Blaise: "Are you talking about here?"
Rita: "I—"
Gilderoy: "Zabini forever!"

[Scene cuts to Pansy and Daphne.]
Pansy: "I'm Pansy Parkinson, and this is Daphne Greengrass."
Daphne: "We work in the Department of Magical Games and Sports."
Rita: "And what sort of work do you do here?"
Pansy: "Honestly?"
Rita: "Sure."
Daphne: "Mostly research."
Rita: "For cases?"
Pansy: "Well, yeah. More like—research about the, um. Magical games and sports."
Rita: "…what about them?"
Daphne: "Just—you know. About them."
Rita: "Are you saying you don't have any sort of familiarity with any sports?"
Pansy: "Oh, no. No, definitely not."
Rita: "That seems… somewhat suspect."
Daphne: "Oh, it is."
Pansy: "Fully."
Daphne: "But in fairness to us, the Ministry was really desperate."
Pansy: "And in fairness to them, we are fantastic liars."
Daphne: "Yes. It comes naturally to us."
Pansy: "Among other things that come naturally to us."
Daphne: "Which does not include our jobs."

Pansy: [*with a charming, haughty laugh*] "No, certainly not those."

Daphne: "Personally, I have a really tenuous handle on quidditch just—as a whole, you know? I know there's—what is it, like three kinds of balls? Two balls? Or is that something else—"

Pansy: "Either way, it's more balls than anyone needs, frankly."

Daphne: [*carefully*] "Well honestly, in any situation, two is more than enough. Even one is sort of, you know. Unnecessary for my purposes."

Pansy: "So true."

Gilderoy: "Would you like to see mine?"

Lee, from behind the camera: "**GODRIC'S SWEET LEMON-TITS, SOMEONE STOP HIM!**"

Pansy: [*delighted*] "Oh my god, *do it*—"

*[Gilderoy pulls two small marbles out of his pocket, handing them to Daphne.]*

Pansy: [*deflatedly*] "Oh."

Gilderoy: "These are my balls."

Daphne: [*cradling them awkwardly*] "Oh, well, thank you—they're, um, very nice Professor Lockh—"

Gilderoy: [*cheerfully*] "Would you like to see my testicles?"

Lee: "**MERLIN'S CROOKED SHAFT, SOMEONE JAM HIS ZIPPER—**"

*[Camera cuts out as Daphne and Pansy chant 'do it, do it, do it' and re-opens on Neville, Marcus, and Cormac.]*

Rita: "Sorry, you're who?"

Marcus: "I'm Marcus."

Rita: [*impatiently*] "Yes, I see that, but Marcus who?"

Marcus: "Are you expecting another Marcus?"

Rita: "Well, it had crossed my mind, but—"

Marcus: "I don't see why the issue requires clarification."

Rita: "I—well, I suppose not."

Neville: "And anyway, to answer your question, we work in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and—"

Cormac: [*interrupting*] "Personally, I work in the beast division."

Rita: [*with cautious skepticism*] "Is—is that—"
Cormac: "—the name of an actual division in this department? Yes. Is it also a reference to my own transcendence of perfect muscularity and exceptional physique? Yes. Is it a hilarious example of my inherent gifts for deeply nuanced double entendre? Hell yes. Is it a capital showcase of witty and astonishing wordplay? Fuck y—"

Neville: [interrupting] "We talked about this, McLaggen."

Cormac: [vacantly] "Did we?"

Neville: "Yes. Remember? We agreed. No more rhetorical question and answer periods, okay?"

Cormac: "Look, is it my fault that my brilliant ideas don't seem to catch on? No. Is there any good reason that the official Ministry dictionary refuses to accept my petitions to make 'quidbitches' a legal term? Hell no. Does it make sense that I'm still required to wear full shirts to the office?"

[They all wait.]

Cormac: "No, really. I'm asking."

Marcus: [exasperatedly] "You guys should really just go."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Obviously we have a lot more characters to check in with (and a lot more Draco Poetry and games of MFK to explore) but I'm saving a few of the big ones for tomorrow. Can't spoil the advent on day one, right? Please do let me know if your birthday is during this period of madness and I will be sure to mention it in the dedications. Thanks for reading. More of this shit until Christmas!
The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode II

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 2.

[Scene opens with Kingsley being interviewed in his office.]
Rita: "So…" [She looks around, clearly bored.] "Is this it, or—?"

Kingsley: [impatiently] "As I'm sure you know, my office is responsible mainly for diplomacy and crisis management. It may not be newsworthy, Ms Skeeter, but a quiet morning is actually rather a relief in my line of w-"

[The door behind them bursts open, cutting him off mid-sentence and revealing Minerva McGonagall in the frame. She is wearing the Sorting Hat and carrying a portrait of Albus Dumbledore. She looks, quite frankly, more than a little put out.]

Minerva: "SHACKLEBOLT, YOU WRETCHED WHORE."

Rita: [eyes widening greedily] "Yes, finally—"

Kingsley: "I beg your pardon?"

Lee storms into camera view.

Lee: "WHAT'S GOING ON IN H- oh, hello Professor—"

Minerva: "GET OUT, JORDAN!"

Lee: [with ruffled offense] "Excuse me? Professor, might I remind you that this is my job, not some sort of foolish classroom antic, and even if it were an antic, or even a shenanigan, you certainly don't have any authority to tell me what to d-"

Minerva: "QUIET, JORDAN, OR I'LL TAKE TEN POINTS!"

Lee: [weakly] "Yes ma'am."

[He wanders out of camera view, looking childishy forlorn. Minerva strides forward, shifting Albus' portrait under one arm before straightening the Sorting Hat on her head and glaring expectantly at Kingsley.]

Albus, via his portrait: "Kingsley, I specifically told you t-" [breaks off] "Minnie, turn me around, how on earth am I supposed to chastise him when I'm not even facing the correct direction? Honestly, it's like you don't even want me to be here—"

Minerva: [to the portrait] "I don't want you to be here, you cocksucking waste of varnish! Even I don't want to be here—"
Albus: "Well, fine, let me handle it then, and you and that squirrel crown on your head can just—"

Minerva: "Squirrel crown?"

Albus: [sarcastically] "Oh, sorry, is it supposed to be some sort of marsupial diadem?"

Sorting Hat: "I know you're trying to hurt me, Albus, but it's not going to work."

Albus: "Sorry, are you speaking to me, vermin tiara?"

Sorting Hat: "I SAID IT'S NOT GOING TO WORK!"

Kingsley: "Er, Minerva, what exactly is this?"

Minerva: "Listen, we're here for—"

Albus: "REMONSTRATION!"

Sorting Hat: "VENGEANCE!"

Rita: "Oh my god, yes—"

Kingsley: "Er, Minerva, I really don't follow."

Minerva: "First of all, ignore them. Secondly—"

Albus: [interrupting] "CAN A MINISTER BE JUDGED FIT TO RULE WHEN HE CHOOSES TO NEGLECT A WORTHY VOICE OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION?"

Kingsley: "I—is that what this is? Because I really don't—"

Sorting Hat: "SHOW YOURSELF, YOU LIME GREEN POCKET OF DESPOTISM!"

Kingsley: "—okay, apparently not—"

Minerva: [to the hat] "I told you, we don't have time for this. It's just a hat—"

Sorting Hat: "Like hell it is!"

Kingsley: "Oh, are you referring to Fudge's bowler hat? That's—well, he sort of took that with him, you know. It's not exactly something we keep as a pet—"

Sorting Hat: [scoffing] "A LIKELY STORY."

Albus: [still muffled] "Minnie, I must insist you let me speak to Kingsley to express my disappointment in his tyranny. When have I been anything but perfectly professional?"

Minerva: "Albus, when the utter fuck have you been anything but perfectly defunct?"

Rita: [hastily taking notes] "Yes, yes, good, keep going—"

Kingsley: [to Rita] "Stop it." [to Minerva] "And Minerva, please explain what this is about, would you? Or Albus, for that matter. Or the hat, even—"

Sorting Hat: "BRING FORTH THE SUBJECT FOR QUESTIONING. TRIAL BY A JURY OF HIS PEERS!"
Kingsley: [sighing] "—or, you know, perhaps not the hat, but I think you get the idea—"

Minerva shoves Rita's chair aside with her foot, charming an elaborate throne-like chair that serves to block Rita's view entirely. She pokes out from behind it, though, and continues to scribble in her notepad.

Minerva: "Look, Kingsley, I think you and I both assumed our respective posts with some understanding of the generally accepted camaraderie between the Headmaster at Hogwarts and the Minister for Magic, did we not?"

Kingsley: [hesitantly, bordering on suspiciously] "Yes…"

Albus: "And in the past, your office has always been clear on the rules preceding any necessary Ministry intervention at the school." [He pauses, thinking.] "Well—the rule, I should say."

Minerva: "Yes, exactly. And listen, Kingsley, we do understand that Hogwarts has always been somewhat of a—" [She hesitates.] "A veritable breeding ground for inadequacy."

Albus: "How rude! But yes, totally that."

Minerva: "And while that may amount to some understood level of concern, it's still my turn to run that godforsaken shithole into the ground, Shacklebolt! Albus already turned it into a murder competition and a traitor playground and a death sky-match for children, and now, after learning from his mistakes and cleaning up his messes, it's clearly my turn to burn it down—"

Luna, popping out from behind Minerva's chair: "Oh yes, I agree. That's only fair."

Kingsley: [furiously] "HOW DID YOU—"

Minerva: "—and I would think, Kingsley, that the Ministry would recognize the school's autonomy in this matter—"

Sorting Hat: "AND PRODUCE THE SUBJECT FOR QUESTIONING!"

Kingsley: "Okay, hold on. First of all, I still have no idea what this is about, and secondly—" [He pauses.] "Nope, just the first thing, actually. What is this?"


Minerva: "For the love of- shut up, Albus—" [Slams a bit of parchment on the desk, scowling at Kingsley.] "This. Who is responsible for this?"

[ Kingsley picks up the parchment, frowning; after skimming the page, his eyes gradually grow wide with recognition. ]

Kingsley: "Oh dear."

[Rita pokes out from behind the chair again.]

Rita: "What is it?"

Albus, Minerva, and the Sorting Hat: "NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS."

Sorting Hat: "Stay out of it, you c-"

Kingsley: "Language, please!"
Sorting Hat: "-ountry whore!"

Kingsley: "Oh. That's fine." [pauses quizzically, murmuring to himself] "Is it?"

Luna: [cheerily] "Where's Gilderoy?"

Rita: "Ugh. Who cares? What's this thing about?"

Albus: "The Ministry is asserting control over Hogwarts! It is extending its CONTEMPTUOUS TENDRILS OF AUTHORITY to squeeze the very LIFE and TRUTH out of wizarding education, and—"

Minerva: [interrupting] "And by virtue of someone enacting a law from nearly four centuries ago requiring Ministry oversight of Hogwarts curriculum, I am now being forced to bend to the ravings of a narcissistic portrait."

Albus: "Oh, Dippet bothering you too, then?"

Minerva: [sarcastically] "Yes. Sure. I'm definitely talking about Dippet."

Sorting Hat: "I KNOW YOU'RE HERE, BOWLER. I CAN SMELL IT."

Minerva: "In any case, surely you agree that this whole song and dance of Ministry control is completely unnecessary, Kingsley."

Sorting Hat: "YOU CAN HIDE, BUT YOU CAN'T RUN!"

Albus: "Besides, our old rule was working fine!"

Sorting Hat: "I MAY BE DOWN, BUT I'M NOT UP!"

Kingsley: [tentatively] "Well... as a reminder, the existing rule is 'no murder,' and that's basically it."

Albus: "Yes! And it works just fine!"

Kingsley: "Okay, but there was a murder, wasn't there?"

Albus: "What? When?"

Kingsley: "More than one, actually. I mean—you were murdered there, so—"


Minerva: "Shut up, Albus." [To Kingsley] "So? Which of your beastly little minions is responsible for this?"

[They all go quiet as Luna chuckles to herself, the giggle evolving to a contented sigh. Slowly, the other heads in the room turn, looking expectantly at her.]

Luna: "Oh, come on. You know perfectly well who did this."

[Hermione is following Hermione Granger through the halls. She is carrying a large box, speaking blithely over her shoulder.]

Hermione: "Sorry Professor, what was it you wanted?"
Gilderoy: "Breasts, if I can get them. I have questions." [Pauses, looking saddened, and then brightens.] "Otherwise, talk to me about plants!"

Hermione: "Oh, I'm sorry Professor, but I'm afraid I really can't at the moment. I'm moving into my new office today. Again." [She smiles wearily, but seems optimistic, if not proud.] "Recently I've been promoted all over the Ministry, actually. I think it's a record—six promotions in the last six months. Unfortunately it means quite a lot of moving, as it always seems to be from department to department."

Gilderoy: "Promotion?"

Hermione: "Yes. I'm leaving the Improper Use of Magic Office now that I've been made head of a different department. It's a smaller office, as I understand it, but it's a fairly considerable title bump, so naturally I'm honored by the Ministry's obvious trust in my leadership abilities. I regret having to leave my previous position, as I really feel I was doing so much good where I was, but apparently I'm needed elsewhere."

[Cuts to Seamus and Dean.]

Dean: "Oh, she was needed elsewhere, alright."

Seamus: "Yes. As in, we really needed to get rid of her."

Dean: "Yes. I mean, she's Hermione, so she's brilliant—"

Seamus: "Yes. But—"

[They glance at each other and lean in conspiratorially.]

Seamus: "She's just, like, so by the book."

Dean: [groaning] "So by the book."

Seamus: "I mean, we adore her, of course—"

Dean: "Unquestionably."

Seamus: [dropping his voice again] "But there was so much paperwork."

Dean: [at once hushed and shrill] "SO. MUCH. PAPERWORK."

Seamus: "I've never seen someone so completely unapologetic about never bending the rules."

Dean: "She's a mutant."

Seamus: "She's a fucking mutant—"

Dean: [louder] "Whom we love."

Seamus: "DEARLY."

Dean: [quietly] "But who really needed to go."

Seamus: "BADLY."

Dean: "She was costing the department a fortune."
Seamus: "A fucking fortune—"

Dean: "—so we convinced Mafalda Hopkirk that Hermione was doing such a good job in our department that she needed a position with more responsibility."

Seamus: "Yes. And at the same time, she needed to be put somewhere she couldn't ruin things."

Dean: "Yes. Sort of like an employment straightjacket."

Seamus: "Yes, exactly."

Dean: "Somewhere she'd be restrained, figuratively."

Seamus: "Yes, and unable to move her arms."

Dean: "...theoretically, you mean?"

Seamus: "Did I not say that out loud?"

Dean: "No."

Seamus: "Huh. Silly me."

Dean: "So anyway, they had her moved to one of the departments of the Ministry that does —" [glances around, leaning in] "—absolutely nothing."


Dean: "I'm not even sure why they exist."

Seamus: "They come in every day—"

Dean: "—and do something, I assume—"

Seamus: "—but we have no idea what it is."

Dean: "Yes. Right."

Seamus: "Right. So anyway, she's the head of it now."

Dean: "Yes. And we're so proud, naturally."

Seamus: "Right. Because it's a promotion."

Dean: "Yes, that."

Seamus: "And we'll miss her terribly, of course—"

Dean: "Of course."

Seamus: "—but it's better her talents not be wasted."

Dean: "Yes. Exactly. This is about her talents, exclusively."

Seamus: "Yes. Well—" [Hesitates] "It's primarily about her talents. Secondarily our sanity."

Dean: "No, secondarily the benefit of the Ministry as a whole. Thirdly our sanity, at best. Maybe
even fourthly, actually. This is clearly for the greater good and not at all about us."

Seamus: "So true. You're so right."

Dean: "Thank you."

Seamus: "You're welcome."

Dean: [turning back to the camera] "Anyway, sorry, what was the question?"

[Cuts back to Hermione.]

Hermione: "... so anyway, I was looking over the four thousand page manual for the department I'm taking over for a bit of light bedside reading, and I happened to find some discrepancies in an old Ministry law that I didn't even know existed. I mean, were you aware that the Ministry is permitted oversight of Hogwarts curriculum if the current administration presents a danger to the students? And also, did you know the only current rule is 'no murder'? That's literally the only rule, it's insane—"

Gilderoy: [interrupting] "So where are we going? Is this a spa?"

Hermione: "A spa?"

Gilderoy: "Yes. Is it a spa?"

Hermione: "No. It's an office."

Gilderoy: "Like the last office?"

Hermione: "No, Professor. Once again, that was the women's lavatory, and I really wish you hadn't followed me inside."

Gilderoy: "So ... not a spa?"

Hermione: [sighing] "No, Professor, it isn't."

[She puts her hand on the worn handle of a door featuring, in crumbling paint, 'DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL CONTRACTS AND TORTFEASOR COMEUPPANCE.' She takes a deep breath, preparing herself, and steps inside.]

From inside, a male voice: "Okay, so, so far I have 'shrill and unkind, o ghost of a stranger' rhyming with 'blue are my balls, I'm still hard for Gr-"

[The voice breaks off as something crashes to the floor. Hermione hastily shuts the door, turning to stare wild-eyed into the camera.]

Hermione: [whispering to herself] "Oh, fucksticks."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Okay, am setting up something suspiciously resembling plot, bear with me.
The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode III

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 3.

[Scene opens with Draco and Theo interview.]

Rita: "What exactly does this department do?"

Theo: "Us? This is the Department of Magical Contracts and Tortfeasor Comeuppance."

Draco: "Yes. And please stop asking me about Granger."

Rita: "I … didn't?"

Draco: "I'm a person, you know. I'm a human being, not some sort of international sex symbol dressed up for ravenous public consumption. I decline to be accosted at will by the mainstream media as some sort of punishment for being a lethal combination of inescapably interesting and wildly attractive."

Rita: "I—okay, noted—"

Draco: "And as for my thoughts on our new department head, as you know, I've never once left room for ambiguity. Or even damnbiguity."

[Scene cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "Damnbiguity. It's a term I coined, based on a combination of the words, 'damn, that's ambiguity,' you know?"

[Scene cuts back to Draco.]

Draco: "I maintain now, as I always have, that I absolutely, unequivocally, and with no exceptions loathe Hermione Granger entirely—"

Rita: [nodding] "Yes, okay. So same as before, then."

Draco: "—both for her unforgivably soft skin and her even softer sensibilities and, frankly, for the way her horrible hair is positively brimming with liberalism and starlight and I assume several months' worth of spare change—"

Rita: [with visible confusion] "Right, well, I thought I knew where this was going, but I no longer know what this is."

Theo: [kindly] "You get used to it. After a while it just becomes white noise. Like, here, watch this—"

Draco: "She's just like Potter with that—"
Theo: "Insufferable morality."

Draco: "—insufferable morality, only worse, because she's—"

Theo: "An affront to the institution."

Draco: "—an affront to the entire Ministry, and a bane on the whole institution—"

Theo: "Ah, damn, not quite. Well, in any case, here comes something that's both an insane compliment and an alarming insult."

Draco: "—and ultimately, she is without a doubt a terrible, floral-scented, dazzling sunbeam of utter incandescence and a disgrace to not only society, but everything valued within it."

Rita: "Oh my."

Theo: "Quite."

Draco: "Also, she's my albatross."

Theo: "What, like the bird?"

[Draco lies down on the floor, moaning.]

Theo: "Cool, I'll check back in ten."

Rita: "Okay, well, that got a bit off track, but I was asking more along the lines of, you know, what you actually do?"


Rita: "Right, but—do you draft the contracts? Or determine the torts?"

Theo: "Hm? No, the Wizengamot does that. We don't actually have any powers of litigation."

Rita: "Oh. Well, then do you enforce the contracts themselves, if you can't prosecute the tortfeasors?"

Theo: "Nope. The DMLE and the Aurors do that."

Rita: "Is this where the contracts are filed?"

Theo: "Hm? No. That's the clerk's office."

Rita: "Okay … so do you, um—"

Theo: "No. Probably not, I mean."

Rita: "So then you do—what, exactly?"

Theo: "Honestly? Most of the time I'm managing my prank war."

Rita: "Prank war?"

Theo: "Well, it's more an aspiration than anything at the moment. Though I did successfully put Draco's stapler in gelatin the other day."
[Cuts to footage of Draco removing said gelatinous stapler from his desk. He picks it up, eyeing it from all sides, and frowns pensively before sampling it with his finger.]

Draco: "What is this, lime?"

Theo: "Green apple."

Draco: "Huh."

[Cuts back to Theo interview.]

Theo: "He's not particularly interested. I also did try with Magical Creatures department, too, but that was even less fun."

[Cuts to footage of Theo, Neville, Marcus, and Cormac. Theo is wearing a heavy black cape, shielding his eyes from the office lights.]

Theo: "It's … it's so cold in here … almost a deathly chill …"

Neville, without looking up from his book: "Mhmm."

Theo: "Is … is that garlic? I— I can't, it's so … unholy—"

Cormac: "Bro, sweet cape. I've got one like it at home. Says 'Spaghetti Time' on the back."

[Neville sets his book down, staring bemusedly at Cormac. Across from him, Marcus also leans forward.]

Neville: "What does 'spaghetti time' even mean?"

Cormac: [shrugging] "That it's fucking spaghetti time, Longbottom."

Neville: "Okay, but why?"

Theo: [louder] "Oh no … my reflection … I dare not gaze upon it!"

Neville: "I don't understand. Do you wear the cape when you're eating spaghetti?"

Marcus: "Or do you just use it to remind you when it's time to eat spaghetti?"

Cormac: "Bro. Bros. It just is, okay? You just do."

Theo: "TOO BAD I GOT BITTEN BY THAT BAT!"

Neville: "Okay, but why spaghetti time? Why not some other kind of food?"

Cormac: "I have other capes, bro."

Marcus: "Are we not even going to address the cape bit? Is this a 'one nonsensical thing at a time' situation, or what?"

Theo: "HOPE NOBODY'S GOT ANY HOLY WATER—"

Neville: "Okay wait, other capes?"

Cormac: "Well, there's my brunch cape. Says 'mimosa time.' Plus my festive one, says 'nacho business,' and—"
Theo: "Ugh, hold on."

[Cuts to Theo walking into DMGS to see Daphne and Pansy.]

Theo: "It's … it's so cold in here …"

Pansy, without looking up: "You're not a vampire, Theodore. And I'm going with marry Voldemort, fuck Grindelwald, and kill Dumbledore, for obvious reasons."

Daphne: "Oh, obviously."

[Theo pauses, abandoning his act.]

Theo: "Was that … did you just …?"

Daphne, eyeing her fingernails: "Yes. Obviously."

Pansy: "We were playing villain MFK, but like, you know, I feel like 'villain' is such a damnbiguous term."

[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "it also works for 'damn, that's ambiguous,' so, you know. It's versatile."

[Cuts back to Pansy.]

Pansy: "And besides, I really think I could have had a positive influence on Voldemort."

Daphne: "Yes, right? I'm pretty sure I could have changed him, you know?"

Pansy: "Yes. I mean, let's be real. You don't get to traipse through this garden of Eden only to turn around and start wars, you know what I mean?"

Daphne: "I do. I've been there, and I've never once started a war."

Pansy: [nodding] "Proof."

Daphne: "Obviously."

Pansy: [thinking] "I mean, I guess Draco technically came close—"

Daphne: "Doesn't count. War was already started."

Pansy: "Ah, good catch."

Daphne: "I consider myself detail-oriented."

Pansy: "As you should."

Theo: "... is there a reason a Dumbledore was included in there?"

Pansy: [flipping a page] "Is there a reason you're here?"

[He pauses, considering it.]

Theo: "Point taken. Hold please."
[Cuts to Harry and Ron, who are alone in the department's bullpen.]

Theo: [disappointedly] "Oh. I was hoping there'd be someone else here."

Harry: "Why? You doing a bit, Nott?"

Theo: "Eh."

Harry: "You have a cape on, so I'm kind of assuming it's for a bit."

Theo: [innocently] "Oh, do I?"

Harry: "Yes."

Theo: "I mean, sometimes my arms are, er, cold. But, you know. Not cold enough for sleeves."

[Harry and Ron exchange dubious glances, folding their arms over their chests.]

Harry: "We're wizard detectives, Nott. We can see you're doing a thing."

Ron: "Yeah. Come on, Nott, just show us the bit."

Theo: "Eh. Nah."

Harry: "Why not? You've already got the cape on."

Theo: "Yeah, but it's just—" [He hesitates.] "It's really nuanced. You might not get it."

Ron: "Oh."

[They wait.]

Theo: "Okay, bye."

[Cuts back to Theo interview.]

Theo: "Basically I'm so bored I've been trying to stimulate interest literally anywhere else, because our department doesn't do anything."

Rita: "Really? Then how do you explain that?"

Theo: "Explain what?"

Rita: [pointing] "… that."

[Camera pans out to show that the three of them are currently sitting outside of the department's office. On the other side of the door, Minerva paces, arbitrarily shouting expletives over her shoulder at Hermione, who sits next to a delighted Gilderoy.]

Theo: "Oh, right. That."

[Cuts to the inside of the room.]

Minerva: "—BOILED IN A STEW OF YOUR OWN BLOOD AND MADE TO FEAST UPON YOUR ENTRAILS—"

Hermione: [timidly] "Professor, I—"
Minerva: "—AND SURE, MAYBE THAT'S NOT AN APPROPRIATE THING FOR A GHOST TO SAY TO A FIRST YEAR STUDENT, BUT WE ALL TURNED OUT FINE, DIDN'T WE?"

Hermione: "I—wait, are you serious?"

Gilderoy: "Question. Will there be time for a musical number?"

Minerva: "THE POINT IS, MISS GRANGER, THAT LEVYING SOME SORT OF VENGEANCE-DRIVEN AUTOCRACY IS—"

Sorting Hat: "THE ONLY APPROPRIATE WAY TO DEAL WITH RECALCITRANT BOWLER HATS!"

Minerva: "—QUITE CLEARLY OPPRESSION TO THE HIGHEST DEGREE—"

Hermione: "It's not a matter of vengeance, Professor! I just think that since this law exists, it's quite a good opportunity for the Ministry and the school to work together, you know, just to make sure that there are no holes in the curric-"

Minerva: "I WILL PUT A HOLE IN YOU, GRANGER!"

Gilderoy, singing: "I-eeeee-iiiiiiii, will put a hoooooooooole in youuuuuuuuu!"

[He finishes in the splits, tossing a handful of freshly cut flowers. Camera cuts back to Theo interview.]

Theo: "Oh, right. Well, this department does do one thing, I guess. We're in charge of old contracts that other departments forgot about before they were all formed to take care of things that we don't have the authority to do."

Rita: [disapprovingly] "Other people besides Miss Granger, it seems."

Theo: "Yeah, she sniffed that one right out. She doesn't seem to like the status quo much."

Rita: "Evidently not."

Theo: "Yeah. It didn't go well with Blaise, either."

[Hermione, Draco, Theo, and Blaise.]

Hermione: "I don't understand. What exactly do you do here?"

Blaise: "Who, me?"

Draco: "Blaise, you mean?"

Theo: "Are you talking to Blaise?"

Hermione: "I—yes, obviously, I'm just wondering what your job is here, Blaise, seeing as you're not actually a Ministry employee—"

Blaise: "Sorry, do you mean here?"

Draco: "Are you talking about here?"

Theo: "I don't follow. Is this about Blaise?"
[Hermione's expression turns murderous.]

Blaise: "You look upset."

Theo: "What are we talking about now?"

Draco: "Is this still about Blaise?"

[Hermione's fingers tighten around her wand. Cuts back to Theo interview.]

Theo: "Yeah, so long story short, he left."

[Draco pops up from the floor.]

Draco: "You know what else about Granger?"

Theo: "Oh good, you're back."

Draco: "She's totally unreasonable. Like, okay, so say that you—or you know, someone, who definitely isn't me—hypothetically, and totally by accident, poisons one p—" [stops, thinking] "Okay, so, say you—someone—accidentally poison two people, right? Totally by accident, and she finds out."

Theo: "Sure, buddy."

Draco: "And then it's just like—BAM, you fucked up. Over. Done. The line is apparently drawn at murder, and like—? We never even talked about it? So there was just… basically no way for me to know she had some sort of, I don't know, personal opposition to it? I just. I can't, like—how is that fair, exactly? I mean, what, there's not even a cooling off period where we both see our respective wrongs and you know, maybe a little cunilatio exchange—"

[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "Cunilatio. Cunnilingus and fellatio. It's a term I coined, based on combining two words for mouth-fucking."

[Cuts back to Draco.]

Draco: "—and then, after we'd both had some time to think about how sure, maybe I shouldn't have tried to kill someone and yeah, she probably shouldn't have been so upset over what ended up only being murder-adjacent at best, we might have come together and—and actually—and—"

[He struggles.]

Theo: "How 'bout another time-out, there, guy?"

[Draco lies down, whimpering.]

Theo: [turning back to the camera] "Right, so—what was the question?"

Chapter End Notes

a/n: This does require some prior knowledge of the first advent, so a note for one or
two of you who seem bewildered in the reviews: there's some history here. Though in fairness, it is bewildering regardless.
The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode IV


[Scene opens with Ron interview. He's sitting at his desk in the Auror bullpen, finishing up some paperwork.]

Ron: [brightly] "Oh, everything's great! As you can see, I'm an Auror now, along with Harry, of course—"

Rita: "I don't know who that is. But sure, how's that going?"

Ron: "Oh, I love working with my best mate. Obviously, I mean, we already knew we make a really great team. We've always really brought out the best in each other, too, which works for us, because Harry can be very take-charge and I'm usually the cool-headed, rational one, you know what I mean?"

[Cuts to Ron and Harry in Auror training.]

Ron: "Harry—Harry? Look at me, okay? Let's not go charging in anywhere, alright, mate? Let's just, you know, have a little breath, count to ten, and—"

[He turns, checking for something over his shoulder.]

Ron: "Yes, okay, perfect, so now that we've assessed the situat- ah, bloody hell, he's gone."

[Cuts back to Ron interview.]

Ron: "It's not a perfect system, but, you know, we're getting there."

Luna: "Really? Hm. That's not what I heard."

[Ron pauses and frowns, first at Luna and then at Rita.]

Ron: [ruffled] "Excuse me, I—" [He pauses and frowns, first at Luna and then at Rita.] "Sorry, but is there a reason there's so many people here?"

Luna: "Do you mean me?"

Ron: "Well, sort of."

Luna: [kindly] "If I'm making you uncomfortable, I can just go back to sitting quietly just outside of camera view."

Ron: "No, it's fine. I meant more—you know. Them."
Camera pans out further to show that on Rita's right, Gilderoy is mimicking Luna's posture, also scribbling in a notepad. He appears to be working on a primitively-drawn but not uncreative aquatic still-life. On his right, the Sorting Hat is sitting in its own chair, also wearing spectacles.

Sorting Hat: "First of all, it's called surveillance."

Gilderoy: [perching awkwardly atop the chair] "Am I doing it right?"

Sorting Hat: "Not even remotely."

Luna: [leaning over to speak encouragingly to Gilderoy.]"I think you're doing fine, Professor Lockhart."

Gilderoy: [alarmed] "Are you a ghost?"

Luna: "Aw, that's sweet."

Sorting Hat: "You know, you should all be grateful I'm here. If any suspicious hats appear, I'll be the first to notice."

Ron: "Suspicious hats? As opposed to you, an unsuspicious hat?"

Sorting Hat: "Young man, know that I hear the implications of your tone, and I unequivocally reject them."

Gilderoy: "I want a fabulous hat!"

Sorting Hat: [scoffing] "Bitch, please. Stay in your lane."

Rita: [to Ron] "I didn't invite them, if that's what you're asking."

Ron: "That's not quite what I asked, but good to know. Comforting, at least."

Luna: "Anyway, Ron, I actually heard differently about you and Harry."

Ron: "Oh? What have you heard?"

[Cut to Auror training.]

Harry: [soothingly] "Ron… Ron, look at me. Stay calm, okay? You're doing fine, Ron, everything's fine, it's just a spider—"

Ron: "A spider?! That thing is a mutant, get it off—GET IT OFF ME, BLOODY HELL HARRY, IT'S THE SIZE OF A SURREY STARTER HOUSE—"

[Camera zooms in on the small domestic spider, which is cheerfully making its way across Ron's desk as Harry moves to pick up the piece of parchment.]

Harry: "Honestly Ron, it's more afraid of you than you are of it—"

Ron: "THIS IS NOT THE TIME FOR CLICHÉS, POTTER!"

Harry: "Okay fine, relax, I've got him—"

Ron: [hovering leaning over Harry's shoulder] "Don't hurt him, Harry, be very caregentle, gentle, Harry—you never know if he's going to want to come back for revenge—"
Harry: "Revenge?"

Ron: "Yeah. I heard spiders have uncanny facial recognition and, you know, I certainly don't want him coming back for more when I least expect it!"

Harry: "I think you might be thinking of something else, Ron. And besides, they say the average human swallows eight spiders a year, so—"

Ron: "WELL NO WONDER HE'S COME BACK, THEN! WHAT IF I'VE DECIMATED HIS FAMILY? HE'S OBVIOUSLY COME FOR A RECKONING!"

Luna: "Swallowing that many spiders is actually a myth."

Ron: [visibly relieved] "Oh, bloody hell, thank g-" [He jumps, registering her presence in the room.] "Wait a minute, how did you get in here?"

Harry: [gingerly setting the spider on the windowsill] "She's been in here for at least twenty minutes, Ron."

Luna: "That's true."

Ron: "Oh."

Luna: "Also, you likely haven't swallowed any spiders, but there are definitely some in your earlobes setting up camp next to the wrackspurts in your brain."

Ron: [wailing] "HARRY—"

Harry: [sternly] "Luna!"

Luna: [gingerly] "Ron?"

[Cuts back to Ron interview.]

Gilderoy: [with relish] "Gilderoy!"

Ron: "Well, look, I'll admit it, there've been some less than stellar moments on my part. And sure, Harry gets most of the attention in the department, surprise surprise—"

Rita: "Harry who? I don't follow."

Ron: "—and anyway, he's probably going to be made Head Auror soon, but it's fine. I'm doing great. Honestly, I really am. I mean, would I like a promotion? Sure. But I'm fine without one, and I mean, my personal life is really fulfilling. As I'm sure you know, Hermione and I have been together since the war—"

Rita: [distastefully] "Yes, I'm aware."

Ron: "—which is great. She's great. It's great."

Sorting Hat: [sarcastically] "Oh really? Is it great?"

Ron: "Yeah. That's what I said."

Sorting Hat: "Son, please."
Ron: "What? We have a connection, you know? An intimacy founded in friendship and mutual respect. Plus, she understands me like nobody else in the world."

[Cuts to Ron and Hermione.]

Ron: [shrieking] "OH MY GOD—"

Hermione: "Hold on, hold on—"

[She comes over, holding out a piece of parchment, and collects the spider on top of it before carrying it out to the door.]

Ron: "Well don't hurt it, Hermione! It might—"

Hermione: [interrupting] "Ronald, I promise you, it's not going to come after us in our sleep."

Ron: "You don't know that! How many times did Voldemort come back?! AT LEAST ONCE, and that's all it takes to wind up murdered in our beds!"

Hermione: "I'm sorry, is this still the spider murdering us in this scenario, or is this actually about Voldemort?"

Ron: [exasperatedly] "Harry already killed Voldemort, Hermione. He's gone. The spiders, on the other hand—"

Hermione: [sighing] "It's not a conspiracy, Ron."

Ron: "IT'S COLLUSION!"

[Cuts back to Ron interview.]

Ron: "So anyway, like I said, things are going really well for me. I work with one of my best friends, I'm happily dating my other best friend, and my sister's coming into town for the end-of-the-year Ministry quidditch game."

Rita: "Your sister? You mean the professional chaser Ginevra Weasley?"

Ron: "Yes."

Rita: "She's allowed to play in a game for Ministry employees?"

Ron: "Well, yes, considering she's also a part-time Ministry employee. Shockingly, all-female quidditch teams don't pay all that well."

[Cut to Ginny interview.]

Ginny: "Yeah, I work at the DMLE from time to time handling surplus investigations for the Auror department. I've considered sucking a few dicks up the chain to try getting a few more sponsorships, but there seems to be some sort of fundamental misalignment with that. I think Cormac's got a word for it, actually."

[Cut to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "Hypolatio. As in, a combination of the words 'hypocritical' and 'fellatio.'"

Lee: "Just out of curiosity, how many of your portmanteaus involve the word 'fellatio'?"
Cormac: [shrugging] "Most of the good ones."

[Cuts back to Ron.]

Ron: "So yeah, every year the Auror department wins, which is fun. Honestly, the whole thing is just a little fun thing we do, which really lets us end the year on a positive note. Totally casual, just a bit of light-hearted competition between departments, and—"

Luna: "Hasn't that game been canceled?"

Ron: [turning pale] "What?"

[Cuts to Pansy and Daphne.]

Pansy: "Oh, the Ministry quidditch game? Yeah, it's like, some stupid thing."

Daphne: "Pretty sure nobody goes."

Pansy: "I mean, we definitely don't."

Daphne: "Right. So like, if a tree falls in the forest and nobody goes to the Ministry quidditch game, does it even need to happen?"

Pansy: "Yeah, exactly. Just easier just to cancel it, you know? Whatever. If people want to be social, then we can bring a bottle of Odgen's into work on a Tuesday. Bam, everyone's happy, and I didn't even have to learn what the twat ball is for."

Daphne: "Twat ball?"

Lee, off camera: "TWAT BALL?"

Pansy: "Right? There's the twat ball, the boners, the golden snatch—"

Daphne: "Wait. That can't possibly be right."

Pansy: [shrugging] "Pretty sure it is."

Lee, off camera: "DID SHE SAY GOLDEN SNATCH?!"

Pansy: "What? So now we can't even talk about quidditch? Thanks, Shacklebolt."

Daphne: "Hold on. If that's what the actual balls are called, then maybe I've done something wrong by avoiding it this long."

Pansy: "Right, well, in any case. It's not like anyone's going to be upset about us cancelling it, right? It's just a stupid quidditch game."

Daphne: "Yeah, exactly. I mean, who cares?"

[A wail resounds from down the hall, along with something that sounds like 'THAT GAME IS ALL I HAVE TO LIVE FOR' and 'MY LIFE IS CRUMBLING AROUND ME,' followed by passionate sobbing.]

Daphne: "Huh, wonder what that's about."

Pansy: [shrugging] "Sounds like Weasley saw another spider."
Daphne: "He seems to see them a lot, doesn't he?"

Pansy: [unscrewing the lid to a jar of spiders] "Hm? Sorry, what?"

Chapter End Notes

a/n: I do write an installment a day, so, they'll all sort of arrive at different times depending on the day. Forgive me fanfic for I have sinned…
The Real World: Ministry of Magic

Episode V

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 5.

[Scene opens with Draco and Hermione interview.]

Rita: "So how are things going?"

Hermione: "They're, um. Well, they're really quite—"

Draco: "It's a garbage fire of inadequacy."

[Cut to Hermione and Minerva, joined by Albus' portrait.]

Hermione: [glancing over a piece of parchment] "Okay, so, who's teaching History of Magic now?"

Minerva: [impatiently] "Professor Binns, of course."

Hermione: "Right. Sure. But just wondering, should you maybe hire a corporeal teacher? In terms of safety, for one thing, probably better to have another physical body who can actually protect students in the event of, say, a mass crisis, or perhaps an uprising by a dark lord—"

Albus: "Are you insinuating something?"

Hermione: "It's really more of an allusion than an insinuation, Professor. But yes, I'm heavily implying that you need to hire someone else."

Albus: [boisterously] "UNILATERALLY REJEC-"

Minerva: "Albus, you blathering bouquet of dicks, shut your painted cockzipper and let me handle this."

Albus: [grumbling] "Fine."

Hermione: [visibly relieved] "Oh, Professor, I'm so glad you've decided to be reasona-"

Minerva: "UNILATERALLY REJECTED. What else've you got?"

Hermione: [hesitantly] "Well, how about instead of having a groundskeeper with access to the entire campus and no legal provision to carry a wand, you let him finish his education, thereby gaining another fully qualified teacher for the school and relieving a member of the faculty his unnecessary reliance on poorly-disguised trickery that's, quite frankly, fooling no one?"

[There is a pause.]

[Then, abruptly, both Minerva and Albus erupt in laughter.]
Minerva: [sputtering] "Oh my god, Albus, you lacquered trapeze of fucks, did you hear that? Did —did you hear her? Say it again, Granger, just like that—use that same serious voice you used like it was a real thing, too, so Albus can hear it—"

Albus: [howling] "NO, NO, I HEARD IT. I HEARD. I—HOLD ON. I CAN'T BREATHE—"

[He picks up a painted glass of pumpkin juice, fanning himself and taking a calming sip.]

Minerva: [still doubled over laughing] "Next she's going to suggest we get rid of Filch's torture room!"

Hermione: [alarmed] "Wait, is that a real thing?"

[Albus and Minerva choke with laughter; Albus sprays his pumpkin juice all over the face of his portrait. Scene cuts back to Draco and Hermione interview.]

Hermione: [testily] "It's not a garbage fire, Malfoy. At best it's, you know, a small gas leak."

Draco: [equally irritably] "Oh, sure. And this isn't total devastation, it's just a normal, unrequited crush!"

Hermione: "Wait, what?"

Draco: "Hm? What?"

Hermione: [sighing] "Anyway, it's not like you've been helping. You've been incredibly unhelpful, actually."

Draco: "I have not!"

Hermione: [eyeing the camera] "Roll the tape, Lee."

[Cuts to Draco and Hermione in the office. Their desks are located across the room from each other, facing each other at opposite ends with a vast empty section of carpet in the middle.]

Hermione: [loudly] "Malfoy, can you come over to my desk, please?"

Draco: "What?"

Hermione: [louder] "Can you come here please? I need to discuss these contracts with you. Have you been keeping track of—"

Draco: "What?"

Hermione: [clearing her throat, then shouting] "I SAID, CAN YOU JUST—"

Draco: "Granger, I simply cannot hear you. If you have something to say, I suggest you send it in an owl."

Hermione: [scowling] "I'm not going t—"

Draco: [cupping a hand around his ear] "What?"

[Hermione sighs, rolling her eyes and scribbling something on a piece of parchment. She folds it into an elaborate paper airplane and charms it directly onto Draco's desk. He glances at it, considering it, and then opens it, skimming the contents quickly. He then proceeds to continue]
Hermione: [exasperatedly] "MALFOY!"

Draco: [looking up] "What?"

Hermione: "I asked you to come to my desk!"

Draco: "What, now?"

Hermione: "Yes, now!"

Draco: "I can't. I'm busy."

Hermione: "What are you busy doing?"

Draco: [innocently] "I'm drafting a response letter to my department head."

Hermione: "I—" [She growls with irritation.] "Malfoy, just come to my desk, I don't need a response!"

Draco: "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Hermione: "Are you serious? You can hear me just fine!"

Draco: "I know I age like fine wine, Granger, there's no need to bring it up now. It's hardly relevant."

Hermione: [frustrated] "That's not what I said!"

Draco: [with a stunning lack of shame] "Frankly, this is harassment."

Hermione: "MALFOY!"

Draco: "Is this entrapment? Is this a trap? I think it is. Are you luring me over there because I'm vulnerable? Because I'm your employee? Is that what this is? Because I know my rights, Granger. I'm not some piece of meat for your consumption, you know."

[Camera zooms out to reveal Theo's desk in the corner of the room. He sighs quietly, eyeing the camera and shaking his head.]

Hermione: [shouting] "MALFOY, COME OVER TO MY DESK IMMEDIATELY OR I WILL LEVITATE YOU HERE MYSELF!"

Draco: "Do it, Granger, I dare you—"

Hermione: [standing up] "MALFOY, SO HELP ME, I WILL DROWN YOU IN A RIVER—"

Draco: [also standing] "COME OVER HERE AND GET ME THEN, YOU SNIPPY DOLLOP OF MARMALADE!"

Hermione: "YOU GET OVER HERE FIRST, YOU ARROGANT SON OF AN INBRED WHORE!"

Draco: [astonished] "Whoa, whoa, Granger!"

Theo: "Jesus, Granger, what the fuck—"
Draco: "—that's my mother, Granger, holy shit—"

Hermione: [horrified] "I know, it just—it slipped out—"

Draco: "A step too far, don't you think?"

Theo: "One step? A dozen steps at least, I mean Christ—"

Hermione: [sheepishly] "You're right, I got carried away. I'm sorry."

Theo: "I'm sorry I had to hear it!"

[Cut to Theo interview.]

Theo: [slyly] "Narcissa's doing fine, by the way."

[Cuts back to office scene.]

Draco: "It's fine, Granger. Honestly. It happens."

Hermione: [relieved] "Thank you, Malfoy—"

Theo: "I mean it's fucked, but—"

Draco: "But we're adults now. We get it. We all lose our cool sometimes."

Hermione: "Thanks, guys."

Theo: "You should really chill, though."

Draco: "True."

Hermione: [sighing] "Listen, Malfoy, can you just come here please? Just for a second, I promise."

Draco: [holding a hand to his ear] "What?"

Hermione: "SERIOUSLY?"

Draco: "Hmm? Sorry, what?"

[Cut back to Draco and Hermione interview.]

Draco: "I honestly just feel so attacked right now."

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna and Gilderoy on his left.]

Gilderoy: "If it helps, I think you're a smokeshow."

Draco: [flattered against his will] "What? Thank you, but—"

Luna: [leaning over] "Professor, I think you mean he got burned."

Gilderoy: [cheerily] "Ah, yes, that's the one."

Hermione: "Hey Malfoy, where's Theo, by the way? He's supposed to be working."

Draco: [looking around] "Where is Theo?"
[Cut to the Department of Magical Games and Sports.]

Theo: "… so are you saying it's *too* subtle, or—"

Pansy: [yawning] "How can it be *subtle*, Nott? You're wearing a cape, you're literally just naming things that everyone *knows* apply to vampires—but only to *European* vampires, and just so you know, you Western-biased fiend, there are *other kinds*—"

Blaise: "Go off, Parkinson!"


Blaise: [tentatively] "Okay, I think he gets it."

Pansy: "Whatever. Find a new show, Theodore."

Theo: "Fuck, Pansy, who spat in your pumpkin juice?"

Pansy: [grimacing] "Sorry. It's been an exhausting morning."

[Cut to earlier that morning, as Ron bursts into the office.]

Ron: [bellowing] "PARKINSON!"

Pansy: [without looking up] "Weasley, listen, we talked about this. I'm going to need you to keep your voice at a manageable level."

Ron: "Fine, I just wanted to—"

Pansy: "Nope, lower."

Ron: [pitching his voice deeper] "Parkinson, I need to talk to you about—"

Pansy: "Nope. Try again."

Ron: [whispering] "Parkinson, about the quid—"

Pansy: "Weasley, I'm going to give you one more try."

[Ron pauses uncertainly, frowning, and says nothing.]

Pansy: [sighing contentedly] "There. That's perfect."

Ron: "But I—"

Pansy: "Nope. Get out."

[Cuts back to Pansy, Theo, and Blaise.]

Pansy: "So anyway, he's trying to talk me into un-canceling the Ministry quidditch game, but that's obviously not going to happen."

Blaise: "Oh, I love that game."

Pansy: "Do you even work here?"
Blaise: "Who, me?"

Theo: "Are you talking to Blaise?"

Blaise: "Is this about me?"

Pansy: [sighing] "You dicks need a new hobby."

[Harry sticks his head in.]

Harry: "Hey Parkinson, do you have a minute?"

Pansy: [without looking up] "Potter, we talked about this."

Harry: "I really can't keep doing this."

Pansy: [lazily] "Well, there's the door—"

Harry: "Look, can you just give the quidditch game another thought? I bet if you asked Ron to help you plan it, he'd be happy to."

Theo: "Trying to keep your boyfriend happy, Potter?"

[Harry turns, giving Theo a wary once-over.]

Harry: "Heard the bit you didn't want to show us was just another 'I'm-a-vampire' sketch, Nott. Kind of tired, don't you think?"

[Theo, ruffled, says nothing.]

Blaise: "Ignore Nott. His prank war's going badly."

Harry: [curiously] "Prank war?"

Pansy: "He's trying to launch a prank war to cure his boredom."

Harry: [shrugging] "Well, always good to set achievable goals, I guess."

Theo: "Unrelated, Potter, how would you react if I gave you a box of biscuits but instead of cream, they were filled with minty toothpaste?"

Harry: "I'd say 'man, I'm underwhelmed,' I think. That's got to be pretty low on the prank spectrum of damage, right?"

Blaise: "I mean, it'd be enough to make me think twice about biscuits—"

Theo: [scoffing] "Well if you're such a prank expert, Potter, what's a better one, then?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna on Theo's right.]

Luna: "Arson!"

Harry: "That's not a prank, Luna. That's a crime."

Luna: "Oh." [Thinks for a moment.] "Well, let's see. First, I think I'd rob a grave—"

Harry: "Luna, that's still—"
Theo: "Shh, shh, let her finish."

Luna: "—and then I'd take my winnings, disguise myself as a man, become an international sensation and irresistible lothario, write a book about my experience, publish it, star in the film adaptation, turn it into a television spin-off, work on it for six seasons, retire young, and then reveal myself to be an old, old woman named Bertha, and then, after decades of speculation about why I did it, which I'd never reveal—and of course an entire other film adaptation—I'd reveal myself to have actually been the ghost of a dead professor all along."

Blaise: "I—" [He frowns.] "What the—"

[Camera pans out to reveal Severus Snape sitting on a collapsible lawn chair beside Luna, wearing a pair of sunglasses and sipping from the straw of a pina colada.]

Severus: [licking his finger and turning the page of his Quibbler] "Simple. Elegant. I like it."

[A moment of astonished pause.]

Pansy: [erupting] "WHAT THE FUCK—"

Blaise: "We thought you were dead!"

Severus: "Maybe I was. You don't know my life."

Theo: "Or death, apparently."

Luna: [approvingly] "Either way, that's a good prank."

[Severus nudges his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose to look at her, pursing his lips distastefully.]

Severus: "It wasn't a prank. I'm not a child, or a fool, or some sort of medieval court jester. I don't participate in pranks, or antics, or larks, or horseplay—"

Luna: "You kinda did, though."

Severus: "Don't be ridiculous."

Luna: [beaming] "Aw. I've missed this."

[He rises to his feet.]

Severus: "So are we done here?"

Luna: "Oh, sure."

[They leave.]

Blaise: [stunned] "Did—did that just—"

Harry: "So wait, was that a yes or no on the quidditch game?"

Chapter End Notes
a/n: Tomorrow/Thursday may be shorter because I have a How to Win chapter to write. Psst, I told myself these would be 500 words. Eye roll @ me.
The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode VI


[Scene opens with Harry interview.]

Harry: "Can I say something?"

Rita: "Depends. Who are you?"

Harry: "You know who I am."

Rita: "Well, I'm afraid you'll have to remind me."

Harry: "I'm Harry Pot-"

Rita: "Ah, yes, Harry Potstain."

Harry: "Do we really have to do this every time?"

Rita: "I doubt we'll run into each other again."

Harry: "Well, can I say my thing now?"

Rita: "Hm? Oh, I'm sorry, that's all we have time for—"

Luna: "No, let him stay. It'll be fun."

Gilderoy: "Also, be careful with soap. It only smells good."

Severus: [licking a finger, turning the page of his Quibbler] "You know, you and I dueled once."

Gilderoy: "Really? Who died?"

Severus: "Academia."

Gilderoy: [shrugging] "Never heard of her."

Rita: "Shut up, you imbeciles—what is it, Harry Potato? Spit it out, we haven't got all day—"

Harry: [sighing] "Look, things aren't going as well for me as they look, okay? I know Ron's telling people I'm going to be the next Head Auror, but honestly that's not even something I'm even sure that I want, and—"

Rita: "What is this? Existentialism?"

Harry: "What?"
Rita: "Get back to me when someone's stolen your wife, or blackmailed you for treason, or—"

Harry: "Wait a minute. Is that actually happening to someone?"

[Cut to Seamus and Dean.]

Seamus: "What's the hot goss, you say? Well, you came to the right place."

Dean: "Unfortunately."

Seamus: "I mean, I shouldn't name names, but—"

Dean: "But he's probably going to."

Seamus: "—look, let's just say there's a certain scar-faced soon-to-be Head Auror and a crimson-haired lady quidditch player who seem to be on the rocks."

Dean: "Really left a lot of room for ambiguity there, Sea."

Seamus: "Rumor is the last time she was in town she didn't even stay at his house. She just went to a hotel, like some sort of expensive prostitute!"

Dean: "That, or a hotel guest."

Seamus: "Please. Don't act like you don't know what goes on in hotels."

Dean: [sighing] "Just keep going."

Seamus: "So anyway, I hear there's been trouble for a while. HUGE SECRET, by the way—"

Dean: "That you just announced to everyone."

Seamus: "For the betterment of the public! You know perfectly well I could have said a lot more."

Dean: [miserably] "Unfortunately, I do."

[Cut to Ginny and Dean.]

Ginny: "Well, I'd say it's going fairly well, but a little problematic in the larger scheme of things. I just think the main problem is that I always just assumed we'd end up together, you know? I'm just a really goal-oriented person, and he's been my goal since I was what, ten years old? So, yeah. I see something I want and I chase it. I mean, I'm literally a chaser, so that makes sense, right? But I think we're just trying to make something work that isn't totally designed to fit together. I mean yes, we're both hot, and sure, we both like quidditch and I look like his dead mum, but shouldn't there be more than that? Yes, I'm unapologetically great. Yes, he saved the wizarding world multiple times. But listen, some things are just fundamentally misaligned, you know what I mean? It's like how some people just prefer dogs to cats, or how some people like going to the bathroom with the door open and other people should just fucking chill—and like, maybe some people prefer to not have to big spoon all the fucking time? Maybe they want a turn at little spoon? And also, some people want to be able to live the sort of life where their significant other does not leave the cabinets open, or—oh, I don't know, maybe he doesn't walk into a room, take off his socks, throw them in two totally arbitrary directions, and then announce that 'daddy's home'? So I guess to answer your question, I don't know, um … maybe three times a week?"

[There is a long pause.]
Dean: "Gin. Some things. First of all, this is not at all what I meant when I said 'sex.' Secondly, I'm just helping you update your paperwork for payroll. Did you really think this is what I was going to write down on your employment form?"

Ginny: "Oh, sorry, did you mean gender?"

[Cut back to Seamus and Dean.]

Dean: "It's my fault. I knew the answer."

Seamus: "Yeah, plus you really shouldn't have told me about any of that."

Dean: "Right. That's another big point, thank you."

Seamus: "Anyway, let's see. Other news? I heard Snape might be a ghost."

Dean: "What? But he's corporeal."

Seamus: [suspiciously] "Is he, though?"

Dean: "Are you asking if I've touched him?"

Seamus: "Yeah. Obviously."

Dean: "No, of course not."

Seamus: "So then we have no concrete proof of whether he is or isn't a ghost."

Dean: "Seriously?"

Seamus: "Oh! Also, I hear Weasley's spending some quality time with the ladies of the DMGS."

[Cut to Ron, Daphne, and Pansy.]

Ron: "Look, you can't cancel the game. Okay? You don't understand, I need this—"

Daphne: [exasperatedly] "What is the deal with this game?"

Pansy: "Yeah. Why do men enjoy chasing balls around so much?"

Daphne: "Yeah! Why is quidditch considered a sport but when I want to do fun things, it's considered a fetish?"

Pansy: "In your case, it's really more of a kink."

Daphne: "That seems like a patriarchy problem."

Pansy: [sympathetically] "As all things are, unfortunately."

Ron: "Listen, just let me have this, okay? You don't understand what a relief it is, being up in the air with no worries except for the quaffle—"

Pansy: [interrupting] "It's pronounced 'twat ball,' actually—"

[Cut to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "Twat ball sounds right."
Ron: [dreamily] "—and the freedom of a life, just for a moment, without any limitations; with the soaring feeling of being aloft, plus the pure, unmitigated joy of that perfect block—"

Daphne: "Just curious, Weasley, but have you ever tried sex?"

Pansy: "Because you should."

Daphne: [solemnly] "You really, really should."

Pansy: "Just like, stick your dick in something."

Daphne: "Try it out. See how it goes."

Pansy: "Just masturbate, even."

Daphne: "Yeah. Sure. Make a day of it!"

Pansy: "Run a hot bath, put some Celestina on—"

Daphne: "—picture something sexy, like your werewolf professor ripping his clothes off right before he ravages you on top of one of the tables in the Great Hall—"

Pansy: "—or that shriek of pure terror when you find another one of the baby spiders I've set loose underneath your desk—"

Ron: [alarmed] "Wait a minute, what?"

Pansy: "Basically just let your imagination take you to new, orgasmic heights."

Daphne: "Yeah! And maybe after sex, he bites you a little."

Pansy: "What?"

Daphne: "Sorry, I got a bit stuck."

Pansy: [nodding] "It happens."

Ron: "Look, fine, I get that this is all a joke to you, and I'm happy to jerk off if that's what you really want from me—"

Pansy: [distastefully] "Jesus, Weasley, don't make it weird."

Ron: "—but the point is, if you un-cancel the game, I'll teach you how quidditch works. Okay? So you two can actually do your jobs."

[Pansy and Daphne exchange a skeptical glance.]

Daphne: "I'm sorry, what's the win for us?"

Pansy: "Yeah, I'm not hearing it."

Ron: [hopefully] "I'll give you flying lessons?"

Daphne: "Is that some kind of sexual innuendo?"
Ron: [aghast] "No!"


Ron: [sighing] "Well, fine. I guess that's best, then. I doubt Hermione would love it, anyway—"

Pansy: "Wait. Are you saying Granger wouldn't approve?"

Ron: [hesitantly] "Well, I don't think so. She's kind of been on me about taking my work more seriously lately, and she keeps telling me to 'bloody let it go' about the game, but—"

Pansy: [firmly] "Done. We'll do it."

Ron: "Wh- really?"

Daphne: [nodding] "This is one of her masturbation fantasies."

Ron: "What, me teaching you guys quidditch?"

Daphne: "No. Her trolling Granger."

Pansy: "Yaaaas, I love it—"

Ron: "She's not actually masturbating now, is she?"

Daphne: [shrugging] "No real way to tell."

[Cuts back to Seamus and Dean.]

Dean: "Well, I look forward to seeing that devolve to lunacy."

Seamus: "I know, right?!"

---

**Ode to a Lioness**

*Definitely not by Draco Malfoy
Definitely not about Hermione Granger

**Free Verse #1004**

Hey so
Just a thought
You used to enjoy my dick
You said so
Many times
Very convincingly
And I'm not generally an idiot
So I think it was true

I know things are weird
Some time has passed
Some things have changed
You probably don't know if my dick is the same
And so maybe you don't want to try?
Which is understandable
But it is, for the record  
My dick, I mean  
It's definitely still good  
Learned a few more tricks  
But nothing weird  
A growing experience, one might say  

Which, coincidentally, is what happens to it  
When you walk in the room  
Just some food for thought  

Haiku #2786  
I am pretty sure  
We could do some real damage  
To Theo's new desk  

Free Verse #1145  
I understand that you have some issues  
With the things I did in my youth  
But the thing about youth is  
I can't do it over  
No matter how many times  
I replay it in my mind  
I don't replay the murder parts  
They're uninteresting  
And fraught with gratuitous gore  

But I consider myself a man of taste  
And touch  
And there is poetry to the way your lips meet mine  
And prose in the shape of your hips  
And I consider myself a collector  
Of the finest works of art  

So no  
To answer your question  
I wasn't listening when you asked for my files  
And no  
I will not look over that contract  
I'm busy  
My mind is occupied with other things  
Good day  

Chapter End Notes  

a/n: Happy birthday avenoir!
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode VII

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode VII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 7.

[Scene opens with Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "My personal life? It's going pretty well. I'm dating Ron, as I think pretty much everyone knows by now—"

Rita: "Yes." [Casually] "By the way, how did that happen?"

Hermione: "Well, it had been building for a while."

Rita: "Well, it had been building for a while."

Rita: "Mm, yes, four books or so, I'd say."

Hermione: "Yeah. Plus he improved over time."

Rita: [surprised] "He got less jealous, you mean? Communicated his feelings? Shared your interests? Stuck by you through difficult times?"

Hermione: "Well …" [hesitantly] "Yes and no."

Rita: "Hm."

Hermione: "Mostly no."

Rita: "Right."

Hermione: [insistently] "But we were kids! We had a lot of growing up to do. And anyway, it was building for a while, like I said, and then during the Battle of Hogwarts he, um. He showed genuine concern about the house elves, so I kissed him."

Rita: "Hm. So those are your romantic standards, huh?"

Hermione: "Well, I mean, I guess I was a little impressed." [Brightly] "And actually, it only took three years of nagging and lectures and somewhat mediocre knitting for me to convince him to actually care about the elves, so just think what I could do with a lifetime, right?"

Rita: [slowly] "… Right."

Hermione: "It was basically inevitable. We've been best friends for ages, and besides, we have loads in common."

Rita: "Like what?"

Hermione: "Well—"
Ron: "Hey, have you heard from Harry yet today about brunch on Sunday?"

Hermione: "Oh, no I haven't, I'll owl him."

[They sip their tea in silence.]

Hermione: "Anything interesting happen at work this week?"

Ron: [considering it] "Well, Harry did fix the lumbar enchantments on my chair."

Hermione: "Oh right, he's good at those."

Ron: "Yeah, he is. That and *Expelliarmus* are basically his bread and butter."

Hermione: [with fond laughter] "Oh, Harry."

[Another long pause.]

Ron: "So what about you? What's new?"

Hermione: "Oh, well I'm working with McGonagall on making some changes to school curriculum. I was going to suggest some alterations to the core classes. I mean, for one thing, I do think we need to have some sort of practicum about how things work in the wizarding world—not only for muggle-born students, of course. I would think all of us could have done with a course on understanding finances, and useful household spells and—"

Ron: [clearly not listening] "Mm."

Hermione: "Well, anyway, it's just going to be an uphill battle."

Ron: "You'll do great, Mione. You always do."

Hermione: "Thanks."

[Another long pause.]

Hermione: "You know, Harry told me a really funny story the other day."

Ron: [with renewed interest] "Oh, did he? Harry's the best."

Hermione: "He really is."

[Cuts to Harry interview.]

Harry: "I mean, I get it. I'm pretty interesting. I'd talk about me too if I weren't there."

[Cuts back to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "Okay, fine. So the thing Ron and I have in common is mostly Harry."

Rita: "Picked up on that, did you?"

Hermione: [sighing] "Look, it could be worse, okay? I mean, at least we don't fight, which is all Malfoy and I ever do."
Luna: "Are you sure?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna sitting next to Hermione, gazing up at her.]

Hermione: [startled] "How long have you been there?"

Luna: "Depends. How long have you been this buried in delusion?"

Hermione: [frowning] "I don't know what you mean."

[Camera pans out further to reveal Severus on her left.]

Severus: [licking a finger and turning the page of his Quibbler] "I'd say about four books, give or take."

[On Severus' other side, a finger materializes and aims itself towards his shoulder. As the camera adjusts, it is gradually made clear that Seamus has dared Dean to try to touch Severus' arm, and he sits giggling in the corner as Dean is about to make contact.]

Severus: [not looking up from his Quibbler] "Do not. Touch me."

[Dean sighs, retreating. Seamus is heard to say, 'but now we'll never know!' just before they both disappear from camera view.]

Luna: "I don't actually think that's true about Draco." [She pauses thoughtfully.] "Didn't you two—"

Hermione: [with a feverish flush] "Us? No, no, of course not. Him? Me? Him and me? Together? Never." [She laughs abruptly.] "Me? With—with him? The two of us? Romantically? Sexually? Really? Having sex while we were at Hogwarts? While we were students, I mean—where would we—where would we even, in the—in the bathroom? In the corridors? In the library during Quid— you know what? No. No. That's just—that's just crazy. That's—that's just rampant sexualization of boarding school culture, frankly. Actually, it's—you know what it is? It's alternative facts. It's just. It's the lamestream media, really, is what it is. Telling all the fake news." [She begins to sweat in earnest.] "It's—I would never."

[There is a dull thud of silence.]

Severus: "Convincing."

Hermione: "SHUT UP!"

Luna: "I just really think there might be more to it than fighting, Hermione."

Hermione: [grumpily] "Yes, and like I told you, you're wrong."

Luna: "Well, don't you two have any common interests?"

[Cuts to Draco and Hermione.]

Draco: "First of all, Granger, if you're going to require a practicum in Hogwarts curriculum, then you're going to have to make sure it includes some semblance of medical training. Do you know how many times I've needed to perform stitches on Theo?"

Theo: "Spoiler: it's a lot."
Cuts to Theo, Daphne, and Pansy.

Theo: "What? Love should be physically demanding."

Pansy: "Yes. When it's good, people should bleed."

Daphne: "Not too much."

Pansy: "Yeah. A manageable amount."

Daphne: "Well, a small amount. Right?"

They silently confer.

Pansy: "Yeah, sure, a small-ish amount."

Theo: "Look, things happen in the heat of the moment, okay?"

Daphne: "Yes. We know from experience."


Theo: "No, definitely not with them."

Daphne: [brightly] "Not for lack of trying, though."

Theo: "I walked when they tried to make me sign a waiver."

Pansy: [irreverently] "Yes, Theodore, like responsible adults, there was some paperwork involved to protect all relevant parties."

Theo: "You were going to make me sign away my rights to all of my future sperm!"

Daphne: "Only in the event of great bodily harm."

Pansy: "Which, granted, was heavily implied by virtue of having a waiver—"

Daphne: "—but in fairness to us, we didn't know you would read it."

Pansy: "Yeah, that was a real downer."

Theo: [continuing] "You also tried to make my safeword 'I'm a little bitch,' which is problematic on multiple levels—"

Pansy: [interrupting] "Listen, the only thing that can possibly stop me when I'm in the moment is laughter at someone else's expense, okay?"

Daphne: "Right! So it was for your own safety, Theo."

Pansy: "Obviously. You utter buffoon."

Daphne: "Yeah!"

Theo: "See? This is why I'm not fucking either of you, independently or together."

Pansy: "Oh, well, to be clear, we're a package deal."
Daphne: "Yes. As in we're a deal, and we're looking for a package."

Pansy: "Meaning a penis."

Theo: "I knew what you meant."

Daphne: "Well, clarity is king."

Theo: "Did you try Blaise?"

Pansy: [shaking her head] "Blaise is a hard no."

Daphne: "Yeah. I really take issue with not being the prettiest person in the room."

Pansy: "For me, it's more like … I just want someone who's going to admire my pussy, you know?"

Daphne: "Right. Not look for his reflection in it."

Pansy: "Yes, exactly."

[They pause.]

Theo: "What were we talking about?"

[Cuts back to office scene.]

Hermione: "Stitches?"

Theo: "Oh, right, stitches."

Hermione: [skeptically] "You know that's really something you should go to a healer for, right?"

Draco: "Not all of us have the privilege of time, Granger. And speaking of, make sure this practicum or whatever you're calling it also has some guidance on time management because listen, when I was Prefect, all the younger students had trouble with it at first, and—"

Hermione: [surprised] "Oh. I nearly forgot you were a Prefect."

Draco: [with palpable drama] "Well COLOR ME ASTONISHED, Hermione Granger fails to acknowledge my preeminent intellect YET AGAIN—"

Hermione: "Well, that's a stretch. Let's not forget that Pansy was a prefect, too."

[Cuts to Pansy interview.]

Pansy: "Actually, the first year I was a Prefect I started rounding up the older kids to tutor the younger ones in their free time, and by the end of the year most everyone's grades had gone up significantly." [She pauses.] "Oh, and I had hella sex in that crazy bathtub."

[Cuts back to office scene.]

Draco: [stiffly] "Well, I'm just saying—"

Hermione: "I didn't realize you cared about this, Malfoy. Do you want to help me work on it?"

Draco: [with heavily affected disinterest] "On what? On the new Hogwarts curriculum, or on
demeaning Parkinson? Frankly, I'm equipped for both, but I dread the results of the latter.

[Cuts to Pansy interview.]

Pansy: "As I've told Draco many times, I know where he sleeps. More specifically, I know where his balls are while he sleeps." [She shrugs.] "It's not a clever threat, but it's an effective one. Threatfective, if you will."

[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: [aiming finger guns at the camera] "You know what I'm about, my dude."

[Cuts back to office scene.]

Hermione: "Look, Malfoy, if you have an interest in this, I could really use your help. I'm sort of out of my element here, if I'm being honest. I already tried to recommend wages for the elves—"

Draco: [irritably] "Oh for fuck's sake, Granger. Will you let that die?"

Hermione: [sighing] "That's what the elves said, too."

Theo: "Understandably."

Hermione: [turning to him] "Do you want to help too, Nott?"

Theo: [layering toothpaste on an pried-apart biscuit] "Nah, I'm good."

Hermione: [turning to Draco] "So are you in, Malfoy?"

Draco: [holding a hand to his ear] "Sorry, what?"

Hermione: "MALF."

Draco: [smaarily] "Calm your socially liberal tits, Granger. I'm in."

[Cuts back to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "See? We have nothing in common."

Severus: "I see, said the blind man."

Rita: [with total indifference] "Well, anyway. For the record, I think Lovegood wins the pool."

Hermione: [confused] "Pool?"

Rita: "We were betting on what exactly brought you and Weasley together. I said a traumatic head injury."

Severus: "I suggested that it would have been brought on by the constant brushes with mortality."

Gilderoy: "I said he lured you in with his bedroom eyes!"

Lee, off camera: "I SAID DRUGS!"

Luna: [dreamily] "I said wish-fulfillment by the author."

Hermione: [turning to stare at her] "Wait, how is that even relevant?"
Rita: "You're right. Snape should win."

Severus: "I've been saying that since 1981."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: A new How to Win chapter also posted today!
The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode VIII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 8.

(Scene opens with Dean and Seamus.)

Seamus: "Look, you can get as snippy as you like Mister Man, but for the last time, I had nothing to do with it."

Dean: "Can you please stop calling me that?"

Seamus: "Why, do you prefer Captain Trousersnake?"

Dean: "I really, really don't."

Seamus: "Governor Balls-Ahoy?"

Dean: "I wish you would stop."

Seamus: "Well, stop accusing me, then!"

Rita: "What exactly is happening?"

Dean: [to Seamus] "I wasn't accusing you. I just asked, in a normal tone of voice, whether or not you were responsible for it."

Rita: "For what?"

Seamus: "And I said I wasn't! It's one thing to publicly announce things on a reality show, Lieutenant Britches, but completely another to do this—"

Rita: "DO WHAT?!"

(Scene cuts to Draco and Theo.)

Theo: "Hey Draco, did you see this interdepartmental owl?"

Draco: "What?"

Theo: "You don't have to pretend you can't hear me. Granger's still at lunch."

Draco: "Oh. Then no. What was it?"

[Blaise pokes his head in.]

Blaise: "Hey, you guys see this memo?"

Draco: "I'm sorry, who are you?"
Blaise: "You don't have to do that. Granger's still at lunch."

Draco: "Ah, right. Then no."

Blaise: "It's right there on your desk. Like—right there."

Draco: "Who the fuck are you? Granger?"

Blaise: "Why, has she also been trying to get you to read the things on your desk? Because if so, then maybe."

Draco: [irritably] "Have you been watching us again?"

Theo: [alarmed] "What do you mean again?"

Blaise: [ignoring him] "You should really just look at it, Draco."

Draco: "No. Shan't." [He glances down.] "What rhymes with 'crippling nostalgia'?"

Theo: "What's the context?"

Draco: "The things that pile on my desk remind me of the times gone by / The memories I hoarded / lying wrapped between your naked thighs / I know that you'd prefer if I just did my office work / But call my sad devotion just another charming quirk,' and then there's a bit more, but hm hm hmm here it is, 'Forgive me, too, my crippling nostalgia—'"

Theo: "Another Granger poem, huh?"

Draco: [defensively] "Of course not."

Theo: "Okay, so try 'rippling tiger alpha,' then—"

Draco: "Thematically, that is ludicrous."

Theo: "Why? Because it's not about Granger?"

Draco: "Y-" [He pauses.] "No."

Theo: [knowingly] "Right."

Blaise: "Well, in the meantime, I need to talk to someone about this memo."

Theo: "You don't even work here!"

Draco: "Do you mean Blaise?"

Blaise: "Are you talking about me?"

Theo: [shouting] "DON'T!"

[Cuts to Pansy, Daphne, and Ron.]

Ron: "Okay, so there are three chasers, and their job is t-"

Pansy: [flippantly] "Don't care. Did you guys see this memo?"

Daphne: "The damaging one exposing the personal relationships of our coworkers, or the petty one
in Comic Sans about not stealing peoples' food?"

[Cuts to Kingsley interview.]

Kingsley: "I have one pleasure in my life, okay? I don't know if you've noticed this, but people storm in here complaining about things like, a lot."

Rita: "Maybe you should be better at your job, then? Just a thought."

Kingsley: "OR MAYBE SOMEONE SHOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN MY PUMPKIN SPICE CUPCAKE!"

Rita: "Pumpkin spice, really?"

Kingsley: "THEY ONLY MAKE THEM FOR PART OF THE YEAR!"

Rita: "You do know that the 'pumpkin spice' is just nutmeg, cinnamon, and—"

Kingsley: [with a groaning percussiveness] "WHY can I not SIMPLY have the things that I WANT?"

[Cuts back to Pansy and Daphne.]

Pansy: [unwrapping a cupcake] "Definitely not the food one."

Daphne: "What's that?"

Pansy: "Dunno. Some nutmeg thing."

Ron: "It says 'Kingsley Shacklebolt' on the box."

Pansy: [impatiently] "Listen, do you want me to learn to read or do you want me to learn to quidditch?"

Ron: "Well obviously I want you to learn quid- wait. [He pauses.] "Did you just say learn to read?"

Pansy: "It's a common expression, Weasley."

Daphne: "Yeah. Like 'don't throw the cat into the dishwasher.'"

Pansy: "Right, or 'don't kill your chickens with two stones,' or—"

Daphne: "Or 'we'll fuck that bridge when we get to it'—"

Pansy: "And 'when life gives you lemons, put it in the spilt milk.'"

Ron: "Why would you put lemons in the spilt milk?"

Daphne: [shrugging] "I think it has something to do with alchemy."

Pansy: "Some things are just lost to history, Weasley. And anyway, shouldn't you already know about this, seeing as it's about your sister?"

[Cuts to Harry and Ginny.]

Ginny: "Yeah, so, a memo went around to all the departments this morning revealing that Harry
and I broke up about a month ago."

Harry: "We didn't know how to tell people yet. Mostly because we didn't want to tell them at all."

Ginny: "Yeah. We were just kind of hoping not to mention it until one or both of us died."

Harry: "That would have been preferable, yes, but this is fine too."

Ginny: "As you might guess, my morning’s been a bit hectic since my dad received it. My mum actually sent me a howler she found out."

Harry: "I think it was just a normal owl, actually."

[Ginny holds it up. The charmed contents are nearly unintelligible, but the owl seems to be wailing 'ALREADY MADE HIM A JUMPER' and 'DO YOU NOT WANT ME TO BE HAPPY—']

Ginny: "It's possible. Her crying does sound a lot like screaming. She once said something about how it protects her from bears."

Harry: "In any case, we're fine."

Ginny: "Definitely. It was highly mutual."

Harry: "Yeah, and—"

[Blaise enters, interrupting them.]

Blaise: "Oh, sorry, I was looking for—well, anyway. Hey, Weasley."

Ginny: "Hey Zabini."

Blaise: "Sorry, will just keep looking, but while I have you—we're actually doing a Slug Club reunion thing, if you're wanting to join."

Ginny: "Sure, sounds fun."

Harry: "Me too, or just Ginny?"

Blaise: "Oh. I forgot you were in it."

Ginny: "Yeah… I mean, he never really was, though, was he?"

Harry: [shrugging] "Meh."

Blaise: "What did you even do that whole year, Potter?"

Harry: "Mostly tried to prove Malfoy was a Death Eater."

Blaise: "Yeah … maybe don't bring that up at the party."

Harry: "Yep, sounds right."

[Cuts to Neville, Cormac, and Marcus.]

Cormac: "Right, so, I just think that since men are allowed to show their nipples, then the only possible feminist alternative would be to insist that women have equal participatory rights."
Neville: "Is that for the benefit of equality, or because you personally want to see more breasts?"

Cormac: "I honestly don't understand the question."

[Blaise pokes his head in.]

Blaise: "Hey, so we need to have a Slug Club reunion."

Neville: "Why?"

Blaise: "Because."

Neville: "Yep, sounds right."

Marcus: [to Blaise] "Do you even work here?"

Blaise: "Which Marcus are you?"

[There is a pause as they register the stalemate.]

Marcus: "Touché."

[Cuts to Theo interview.]

Theo: "Okay, first of all, they left out the most important part." [He can hardly contain his excitement.] "The memo was signed 'xoxo, Gossip Girl.'"

Rita: "So?"

Theo: "So?! Gossip Girl's back!" [He looks delighted.] "Year of pranks, baby!"

Rita: "Wait, does that mean that you're this… 'Gossip Girl' person?"

Theo: "Me? No. I've been busy with my last prank."

Rita: "How'd that go?"

[Cuts to Draco, taking a bite of a biscuit.]

Draco: "What the—" [He pauses, making a face, and glances down at the biscuit before glancing around the room.] "Is this mint?"

[Cuts back to Theo.]

Theo: [grinning] "Needless to say, it was devastating."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: You can now find my D/Hr Advent one shot, A Gentleman's Guide to Incandescence, in my collection of works on AO3.
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode IX-XI

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode IX-XI

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 9-11, because FFN was down Saturday night and I couldn't access it, and then last night I was tired.

[Scene opens with Severus and Luna.]

Luna: "You never told me you were planning to bring Gossip Girl back."

Severus: [not looking up from his Quibbler] "I wasn't. And furthermore, I didn't."

Luna: [surprised] "That wasn't you?"

Severus: "Of course not. I have other things to do."

Luna: "Like what?"

[Cuts to Minerva in her office at Hogwarts.]

Sorting Hat: "SOMETHING MUST BE DONE! ARE YOU HEADMASTER OR NOT?!"

Minerva: "Listen you unraveling cock-brained menace, you'll have to be marginally less hysterical. Once again, I have no idea what you're shouting about—"

Sorting Hat: "THIS IS HARASSMENT! DO YOU SEE THIS?"

Minerva: "This? It's a drawing. In crayon."

Sorting Hat: "IT'S A THREAT! IT'S A SHAMELESS CALL TO VIOLENCE!"

Minerva: "It's signed 'Bowler Hat' with the letter 'e' written backwards."

Sorting Hat: "IS THIS WHAT WE'VE COME TO? A DARK LORD RISES TO POWER AGAINST ALL ODDS AND STILL YOU FILTHY MORTALS LEARN NOTHING FROM IT?"

Minerva: "Are you genuinely using Tom Riddle as a cautionary tale to magnify a threat that's ostensibly come from… a hat?"

Albus: [sagely, whilst smoking a painted cigar] "Stranger things have happened."

Minerva: [rounding on him] "Name literally one."

Albus: "Well, for one thing, one previous headmaster permitted his students to be kept unconscious at the bottom of the lake while the other sea creatures blithely attempted to murder their rescuers."

Minerva: "You do know that was you, right?"

Albus: [taking another long drag] "Also, I believe that someone permitted dragons on campus without any sort of waiver, despite previously requiring permission slips to buy candy."
Minerva: [through gritted teeth] "Also you—"

Armando Dippet: [tentatively] "Is no one going to mention me?"

Minerva: "—not to mention that for some reason, you chose Ron Weasley over Harry Potter for Prefect. Remember that?"

Armando: [clearing his throat] "Remember me? Remember the time I overlooked obvious markers of psychopathic behaviors in a student, ultimately leading to two rounds of mass politically-driven genocide?"

Albus: [stiffly] "Minnie, as I've said one thousand times, it came to me in a dream."

Armando: "Oh, are we—so, we just don't care? Is that—? Okay."

Minerva: [to Armando] "For the record, that was technically also Albus."

Albus: [coolly] "Yes, you piteous oaf. Stay in your lane."

Armando: "Ah, damn it."

Minerva: [sighing to herself] "It's possible that this school is not particularly high-functioning."

Sorting Hat: [militantly] "GATHER THE HORSES! PISTOLS AT DAWN!"

[ cuts back to Severus. ]

Severus: "What have I been doing? Nothing."

[ He nudges a box of crayons out of camera view. ]

Luna: [shrugging] "If you say so."

Severus: "Why, what have you been doing?"

Luna: "Oh, um—"

[ cuts to Ron and Rita. ]

Rita: "Where exactly are we?"

Ron: "First of all, as a reminder, nobody asked you to come."

Rita: "You'd be surprised how infrequently that stops me."

Ron: [sighing] "I doubt it."

[ Pansy and Daphne enter, joined by Oliver and Marcus. ]

Marcus: "What are you all doing at our practice field?"

Rita: "Which Marcus are you?"

Marcus: "Excuse me?"

Rita: "I can see you're a Marcus. I'd like to know which one you are."
Marcus: "Are you expecting more than one?"

Rita: "It's been known to happen."

Oliver: [brusquely] "Can we just get to the point, please?"

Pansy: "Personally, I feel I've already made this clear to both of you."

Daphne: "Yes, we already explained it."

Pansy: "We demand access to your boners."

Ron: [hurriedly] "She means bludgers."

Pansy: [shrugging] "I said what I said."

[Cuts to Ron, Pansy, Daphne interview.]

Ron: "Well, let's just say theory wasn't working very well."

Daphne: "I'm an anatomical learner."

Ron: "She means kinesthetic."

Daphne: [shrugging] "I said what I said."

Ron: "Anyway, I really wasn't making any headway trying to explain it to them, so—"

Luna: "So I suggested he actually show them how the game was played."

[Camera pans to the left to reveal Luna sitting next to Ron. She is smiling with furtive delight.]

Ron: [uneasily] "Right. And anyway, I was just going to go outside and do it, but—"

Pansy: [interrupting] "But when we do things, as a rule, we do them big."

Daphne: [nodding] "Huge."

Pansy: "Right. Is a thing even worth doing if someone isn't totally bamboozled in the process?"

Daphne: "As a rule, no."

Pansy: "We have a lot of rules."

Ron: [wearily] "So it would seem."

Luna: "Do you by any chance have any legal contracts, too?"

Daphne: [brightly] "Well, now that you mention it—"

Ron: [hastily] "Let's just play quidditch first, shall we?"

[Cuts back to quidditch pitch. Ron is wrangling a bludger out from its box as Marcus and Oliver stand by watching disapprovingly.]

Daphne: "Hold on. Is that ball trying to kill you?"
Pansy: "Also, totally unrelated follow-up question: do you have any particular stance on resuscitation?"

Ron: [with difficulty] "For the record, it's not trying to kill me. It's trying to kill everyone."

Pansy: "Wait. Really?"

Daphne: "That sounds dangerous."

Pansy: "Deliciously so."

Daphne: [nodding] "Right. That's where I was going with it."

Pansy: "So what does it do?"

Ron: [sweating vigorously] "Well, each team has a beater, and the beater's job is to—"

Pansy: [gasp ing, with a forceful epiphany] "Smack the murder ball directly into the testicles of their sworn rivals?"

Ron: [impressed, and then immediately anxious] "Yes, actually."

Daphne: "Is this a very sexy game? Because it feels very sexy."

Pansy: "Wait, hold on. Weasley, are you serious?"

[Ron doesn't answer, as the bludger has escaped his hold and aimed itself at Pansy. She slams it with the bat, sending it directly back at Ron, who ducks. Oliver leaps on top of it, wrestling it to the ground as Marcus tilts his head appreciatively, admiring his view of Oliver's backside.]

Pansy: [looking down at the bat] "I think like this game."

Ron: "Okay, but hold on, before you get too excited—"

Daphne: "No offense, but it's way too late for that."

Ron: [hastily] "For the Ministry game it's just five-a-side, so there are no beaters."

[There is a pause.]

Pansy: "IS THAT SUPPOSED TO BE SOME KIND OF HILARIOUS JOKE?"

Daphne: "Because it isn't."

Pansy: "—BECAUSE IT ISN'T—"

Ron: "Well it's not like we have officials! We can't have beaters in an unofficial Ministry game, people could get hurt!"

Pansy: "EXACTLY—"

Daphne: "It's like you don't even get it!"

Pansy: "—IT'S LIKE YOU DON'T EVEN GET IT—"

Marcus: "We can officiate the game for you, if you want."
Oliver: [as the bludger escapes and smacks him in the stomach] "Hello? A little help, please?"

Marcus: [shrugging] "You're fine."

Pansy: [to Marcus] "We accept your offer, whoever you are."

Ron: "Hold on a minute—"

Marcus: [ignoring him] "Great. What's it pay?"

Daphne: "Well, in this case, it pays the value of us not writing you up for having violated the DMGS-required handrail width."

Oliver: [dragging himself and the bludger back to the ball case] "I'm sorry, what?"

Pansy: [eyeing her fingernails] "Well, as you know, DMGS regulations require handrails with circular cross sections measuring 32 millimeters minimum, and as you're probably—"

Daphne: "Knowingly, I'd say."

Pansy: "Yes, right, much more litigious—seeing as you're knowingly already aware, yours are far too narrow."

Ron: [gapping] "This you know, but quidditch is too difficult?!"

Daphne: [turning facetiously to Pansy] "That citation would be, what, a few thousand galleons' worth of facility upgrades plus a fine, isn't it?"

Pansy: [cheerfully] "Why yes, Miss Greengrass, I believe it would be!"

Marcus: "Wait a minute. Are you threatening us?"

Daphne: "Aw, that's sweet."

Pansy: "We're so pleased you noticed."

Oliver: [growling with displeasure] "Fine. Let the bloody fines go, then, and we'll officiate your game."

Daphne: [warmly] "That's so kind of you to offer."

Pansy: "And returning to the subject of your boners—"

Ron: [ushering them away] "Actually, we should really just quit while we're ahead."

[Cuts back to Ron, Daphne, Pansy interview.]

Ron: "You two really get away with everything, don't you?"

Daphne: "Oh, honey."

Pansy: "It's tragic you've only just noticed."

[Cuts back to Luna and Severus.]

Luna: "I've been doing almost nothing, really."
Severus: "Clearly. Was that yesterday?"

Luna: "Yes."

Severus: "So what were you doing this morning?"

Luna: "Oh." [She pauses.] "Um—"

[Cuts to Theo in his office.]

Luna: "What are you doing?"

Theo: "Adjusting the humidity in the room."

Luna: "Why?"

Theo: "Makes Granger's hair frizzy."

Luna: "Oh, that's…" [She pauses uncertainly.] "Slightly better than toothpaste, I guess."

[Harry pokes his head in.]

Harry: "Is Hermione here?"

Theo: [continuing to adjust the magical thermostat] "No."

Harry: "Oh. Okay." [He moves to exit, and then pauses.] "Messing with the humidity, huh?"

Theo: [turns over his shoulder] "What makes you say that?"

Harry: "Hermione's hair."

Theo: "Oh."

Harry: "Yeah. Not very creative, Nott."

Theo: [pausing suspiciously] "Excuse me?"

Harry: "Well, I mean, it's fine. I suppose everyone has to start somewhere."

Theo: [with oppressive indignation] "EXCUSE ME?"

[Luna glances between them, giggling shrilly.]

Harry: "Well… it just seems like you could do better than just a mild inconvenience, that's all."

Theo: [sarcastically] "Oh really, Golden Boy? And what would you do, then?"

[Luna disappears.]

Harry: "I mean, if I were to pull a prank, I think I'd go for more of a long game."

[Luna reappears, tugging Lee behind her.]

Lee: [gruffly] "What is it?"

Luna: "Look!"
Theo: "Oh really Potter, a long game? And what makes you think you can even pull off any sort of long con?"

Harry: [smugly] "Well, I am the Chosen One."

[Theo's eyes narrow. Harry cocks his head, beckoning.]

Lee: [whispering loudly] "OH MY GOD, I SEE IT."

Theo: "So what are you suggesting, then, Potter?"

Harry: [thoughtfully] "Well, the most important thing is the victim."

Theo: "Don't tell me what's important as if I don't already know!"

Harry: [shrugging] "Fine." [He turns.] "I suppose I'll just go then—"

Luna, Lee, and Theo: "WAIT!"

[Theo glances quizzically at Luna and Lee, who pantomime zippers across their mouths.]

Theo: "Wait. Fine." [He sighs.] "What would you do?"

Harry: [with a faint air of victory] "Well, has anyone been bothering you lately?"

Theo: "Hm. Well—"

[Cuts to the office earlier that day.]

Draco: "LISTEN UP, YOU HEAVEN-SLAPPED SWOT-MONSTER—"

Hermione: "ME LISTEN? YOU LISTEN, YOU VAMPIRIC TYRANT—"

Draco: "—IF YOU COULD MANAGE TO BE LESS ETHEREALLY IRRITATING WE MIGHT ACTUALLY GET SOMETHING DONE—"

Hermione: "—WHEREAS IF YOU COULD CONTAIN YOUR OPPRESSIVE SMUGGERY FOR APPROXIMATELY FIVE MINUTES—"

Draco: "OH, I CAN GO A HELL OF A LOT LONGER THAN FIVE MINUTES, GRANGER!"

[Theo glances at the camera, shaking his head.]

Hermione: [startled] "What does that mean?"

Draco: [looking violently ill] "NOTHING!"

Hermione: [furiously] "Then will you stop yelling, Malfoy?"

Draco: "I'm sorry, what?"

Hermione: "MALFOY, YOU COURTLY BASTARD—"

Draco: "YOU'RE ONE TO TALK, YOU SUMPTUOUS PAIN IN MY ARSE!"

[The camera settles on where Theo rests his head against the desk.]
Hermione: "Fine. FINE. Let's just go with your idea, then. What even was it?"

Draco: *[cupping a hand to his ear]* "What?"

Hermione: *[with palpable fury]* "DO NOT—"

Draco: "I said, Granger, that McGonagall should approve all class syllabi prior to the start of term, and—"

Hermione: *[aghast]* "But that's exactly what I said, Malfoy!"

Draco: "WELL, MAYBE IF YOU'D MANAGED TO ADDRESS ME WITH A SLIGHTLY LESS ANGELIC FLUSH OF RAGE, YOU MIGHT HAVE NOTICED WE WERE IN AGREEMENT."

Hermione: "MALFOY, I SWEAR, ONE MORE WORD AND I WILL FUCK YOUR SHIT UP —"

Draco: "How?"

Hermione: "What?"

*[Theo looks out the window, as though he is contemplating a leap.]*

Draco: "Just—how would you do it? Be specific."

Hermione: "What?"

Draco: "I mean—not for anything weird, obviously. Normal stuff."

Hermione: "Are you sure?"

Draco: *[indignantly]* "What, I can't have private oddities now?"

*[Cuts to Pansy.]*

Pansy: *[rolling her eyes]* "Thanks, Shacklebolt."

*[Cuts back to Draco and Hermione.]*

Hermione: "I—what?"

*[Cuts back to Harry and Theo.]*

Theo: "I can think of a couple people I'd like to prank, yeah."

Harry: *[with some hesitation]* "Well, I don't know. Hermione is my best friend—"

Theo: "So? Draco's mine."

Harry: "Huh. True."

Theo: "Besides, don't tell me you've never wanted to get Granger back for something."

Harry: "Oh. Um."

*[Cuts to old footage of Harry and Hermione.]
Hermione: "Harry, have you done your essay for Snape's class? Stop playing chess with Ron! And anyway, if you're going to move that piece, you should really—" [She plops down beside him, shaking her head.] "Honestly, are you trying to lose?"

[Cuts to more old footage.]

Hermione: "Harry, have you figured out the egg yet? Stop enchanting pictures of Snape with oversized breasts! They're not even anatomically correct, and—here, let me fix it—" [She grabs at the drawing, muttering to herself.] "Honestly, Ron clearly drew these, they're entirely without proportion—"

[Cuts to more old footage.]

Hermione: "Harry, have you gotten the memory yet? Stop writing fake horoscopes with Ron!" [She grabs the parchment from him, scribbling things out.] "First of all, 'you're a Death Eater, Malfoy' is hardly even subtle, you could at least embed it with a touch more nuance—"

[Cuts back to Harry and Theo.]

Harry: [tentatively] "I guess a little light mischief never hurt anyone."

Theo: "That's the spirit! And—sorry, just one second—" [He turns over his shoulder.] "Why are you two crying?"

Lee: [swiping at his eyes] "IT'S JUST—"

Luna: "This is very exciting for us."

Lee: "YOU CAN'T POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND."

Luna: "Yes. You don't know what we've been through!"

Lee: "I, SPECIFICALLY, DESERVE TO HAVE THIS."

Harry: "Have what?"

Theo: "What on earth are you on about?"

Lee: [wailing] "YOU BLIND IDIOTS!"

Luna: "Where's Severus? He'd love this."

[Camera pans out, revealing Severus just to the right of the frame.]

Severus: [licking a finger, turning the page of his Quibbler] "I've seen worse."

Lee: "THROW ME IN THE BINS, I'M TRASH."

Theo: "Potter, should we discuss this further?"

Harry: "Sure. Hungry?"

Theo: "In general I do enjoy lunch with my mayhem, yes."

[They leave. Lee continues sobbing incoherently.]

Luna: "Hm." [She looks around the room.] "What should I do now?"
[Scene cuts to Rita and Gilderoy.]

Rita: "Will you please just read the cue cards if you're not going to manage to act like a normal human person?!

Gilderoy: "Joke's on you, woman! I don't know what any of that means."

[Luna smiles knowingly at the camera.]

Rita: [seething] "There's a not insignificant chance I might murder you, you pratting loon."

Gilderoy: [indignantly] "My eyes are up here!"

Rita: "What?!!"

[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "I told Gilderoy the same thing I tell everyone. If you're ever in a difficult situation, just say 'my eyes are up here.' It seems to work perfectly well for women, and then I remember where their eyes are, so all in all it's just a courteous thing to do."

[Cuts back to Luna and Severus.]

Luna: "You know perfectly well what I was doing this morning."

Severus: "Unfortunately, that's very true."

Luna: [cheerfully] "Oh, it's not that unfortunate. I think you derive some pleasure from it. Besides, if you aren't Gossip Girl this year, then what are you going to do with all your free time?"

Severus: [taking a disturbingly sinister photograph of a lime green bowler hat brandishing a bloodied knife] "Sorry, free time?"

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**Free verse #116**

I had a dream last night
That you and I were talking
About something stupid;
Ancient runes

You didn't hate me
And I didn't hate you
Which ultimately proves
That dreams are bollocks

But still
We should probably kiss

---

**Free verse #272**

You are loveliest in a temper
In a rage, in fact
You can't see it
But I make your eyes dance
And if you saw what I saw
You'd understand
Why I just called Weasley a dumb twat

For one thing, he is
But for another
I like to watch you sparkle
Even if it means I have to jump out of the way

Haiku #2789

Unresolved issues?
That hardly seems relevant
Love notwithstanding

Sonnet #1372

It seems like you should know by now
That I am difficult at best
Since I can tell my noble brow
Is near perpetually distressed
Your presence is a plague for me
I'm in a constant sweat
Death is coming for me soon
But you never seem to fret
It's almost like you've lost all sight
Of what we used to be
And sure, a sonnet might be trite
But so is ignorance, you fiend
I don't think that I ask for much in pointing out the obvious
I simply think that we should fuck, being once such able hobbyists

Free verse #1299

Is this some sort of joke?
I'm handsome
My mother says so
And Theo
I don't know why they were both there
But they agreed
So frankly
It must be true

Free verse #1456

The things that pile on my desk
Remind me of the times gone by
The memories I hoarded
Wrapped between your naked thighs

I know that you'd prefer
If I just did my office work
But call my sad devotion
Just another charming quirk
I suppose that it's a pity
I suppose that it's a shame
I still suppose the worst of me
And I suppose it's all the same

So call it what you want to
Call me the stupidest of fools
I guess that's how the cookie crumbles
Clearly I don't make the rules

Why would I indulge you this,
My crippling nostalgia?
Because, it's hardly any worse
Than stiffening myalgia

Besides, I don't think you forgot me
I suspect you feel it still
So I'll just torment you from here
Until you get your fill

Haiku #2943

Ninety-nine problems
And if I'm being honest
You are all of them

Free verse #1333

Do I pine for you?
That's ridiculous
I am not a tree
I am not a cone
I would never pine

Do I ache for you?
That's libellous
A scandal
I am not a bruise
I do not ache

Oh, semantics, you might say
Well, I'll give you semantics
Here's a word:
Lustrum

It means five years
So no
I haven't been pining
But yes
Now that you ask
I have definitely been counting
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode XII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 12.

[Scene opens with Dean and Seamus.]

Seamus: "I have to say, Gossip Girl is really going for the jugular this time."

Dean: [surprised] "How do you figure?"

Seamus: "Well, going after Nott like that is a bit harsh, don't you think?"

Dean: "It's not any worse than Potter and Ginny. Is that really the bar for jugular?"

Seamus: "That's just what it's called, Dean."

Dean: "What what's called?"

Seamus: "You know. When you sleep with older women."

[There is a pause.]

Dean: "I'm sorry, but are you trying to call Nott a 'gigolo'?"

Seamus: [scoffing] "I hardly think this has anything to do with the state of his neck, Dean."

[Cut to Theo interview.]

Theo: "Look, it's not a big deal. This isn't the first time I've been accused of fucking Draco's mum. Though now that I think about it, he hasn't mentioned it in a while."

[Cut to Draco interview.]

Draco: "I really just prefer to bury myself in delusion. Better for my digestion."

Rita: "You know, I suspect Granger does something similar."

[Camera pans out to show Hermione looking up from her desk.]

Hermione: "What? No I don't."

Draco: [to Rita] "Don't worry, she can't hear you from across the room."

Hermione: "I can hear you perfectly well, Malfoy!"

Draco: "Granger, please, I know I've been a good boy. There's no need to keep telling me."

Rita: "I don't think that's what she said."
Draco: "Impossible to tell, really."

Hermione: "Seriously, guys, I'm not delusional."

Draco: [loudly] "Yes, Granger, I know I'm beautiful. MOVE ON."

Rita: [to Draco] "You've really got your own thing going, don't you?"

Draco: "Listen, when your best friend might be railing your mum, you really have to bury yourself in your work. Or, ideally, your coworker."

Hermione: "What!?"

Draco: "See? I told you." [He shrugs] "Can't hear anything from across the room."

[Cuts back to Theo.]

Theo: "It's only speculation, anyway, same as before. And besides, it's not like Gossip Girl ever caused any lasting damage."

[Cuts to Justin Finch-Fletchley and Pomona Sprout interview.]

Justin: "Actually, Gossip Girl did uncover my dependence on fluxweed-opiates. I was arrested for a hot sec there right before seventh year."

Pomona: [patting his knee] "But we worked through it, didn't we?"

Justin: "Yes my sassy lady greenthumb, we certainly did."

Rita: "And what about this?" [She gestures skeptically between them.] "I take it you were released from your position then, Professor Sprout?"

Pomona: [surprised] "Me? No. Albus was fairly chill about it."

Albus, via his portrait: "It happens."

Rita: "I'm sorry, what happens?"

Albus: [shrugging] "On occasion, feelings of a romantic nature and/or one or two penises are unleashed without regard for age, social propriety, or squick factor."

Gilderoy: "It's nobody's fault!"

Albus: "Yes, exactly."

Gilderoy: [sadly] "It's hard to keep him inside the pants."

Albus: "Again, yes, that."

Rita: [to Albus] "Is that—are you speaking from experience?"

Albus: [sarcastically] "No, Rita. It's just a wild extrapolation of statistically significant evidence that's not remotely anecdotal."

[Minerva enters, startled to a halt.]

Minerva: "What in the name of Godric's sweet melonsack are you all doing in my office?"
Justin: "Oh, hey Minnie."

Minerva: "Stop calling me that immediately."

Justin: "Cool, can do."

Pomona: "We were just sharing the story of our love."

Minerva: "You mean the brush of illegality that resulted in this maniacal union?"

Rita: "Ostensibly, yes."

Pomona: "Oh but Minerva, I thought you liked my boyfriend?"

Minerva: "Honestly? I'd like him a lot better if he wasn't always trying to smoke shrivelfigs behind the greenhouse when he thinks I'm not looking."

Justin: "I have glaucoma, okay?"

Pomona: "Yes, he's managing his condition!"

Minerva: [sighing wearily] "Granger's right. This place needs a flood."

[Cuts to Hermione.]

Hermione: [tentatively] "I didn't say it needed a flood, per se, but I did heavily imply that a swarm of locusts would not be amiss."

[Cuts back to Theo.]

Theo: "In any case, it's not a big deal. So what if Gossip Girl thinks I'm some sort of cougar bait? I've heard worse things, frankly."

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna on his left side.]

Luna: "Really? Like what?"

Theo: [startled] "How did you get here?"

Luna: "Me?"

Theo: "Yes, obviously you."

Luna: "Oh. I thought you meant him."

[Camera pans out to reveal Harry on Theo's right side.]

Harry: "Oh, hi."

Theo: "Well, I knew he was there."

Luna: [slyly] "Did you?"

Lee, off screen: [high-pitched wailing] "TRASH!"

Harry: "Anyway, Nott, I don't really care who you are or aren't fucking."
Theo: [airily] "Well, good."

Harry: "I mean, unless you want to come clean—"

Theo: "Shh, shh, she's coming!"

[Hermione enters the office as Theo tugs Harry and Luna down, hiding them behind his desk. Hermione picks up a piece of parchment from atop her pile of papers, frowning as she scans it.]

Hermione: "What's this?"

Theo: "Office secret santa."

Hermione: [suspiciously] "I've never heard of that."

Theo: "Well, Granger, you clearly need to read your memos more carefully."

Hermione: "I read all the memos! I have them saved in a scrapbook!"

[Cut to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "This one's my favorite." [Camera zooms in on a meticulously labeled binder.] "It's all the memos sent between the third week of January and the fourth week of March last year. They're all in Didot typeface and there's just a really pleasing sense of cohesion. [She sighs happily, and then her expression darkens.] "But don't even get me started on the Lucinda Handwriting debacle of September 2001."

[Cuts back to the office.]

Theo: "Well, clearly you're missing the fine print, Granger."

Hermione: [sighing as she reads the parchment] "I have Malfoy, really?"

Theo: [shrugging] "It's a small office, Granger."

Hermione: "Ugh, fine."

[She throws the parchment in her bag, muttering something about 'totally ineffectual' and 'this is clearly how I die' before leaving the office again. In her absence, Harry and Luna resurface.]

Harry: "Think she bought it?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Severus, who is wearing sunglasses and reclining in his lawn chair.]

Severus: "Well, just think—if she didn't, then you two only wasted three entire hours of your miserable little lives."

Harry: [panicked] "Three hours?! I have to find Ron!"

[He leaves.]

Theo: [sighing] "Frankly, I have no idea what I'm going to do for the next three hours."

[Severus looks up from where he is clipping letters of different typefaces out of various editions of the Daily Prophet. Currently, the letters are arranged to spell 'DEATH AWAITS' while a few scattered letters vaguely spell the words 'BOWLER HAT' and 'HARBINGER OF NIGHTMARES.' ]
Severus: "Have you ever written a ransom note?"

Theo: "Not that the authorities know of."

[They eye each other suspiciously, and then Severus nodes approvingly.]

Severus: "Sit down, Nott."

[Cuts to Theo interview.]

Theo: [smugly] "Year of pranks, baby!"

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Late because I was at the premiere of Watsky's 'x Infinity,' which is an album you should really listen to if you haven't already.
The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XIII


[Scene opens with Cormac, Neville, and Blaise.]
Cormac: "Fuck Flint, marry Belby, kill Aurelius."
Blaise: "What? No. We're—what? We're not even doing that right now."
Cormac: "Hm? [He blinks.] "Oh, sorry, am I supposed to be doing something?"
Blaise: [impatiently] "Yes. We're working on the Slub Club reunion party, remember?"
Cormac: "Question. Who will be presenting me with the lifetime achievement award?"
Blaise: "No one."
Cormac: [shrugging] "Never heard of her."
Blaise: "What exactly are you even supposed to have achieved up to this point, McLaggen?"
Cormac: "It's a lifetime of achievement, Zabini. The achievement is ongoing."
Blaise: "Well, you're useless."
Cormac: [smugly] "Joke's on you. I already know that."
Neville, from just outside camera view: "Blaise, I really don't think I can be helpful with this right now—"
Blaise: "And why not?!"
Neville: [frantically] "Because I have to do something about all these poisonous plants!"
[Camera pans out to reveal that Neville's desk is surrounded by abnormally large potted plants, of at least a dozen nefarious varieties.]
Blaise: "Holy hell, Longbottom. Who are you trying to murder?"
Neville: "They're not mine! I just came in and they were here! The weird thing is they're not even from the same genus of flora."
Blaise: "Really? That's the weird thing?"
Cormac: [pointing] "I'd marry that one, fuck that one, and kill that one."
Blaise: [alarmed] "Jesus, McLaggen—"
Neville: "No, no. He's right."

[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "I mean, the game definitely has a good amount of nuance, but when it comes down to it, I always know what things should or shouldn't be fucked. It's basically just a teeth rule. Like, does it have teeth? Ask first. If it says yes, then fine. If it says no, then no. If it can't speak, probably also lean towards no, just for safety." [He pauses.] "Also, all of the plants were addressed to Malfoy, but that didn't seem relevant to mention."

[Cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: [irritably] "Yeah, so, this whole 'secret santa' thing is going to be a challenge. I had good intentions at first! In fact, I was planning to do something a little bit less—"

Rita: "Villainous?"

Hermione: [shrugging] "Yeah, sure." [Her expression darkens.] "But then he had to go and be a total monster."

[Cuts to the office earlier that day.]

Hermione: "What do you think about herbology?"

Draco: [not looking up] "Honestly? I'm not convinced."

Hermione: [continuing] "Because I was thinking that for the curricul—" [She stumbles to a halt.] "Wait a minute. What do you mean you're not convinced about herbology?"

Draco: [shrugging] "Just sounds like a pseudoscience, you know? Like astrology, or gravity."

Hermione: "Malfoy, gravity is definitely a real thing." [She pauses, genuinely concerned.] "You do know that gravity's a thing, right?"

Draco: "Look, the whole thing is based on some guy getting hit in the head with an apple. I don't know about you, Granger, but I don't know that I can trust something that begins with a concussion, even if it does involve Latin. And apples."

Hermione: [momentarily speechless] "Gravity is one thing, fine, but herbology, Malfoy? It's the entire basis for potions, and it's obviously crucial for care of magical creatures—"

Draco: "Look, you asked, and I gave you my answer."

Hermione: "Yes, but are you honestly just suggesting, just… a blanket no on all herbology?"

Draco: [shrugging] "I mean, if the shoe kicks."

[Cuts to Pansy and Daphne.]

Daphne: "If the shoe kicks, definitely buy it."

Pansy: "Yes. These shoes were made for kicking."

Daphne: "Unless it's a dead man's shoe."

Pansy: "In which case, if it kicks, put it back. It's haunted."
Daphne: "Right. So basically, just don't underestimate a kicking shoe."

Pansy: "You knew it was a shoe when you picked it up."

Daphne: "Yep. So put it back down."

[There is a pause.]

Pansy: "I feel like we were supposed to be doing something."

[Camera pans out to reveal a lengthy queue of people at their service desk.]

Marcus: "Hello? Are you even working?"

Daphne: "Which Marcus even are you?"

Pansy: "Also, we're closed for the day."

Marcus: [with palpable annoyance] "It's 9:30 in the morning!"

Daphne: "Look, when we need a snotty talking watch, we'll let you know."

[Cuts back to Hermione and Draco.]

Hermione: "So, let me get this straight: no herbology. No gravity. None of it."

Draco: "Right."

[A pause.]

Hermione: "ARE YOU INSANE?!"

Draco: "DON'T YELL AT ME, YOU OPPRESSIVELY WHIMSICAL MOONBEAM!"

Hermione: "What if I delivered a dozen poisonous magical plants to you, hm, Malfoy?" [With a distinctive air of 'I told you so'] "If you hadn't taken herbology, you wouldn't even know they were toxic!"

Draco: [scoffing] "I don't need to know a plant is toxic to know not to fuck it, Granger."

[Cuts to Cormac.]

Cormac: "See? Teeth rule. Tell your friends."

[Cuts back to Hermione and Draco.]

Hermione: "MALFOY, YOU ARE IMPOSSIBLE!"

Draco: [hopefully] "To resist?"

Hermione: "TO WORK WITH!"

Draco: "Oh. Well, in that case—" [He holds his hand up to his ear.] "What did you say?"

[Cuts to interview with Theo and Harry.]

Harry: "So, we've had sort of a busy morning."
Rita: "Sorry, you are … I want to say Terry?"

Gilderoy: [excitedly] "Close!"

Harry: [sighing] "Isn't this getting old yet?"

Gilderoy: [to Rita] "It's pronounced 'Terr-ay,' but in my experience names can be very confusing."

[Cuts to Neville.]

Gilderoy: "Sorry, your name is what?"

Neville: [sighing] "Neville Longbottom."

Gilderoy: "Yes, yes, Longbottom. And this is… [He trails off, squinting intently.] "A normal name?"

Neville: [exasperatedly] "Can I just please get rid of these plants? They're starting to burn."

[Cuts to Cormac.]

Cormac: "I have rules about burning, too, but they're pretty self-explanatory. Mostly just a delicate no to anything that burns."

[Cuts back to Theo and Harry.]

Theo: "Yeah, so, I sort of figured Granger was going to send something terrible, but this was a surprise." [He shudders.] "Frankly, I'm starting to question how responsible she actually is."

Rita: "She once kept me in a jar."

Theo: "Did she?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Severus beside them dabbing a brush onto canvas. He is crafting an elegant watercolor that features a lime green bowler with sensual eyes, overlooking a vast ravine with a series of crumpled hats at the bottom.]

Severus: "Also, she once lit me on fire."

Theo: "Right, okay, so rule number one, be careful with Granger."

Harry: "It's a good rule." [To Theo] "So what exactly did you do with the plants, anyway?"

Theo: "You say that like you don't trust me to have done the responsible thing, Potter."

Harry: "Well, now that you mention it—"

[Cuts to Neville, who is nursing a series of nasty-looking blisters.]

Neville: "I mean, it's really best that I got them, anyway. At least I know what to do with them, right? Someone else could have really been hurt!"

[Cuts back to Harry and Theo.]

Theo: "Listen, I went with the option that would cause the least damage, okay?"

Harry: "Fine. And what about Malfoy?"
Theo: "What about him?"

[The camera pans out to show Draco popping up from behind his desk, looking feverishly manic. All of his drawers have been opened and everything he owns is levitating in the air, orbiting his head like a halo.]

Draco: "IT'S GONE!"

Harry: "THE WRIST THING, AND KNOCKT- oh sorry." [He exhales slowly.] "Reflexes, you know."

Gilderoy: "I understand."

Harry: "Do you?"

Gilderoy: "Yes." [sympathetically] "It's hard to keep him in the pants."

Theo: [To Draco] "What's gone, buddy?"

Draco: [wringing his hands] "MY—MY—"

Theo: "Use your words, pal."

Draco: "IT'S—I CAN'T—"

Theo: [innocently] "You're not missing a book of Granger poetry by any chance, are you, Draco?"

Draco: [with obvious distress] "I DON'T WRITE POEMS."

[He leaves with a clatter, looking severely unhinged. Harry glances at Theo.]

Harry: "Hm. Is it possible this is all escalating a bit too quickly?"

Theo: "Anything's technically possible, Potter. That doesn't mean we should spend all day charting every possibility. I have far too many demands on my time as it is."

Rita: [skeptically] "Working hard, are you?"

Theo: [shrugging] "Hey. I could be worse."

[Cuts to Daphne and Pansy.]

Daphne: "You know, I'm really warming up to this whole quidditch thing."

Pansy: "I know, right? I feel like it's doing me a lot of good professionally."

Daphne: "Yes. And my skin feels clearer, too."

Pansy: "Right. There's just something about investing in my career that's really cleansing my aura."

Daphne: "I'm so proud of us."

Pansy: "Me too!"

[Camera pans out to show Ginny waiting in line at the service desk.]

Ginny: "So … are you guys going to fill out this permit form, or—?"
Pansy: "Honestly? Probably not."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Happy birthday to my love UnicornShenanigans! A haiku for you, my review haiku queen:

Today you were born
Look how the stars are shining!
We're all glad you're here
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode XIV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XIV


[Scene opens with Dean and Seamus.]

Seamus: "You know, I will say that whoever Gossip Girl is this year, they're really missing that poetic touch from last time. It used to be more of a sly meandering into the point, you know what I mean?"

Dean: "Whereas now, it's more like the dropping a point-laden anvil."

Seamus: "Which is great in many ways, obviously."

Dean: "Of course. Efficiency, for one."

Seamus: "Yes, very efficient. Just get in—"

Dean: "—strongly suggest that the Slug Club is some sort of incestuous sex organization—"

Seamus: "—and get out."

Dean: "Right. Efficiency."

Seamus: [nodding gravely] "Efficiency."

[Cuts to Neville, Cormac, and Marcus.]

Cormac: [thoughtfully] "I'm going to say fuck me, marry Marcus, and kill Neville."

Neville: "Yeah, that sounds about right."

Marcus: "I'd fuck you, Longbottom."

Cormac: "Really? So then you'd marry me?"

Marcus: "Well… that is one option, yes."

Cormac: "But then you'd have to kill yourself."

Marcus: "A coincidence, I'm sure."

Neville: [to Rita] "Sorry, what was the question?"

Rita: "I asked what you think about the latest Gossip Girl allegations."

Marcus: "What, that we're sex fiends?"
Cormac: "Oh, was that a Gossip Girl note? Weird. I thought they were just renaming the department."

Marcus: "You thought they were renaming the department to members of the Slug Club past establish sex den for members present?"

Cormac: [shrugging] "Hey man, I don't oil the machine, I just fuck her til she comes."

Marcus: "That's ... progressive?"

Cormac: "I like to think so."

Neville: "For the record, we're pretty sure that note doesn't apply to us."

Rita: "Who else would it apply to?"

[Blaise pokes his head in.]

Blaise: "Okay, so for the reunion, do we think seven minutes is enough? What about like, fifteen minutes in heaven? I just feel like seven is sort of a lot of pressure to perform, you know what I mean? Actually, maybe twenty minutes, just to be safe." [He pauses.] "How long if I'm factoring in possible cunilatio?"

Cormac: "Is Mercury in retrograde?"

Blaise: "What? No."

Cormac: "Are there roller skates involved? Or any heavy machinery?"

Blaise: "I—no. Definitely not."

Cormac: "Any gluten allergies?"

Blaise: "Not that I know of."

Cormac: "How many buttons?"

Blaise: "On her, or on me?"

Cormac: "Total."

Blaise: "Um. Two?"

Cormac: [shrugging] "Then sure, twenty minutes."

Neville: "Hold on. Isn't this party being held at work?"

Blaise: "Yes. But do I even work here?"

Cormac: "Who, you?"

Marcus: "Are you talking about you?"

Neville: [frowning] "I no longer feel like I understand this."

Rita: "Wait, does he work here?"
Neville: "Who, Blaise?"

Cormac: [approvingly] "Back in it. Nice."

Neville: "Thanks." [He sighs contentedly] "It felt right."

Blaise: "Also, do we think black tie?"

Marcus: "I thought this was just a casual get together."

Blaise: "Well, right, it was. But then someone pointed out that we picked the same day as the Ministry quidditch game, so I figured we should probably have it afterwards. Plus, you know." [He shrugs] "I just look better in dress robes."

Neville: "Who exactly are you trying to impress, Zabini?"

Cormac: "Me, I assume. In which case, don't worry. I'm looking, and I like what I see."

Blaise: "I—no. Thank you, but no."

Cormac: "I didn't actually offer."

Blaise: "Oh."

Cormac: [scoffing] "Believe me, when I offer, you'll know."

[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "It's because there are several legally binding contracts involved."

[Pans out to reveal Daphne and Pansy on either side of him.]

Pansy: "It's just the smart thing to do, honestly."

Daphne: "Nobody wants to be held liable for unforeseeable damages."

Pansy: "Unforeseeable by the victim, obviously."

Daphne: "By which she means partner."

Pansy: [frowning] "Why, what did I say?"

[Cuts back to office scene.]

Rita: "So hold on. You're throwing a reunion party just so you might have a chance to sleep with someone?"

Blaise: "Well, I considered writing a book of poetry and accosting them slowly over time, but recent events have proven that to be a somewhat vulnerable way of going about things."

[Cuts to Draco interview. His hair is standing on end and he is twitching slightly.]

Draco: "Okay, so here's my theory—ghosts."

Rita: "Is... is there more?"

Draco: [whispering] "Ghost thieves."
Blaise: "I'm thinking I made a good call, all things considered."

Rita: "Right. And the person you're doing all this for?"

Blaise: "Oh. Um—"

Ginny: "I mean, I'm not going to lie. I've definitely wondered about how this whole reunion thing is going to go now that Harry and I are publicly broken up. Blaise and I used to have sort of an affinity for broom cupboards, if you know what I mean."

Gilderoy: "Sorry, is that a reference to sex or murder?"

Ginny: "What?"

Gilderoy: "It's just that when I don't understand something, it's usually about sex or murder."

Ginny: [apprehensively] "Who have you been talking to about murder?"

Sorting Hat: "—and when all these SPINELESS COWARDS have finally stepped aside and relinquished MY MORTAL ENEMY from his WRETCHED SANCTUARY OF COWARDICE, I'll have him swimming with the fishes before I've even finished my afternoon Earl Grey."

Gilderoy: [tentatively] "Sorry, is that a sex thing?"

Ginny: "Turns out hats don't have sex."

Ginny: "Right."

Gilderoy: "They appear to be super into homicide, though."

Ginny: [thoughtfully] "Well, in fairness to you, 'swimming with the fishes' wouldn't be the weirdest sex euphemism I've ever heard."

Daphne: "Taming the strange."

Luna: "Joint session of congress."

Harry: "Opening the Chamber of Secrets."

Neville: "Spelunking down under."

Seamus: "Detention in the Forbidden Forest."

Minerva: "Fifteen minutes of disappointment."

Theo: "The disappearing wand trick."
Draco: "Servicing Venus."

Albus: "Wrangling the cyclops."

Gilderoy: "Honestly? No one will tell me."

Cormac: "Spaghetti time!"

Hermione: "Ouch, my hair is stuck."

Blaise: "Ain't nothin' wrong with a little bump and grind."

Ron: "Am I doing this right?"

Pansy: "It's called fucking, you amateurs." [She pauses.] "But I'm sure the golden snatch applies here somehow."

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Chapter End Notes

*a/n: A short one today, as I really, really need to sleep. Resounding thanks for following along!*
Minerva: "Do you even have any idea what's going on in this Ministry, Shacklebolt?! Granger's trying to require accreditation! She wants teachers to be credentialed! She's demanding standards! Measures!"

Sorting Hat: "VENGEANCE!"

Albus: "It's like she's trying to turn the school into some sort of—some kind of—"

Kingsley: "School?"

Albus: "YES, EXACTLY. Like some sort of—"

Kingsley: "Fiduciary bureaucrat?"

Albus: "THE WOMAN MUST BE STOPPED!"

Sorting Hat: "THE DAWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS IS UPON US!"

Kingsley: "You guys really need to refine your agenda. Candidly, it seems like it's going in a few different directions."

Albus: "To be honest, we've definitely already discussed it."

Kingsley: "It's my fault. I got carried away."

Albus: "It's fine."

Kingsley: "I appreciate that. I feel heard."

Albus: "Hm?"

Minerva: "Listen, you just need to put a stop to it, Kingsley, immediately. Just—move Granger to a different department or something."

Kingsley: "It can't be that bad, can it?"

Minerva: "ROLL THE TAPE, JORDAN!"

Lee, outside camera view: "YOU'RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME!"

Minerva: "JORDAN, THIS ISN'T THE TIME FOR ROLEPLAY."

Lee: "Fine."

[Cuts to Hogwarts.]
Hermione: "I understand that many of the professors here have excellent academic track records, Professor, but they also have quite a number of issues."

Minerva: [haughtily] "Like what?"

Hermione: [enumerating on her fingers] "Professor Sinistra and Professor Trelawney run an illegal gambling ring out of the Astronomy tower. Professor Flitwick has an outstanding warrant for his part in a diamond heist in Munich. Madame Hooch is using school funds to sell students' shoes to foot fetishes via owl post. Madame Pince has actually been dead for three years and her Inferius is currently running the library. Oh, and Filch is just three bags of sand piled on top of each other wearing a housecoat."

Minerva: [scoffing] "Please. And how would you possibly know about any of this?"

[Cuts to Hermione at Grimmauld Place.]

Winky: [slurring her words into a bottle of butterbeer] "And… and did Winky tell yous, Binns and the Bloody Baron be—" [She pauses, hiccuping.] "They be swimming with fishes every Wednesday when they be thinking Winky is asleeping. But Winky is not asleeping." [She shudders.] "Winky is awakened."

Harry: "You mean woke?"

Winky: [nodding somberly] "Winky is lit."

Hermione: [with palpable concern] "Harry, what's going on?"

Harry: [turning to face her] "Hm? Oh, right, sorry, Kreacher brought Winky over when I asked him to come chat about one of my cases."

Hermione: "Why?"

Harry: "Well, I've started using house elves as informants, did I tell you? Worked out well when we needed to find Mundungus, so I figured I'd keep doing it. Nobody notices them, so, like, I barely have to do any work."

Hermione: "No, I mean—why is Winky here with Kreacher?"

Kreacher: [gravely] "It be spaghetti time, Miss."

[At that, Winky stumbles to her feet, winking outrageously at Hermione and dragging the butterbeer behind her. Scene cuts back to Hermione and Minerva.]

Hermione: "Oh, right. It might also be worth mentioning that some of your house elves have drinking problems."

[Cuts back to Kingsley's office.]

Minerva: "So as you can see, you really need to get your house in order, Shacklebolt."

Kingsley: "What?!"

Luna: "Oh! Maybe you should try going undercover."

[Kingsley jumps in alarm as the camera pans out to reveal Luna standing behind him, gingerly massaging his shoulders.]
Kingsley: "FOR THE LOVE OF—"

Sorting Hat: "—BLOOD FEUDS AND RETRIBUTION!"

Kingsley: [frustratedly] "—how do you keep getting in here—"

Luna: [absentmindedly digging her elbow into a knot in Kingsley's shoulder] "Well, I'm just thinking—what better way to see how the Ministry is doing than going undercover to find out? Seems perfectly reasonable to me."

Kingsley: "I really wish you would stop touching me."

Luna: [lightly pounding his upper back with the blades of her hands] "Well, set achievable goals, I always say."

[Scene cuts to Harry and Theo interview.]

Rita: "So what exactly did you tell Granger? I'm still not understanding the purpose of this prank war."

Harry: "It's not really a prank war so much as a charming scam. You know, like… a whimsical beguilement."

Rita: "Well thank you, Herbert Parsnip, but I don't think I asked for clarification on the verbiage."

Harry: [to Theo] "Actually, what did you tell her, Nott?"

Theo: "Hm? Oh, I told her that secret santa is a weeklong series of alternating gift exchanges."

Rita: [skeptically] "And she believed that?"

Theo: [shrugging] "She really didn't have a choice."

[Hermione: [confused] "Wait. So I gave Malfoy a gift yesterday, and he gives me one today, and then I give him another one tomorrow?"

Theo: "Yes. And this goes on for several more days."

Hermione: "But that doesn't make any sense."

Theo: [pointing to the parchment] "The memo was printed with a Ministry seal, Granger. And it's in Didot font."

Hermione: "That's true." [She sighs.] "Well, I suppose the markers of authenticity are inarguable."

Theo: [patting her shoulder] "Exactly."

[Hermione: [pointing to the parchment] "The memo was printed with a Ministry seal, Granger. And it's in Didot font."

Hermione: "That's true." [She sighs.] "Well, I suppose the markers of authenticity are inarguable."

Theo: [patting her shoulder] "Exactly."

[Rita: "I genuinely worry about literally everyone who works here."

Harry: [resignedly] "Well, speaking of working here, I should probably go back to doing my job. Kingsley's been going undercover to all the offices, so I suppose I should try to pretend like I want
Theo: "Oh, is he doing that? I didn't realize he was having a sneakaround. I should have offered to join." [He shrugs.] "You know. It being the year of pranks and all that."

Harry: "Well, he seems really proud of his disguises, so try not to say anything if you see him."

Theo: "No promises."

Harry: "Right. Bye, then."

[Harry leans forward, brushing his fingers against Theo's arm. Theo leans in at the contact, cupping his free hand around a furtively concealed smirk.]

Rita: [blinking at Harry] "Did—did you just... caress him?"

Harry: [innocently] "Hm?"

Theo: "Who?"

Rita: "I just..." [With furrowed disbelief] "I just honestly don't understand how you didn't think I would see that."

Theo: "See what? I don't even know who this person is. Herbert Parfait, was it?"

Harry: "Parsnip, actually."

Theo: "Right. And also, he's not even remotely Draco's mother."

Harry: "True. Not even a little. Though we were possibly equally obsessed with him at one point in time."

Theo: "That's fair."

Rita: "No it isn't. That's mad."

Theo: "Yes, well, that's the world. Bye, then."

Harry: "Bye."

[Harry leaves.]

Rita: "Well. What now?"

Theo: "Work, I suppose."

Rita: "Working hard, are you?"

Theo: "I've done some things, yes."

[Cut to earlier that day in the office.]

Hermione: [holding a hand tentatively to her mouth] "What is this?" [She looks up at the camera, her eyes wide.] "Who put this here? It's—" [She swallows, glancing back down at the slim leather-bound volume, and whispers quietly to herself.] "He wrote this for me?"

[Cut back to Theo interview.]
Rita: [drily] "Ah, and is that all you did today?"

Theo: "Eh, more or less."

[Cuts to Hogwarts.]

Sorting Hat: [shrieking] "WHAT IS THIS?"

[Minerva jumps in place, turning to glare at it.]

Minerva: "What is it now, you shriveled stewed prune?"

Sorting Hat: "WHO PUT THIS HERE?"

Minerva: "Hold on, what the—" [She breaks off, frowning.] "Is this a ransom n- ah, nope, okay, it's signed 'Bowler Hat,' clearly this is—"

Sorting Hat: [wailing] "HE WROTE THIS FOR ME!"

[Cuts back to Theo.]

Theo: "Fine." [He shrugs.] "More 'more' than 'less,' I suppose."

Rita: "... right."

Theo: "Hey man, I could be worse."

[Cuts to Pansy and Daphne.]

Pansy: [thoughtfully] "I think I'd fuck a troll over a goblin."

Daphne: "Really? But trolls just seem so, you know. Needy in the bedroom."

Pansy: "Right, I get that, but there's no way a goblin would let me stab him in the heat of the moment. That's just—I just don't see that happening, frankly."

Daphne: "Right. That's fair. So would you kill the goblin, then?"

Pansy: "No, I'd definitely marry the goblin. Can you imagine the jewelry? I'd probably Imperius him to forget our anniversary just to be sure I got a tiara out of it." [She pauses.] "Or maybe really fancy handcuffs."

Daphne: [nodding] "Okay, see, I think I'd kill the troll, and I definitely see your argument about the metallurgy with the goblin—"

Pansy: "Right, yeah."

Daphne: "—but that leaves fucking the centaur, and I'm just not sure how feasible that is."

Pansy: "Which part?"

Daphne: "Well, I'm just not sure I buy into the whole divinist angle, you know what I mean? Like, is he going to fuck me and then go on for weeks about our astrological compatibility? That's just really not what I'm there for. I worry that there could be some clinginess involved."

Pansy: "Hm, true. So what then, kill the centaur?"
Daphne: "I actually think marry the centaur. I'll fuck the goblin, it's fine."

[Camera pans out to show that Kingsley is standing at the service counter. He is wearing a fake mustache and a lime green bowler hat, looking horrified to the very core of his being before he slowly backs out of the office.]

[Cuts to Kingsley interview.]

Kingsley: [whispering] "I've made a terrible mistake, and now I am shaken."

Luna: [patting his shoulder] "I think you mean 'shook,' but good try."

[Cuts back to Pansy and Daphne.]

Pansy: [brightly] "Oh, right, so speaking of fucking goblins—"

Daphne: "Yes, speaking of, back to the topic at hand."

Pansy: "Right. So, where do we stand on potentially fucking Weasley?"

Daphne: "How did that lead into this conversation, by the way?"

Pansy: [frowning in thought] "I think it started with 'things we would literally never do' and then transitioned into 'actually, things we might do upon further reflection,' which brought us approximately here."

Daphne: "Right. So where did we land on that?"

Pansy: "We didn't."

Daphne: "Ah, right. Because goblins."

Pansy: "Right. And I'm not sure it matters, anyway. Weasley is currently dating Granger, and I suppose it's probably one of those weird monotonous relationships, isn't it?"

Daphne: "You mean monogamous?"

Pansy: "Why, what did I say?"

Luna: "That doesn't seem like it'll last, though, does it?"

[Camera pans out to show Luna standing behind Pansy, pensively braiding her hair.]

Pansy: [thoughtfully] "Well, that's true. But I'd rather not take the scraps of a relationship, you know what I mean? Even if it is for the benefit of my uninhibited sexual pleasure."

Daphne: [tentatively] "He does meet our standards, though, doesn't he?"

Pansy: "Which standards?"

Daphne: "Well, for one thing, he seems fairly comfortable with being ruthlessly dominated by women, to the point of it altering his entire psyche and possibly damaging him well into adulthood."

Pansy: "Mm, true. And he does take instruction well."

[Cuts to Ron and Pansy.]
Ron: "Okay, so one more time, there are three chasers—"

Pansy: [interrupting] "Weasley, I've decided something."

Ron: "Oh god."

Pansy: "No, it's fine, it's good."

Ron: "I doubt it."

Pansy: "Are you ready?"

Ron: "No."

Pansy: "Okay, here it is: I've decided you're going to be the next Head Auror."

Ron: [taken aback] "Why?"

Pansy: [shrugging] "I think I need friends in high places."

Ron: "Why don't you just befriend people in high places, then?"

Pansy: "Weasley, please. When I want you to be a cunt, I'll strip you down and grab a dildo. In the meantime, do be quiet."

Ron: "Am I allowed to ask questions?"

Pansy: [pausing] "Fine. You can ask three questions."

Ron: "Okay, first question: can I have more questions?"

Pansy: "No. Next?"

Ron: "Are you going to make me do anything illegal?"

Pansy: "Probably. Last one."

Ron: "How is this haircut?"

Pansy: "Bad. So, are we clear?"

[Cuts back to Daphne and Pansy.]

Daphne: "He really does check a lot of boxes."

Pansy: [sighing] "He really, really does."
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episodes XVI-XVII

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XVI-XVII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 16 and 17, because it is finally the last race of Mr Blake's regular season, but the weekend has made me immensely tired.

[Scene opens with Ron and Hermione.]

Rita: "So, what's new with you two?"
Ron: "Not much, really. Working, I suppose."

[Cuts to earlier that day in the Auror office.]

Harry: "Right, so, we have a fairly high-profile case of organized pixie thefts in Knockturn Alley —"

Pansy: [interrupting] "Are the pixies being stolen, or are they doing the stealing?"

Harry: "Well, I'm not—" [He pauses.] "Sorry, why are you here?"
Luna: "It's a valid question."

Harry: "Luna? Why are y-" [He sighs.] "You guys know this is a closed meeting, right?"

Pansy: "I rather think it isn't, Potter. And anyway, it doesn't matter. Disregard my initial question, just write down that Weasley volunteers."

Ron: [startled] "What? I do?"

Pansy: "Yes. He'll be there with balls on."

[Cuts to Cormac.]

Cormac: "I feel that one's pretty self-explanatory."

[Cuts back to Auror office.]

Ron: "Why am I volunteering?"

Pansy: "Because."

Ron: "Oh."

Pansy: "Also, put these on."

Ron: [skeptically] "Are these leather trousers?"

Pansy: [shrugging] "We're just trying things out."
Daphne: "Personally, I wanted you to wear a deerstalker, but Pansy won the toss."

Harry: [frowning] "I'm just realizing there are no other Aurors in this room."

Luna: "Look at you, Harry! Observation."

Gilderoy: [solemnly] "Observation and voyeurism are similar but different things."

Luna: [cheerfully] "Yes, very good, Professor!"

Ron: "Wait. Couldn't I just wear the hat and the trousers at the same time?"

Pansy: "Of course not."

Daphne: "You can't run two experiments at the same time, Weasley."

Pansy: "It's a matter of attribution."

Daphne: "Besides, I never said anything about pants."

Harry: "So… should I just leave, or—?"

Luna: "Do you have somewhere else to be?"

Harry: "Not really."

Luna: [patting the seat beside her] "Come sit, then."

Harry: [resignedly] "Okay."

[He sits.]

Ron: "Hold on. What exactly is the experiment?"

Daphne: "Ooh, sorry, can't tell you."

Pansy: "It's a blind study."

Ron: [alarmed] "Am I going blind?"

Daphne: "I wouldn't worry about it."

Pansy: "Off you go, Weasley. You have pixies to wrangle."

Luna: "Or recover. As yet undetermined."

Harry: [eating popcorn] "I don't actually know, to be honest."

Ron: [as he is being shoved out the door] "Wait, but then how am I supposed to—"

Daphne: "Bye, Weasley!"

Pansy: "Take what's yours!"

Luna: "Manifest destiny!"

Gilderoy: "And if the door says 'ladies,' knock first!"
Ron: "I think I might possibly be some sort of political puppet?" [He frowns.] "But that can't be right—"

Hermione: [fidgeting, her ankle dancing as she crosses her legs tightly] "Well, you certainly haven't been doing anything else of note."

Ron: [startled] "What's that supposed to mean?"

Hermione: "I've seen beauty in your absence / I've known privilege all the same / I know the sun still rises / But I am gutted like a flame / For all that I have loved you / For how deeply I've adored / How bitter my devotion / Now my love's all but abhorred." [She pauses, sniffing.] "The world continues turning / I sleep and then I wake / You exist somewhere beside me / Never mine to give or take." [She pauses again, swiping at her eyes.] "Imagine me from time to time, while badly do I suffer / Transfigure me to weathered stone, that time may make me tougher."

[She looks up at the camera, pained, and glances back down, turning the page.]

Hermione: "I worship you best from my knees / I am holiest from there / Call me penitent in sorrow / Call my name while I despair—"

[She breaks off, bursting into tears.]

Hermione: [between bouts of muffled sobbing] "The last four pages were literally about my breasts and I've been crying on and off for forty-five minutes!"

[Cuts back to Hermione and Ron.]

Hermione: [stiffly] "Just out of curiosity, Ronald, how would you describe my hair?"

Ron: "Um. Brown?"

[Cuts back to Hermione reading aloud.]

Hermione: "... as tangled as our circumstance / As unruly as my heart / As brilliant as a sunbeam / As delicate as art." [She pauses, wailing.] "THAT MAJESTIC BASTARD!"

[Cuts back to Ron and Hermione.]

Ron: "No, wait, your hair is—" [He pauses.] "Pretty? No, wait, trick question." [He grins broadly.] "I value you for your brain, because your hair is not a reflection of your intellect."

Hermione: "Oh, just SHUT UP."

[She promptly storms out. Ron stares after her, puzzled, and then sighs.]

Ron: "You know, all of the women in my life are being very confusing at the moment."

Rita: "Well, Miss Parkinson and Miss Greengrass certainly seem to have taken an interest in you."

Ron: "True, Daphne seems to have warmed to me. I'm still not sure about Pansy, though." [He shifts uneasily] "Sometimes she seems like she's saying a nice thing, but I'm never fully convinced she isn't holding a knife, you know what I mean?"
Daphne: "That's the thing about being in Pansy's life. You never really know for sure if she likes you."

Pansy: "Well, I don't know. Eventually I think you sort it out."

Daphne: "We're certainly permitted our suspicions."

Pansy: "Yes. And in the event of confusion, I've written down all my opinions on people, with instructions to be read aloud at my funeral."

Pansy: "To Potter: I didn't actually want the Dark Lord to murder you. I probably would have managed to live with myself if he had, but it was really more of an in-the-moment expression of concern for my own well-being, and therefore almost not at all about you. Hope that makes you feel better. If it doesn't, I don't care. To Theo: I have almost no thoughts about you. Don't take that as an insult, but also don't take it as a compliment. It means nothing, which is coincidentally what you have meant to me. To Granger: I know it must have seemed like you annoyed me, and perhaps that I was rude to you out of some sort of inherent, baseless dislike. This is correct. Please know that nobody has ever annoyed me more than you, and that I have never had a reason. Some things just are. Also, in case I didn't get to say it while I was alive, please also know that the brown skirt you seem to like is the most terrible thing I've ever seen and I've set it on fire. Oh, note to Daphne: please see that this is done. Thank you. And also, I did genuinely like you, but don't tell anyone, because it's embarrassing."

Daphne: "That's very thoughtful of you."

Pansy: [nodding] "I like to think so."

Ron: "Well, anyway. I should probably go. Apparently I'm up for a promotion, and I think my girlfriend might be cross with me, so I suppose I should probably apologize."

Rita: "What are you planning to apologize for?"

Ron: [thinking] "Well, from experience, I've either unjustly blamed her cat, failed to ask her to the Yule Ball, or left her stranded on a horcrux hunt."

Rita: "Just... any one of those things?"

Ron: "I'll probably apologize for all of them, just to be safe."

Rita: "Fair enough. Oh, and I take it you haven't seen Gossip Girl's latest memo?"

Ron: [frowning] "No. What's it say?"

Seamus: "Well, between you and me and everyone, Weasley's quite the hot topic this morning."

Dean: "Yes. Apparently he's competing with Harry for the Head Auror job? Which I'm not sure he
knows about. It doesn't seem like something he'd do on purpose."

Seamus: "Well, he did beat out Potter for Prefect, didn't he?"

Dean: "Yeah, but I'm pretty sure Dumbledore said that came to him in a dream."

Seamus: "I'm sure Kingsley has dreams too. He has a whimsical disposition, I think."

Dean: "Are you suggesting that Dumbledore had a whimsical disposition?"

Seamus: "Well he had a twinkle in his eye, didn't he? So it was definitely either whimsy or a vaguely dangerous mania."

Dean: "Right, true. Oh, and speaking of Kingsley, I've been meaning to ask—do we think that he might be Gossip Girl?"

Seamus: "Why do you say that?"

Dean: "Because he's been sitting here for three hours pretending to be a potted plant."

[Camera pans out to show Kingsley standing in a large ceramic pot. There are several leaves and twigs taped to his clothing. He sighs, rises to his feet, and drags the planter along behind him as he exits the office.]

Seamus: "Well, that's new."

Dean: "Sorry, what was the question?"

[Rita walks past the doorframe, coming to a sudden halt and pausing to poke her head in.]

Pansy: "Weasley, aren't you supposed to be working?"

Ron: [startled to his feet] "Yes, right, sorry—"

[He leaves. Pansy glances at Rita, arching a brow in disapproval.]

Pansy: "Is there a reason you're speaking to him?"

Rita: "Yes. And I know what you're doing, you know."

Pansy: [skeptically] "Oh really?"

Rita: "Obviously. You're not the first woman to try to prop up a useless man for her own selfish purposes, you know."

Pansy: "Hey, he's not totally useless! [She shrugs.] "I assume, anyway."
Pansy: "To Weasley: You're not totally useless. I assume." [She glances up.] "I update these on a biweekly basis, so, you know. All of it is subject to arbitrary change."

Pansy: [suspiciously] "Besides, who exactly have you propped up, Skeeter?"

Woman: "Look, we need to up your screen time, okay? For some reason the audience loves your idiotic non sequiturs, much as I utterly loathe them. If we're going to parlay this pile of steaming swamp-trash into something that's beneficial for both our careers—by which I mean mine, obviously—then we need to grab your middle-aged housewife demographic and milk it for all its worth." [A pause.] "Try following the blonde nonsense girl around. She seems to pop up everywhere."

Man: "If I do, then can we do this again? You have an absolutely spectacular—"

Woman: [interrupting] "I know I do, and no. Absolutely not. This was a mistake, and it's not happening again."

Man: "Does that mean tomorrow?"

Woman: [with irritation] "Yes. Obviously."

Luna: [curiously] "What are you doing, Lee?"

Rita: "I didn't mean me, you nasty twit. It was a metaphor."

Pansy: [sniffing] "Please. I think you mean metawhore."

Cormac: "Metawhore: when a person sleeping with another person for profit likens one situation to another in a way that isn't literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison." [He brightens.] "Alternately, a self-referencing slutbag!"

Rita: "Fine. You stay out of my lane, I'll stay out of yours. Deal?"

Pansy: "Deal."

Luna's face appears in front of the camera.

Cuts to Cormac.

Cormac: "Metawhore: when a person sleeping with another person for profit likens one situation to another in a way that isn't literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison." [He brightens.] "Alternately, a self-referencing slutbag!"

Cuts back to Rita and Pansy.

Rita: "Fine. You stay out of my lane, I'll stay out of yours. Deal?"

Pansy: "Deal."

Cuts back to Pansy reading aloud.
Pansy: "To Rita Skeeter: I almost never keep my promises."

[She closes the book, smiling serenely at the camera.]

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Someone sent me a facebook post the other day from Nikki, who is having a tough time. I'm not in any facebook groups, but a note from me to you: I hope you are doing okay, and I am here for you in spirit (and also in the form of terrible jokes!)
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode XVIII

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XVIII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 18.

[Scene opens with Theo and Harry.]

Theo: "Honestly? I really thought this prank would be much more satisfying."

Harry: "That's true. It's been pretty quiet, and like—vaguely whimsical?"

Rita: "Whimsical?"

Harry: [to Theo] "Is there a better word for it?"

Theo: "Hm. There's definitely an element of quaintness."

Harry: "Sort of a… frolicsome effervescence?"

Theo: "It's kind of frothingly irritating, actually. Like, for example, take the third day—"

[Cuts to footage of the office.]

Draco: "Granger, what is this?"

Hermione: [blushing] "Hm?"

Draco: "This, Granger. This—this thing. What is it?"

Hermione: "It's an enchanted coffee mug, Malfoy. It keeps your coffee hot for twelve hours."

Draco: [bluntly] "What for?"

Hermione: "Oh, well, um—" [She pauses, flustered.] "I just noticed you're always using reheating charms in the afternoons or getting up to refill your cup, so I thought I'd charm one for you."

[There is a pause.]

Draco: [suspiciously] "I don't understand."

Hermione: "Oh, it's, er." [She is furiously crimson.] "It's a gift, Malfoy."

Draco: "For what?"

Hermione: "For secret sant-"

[She breaks off as Theo, who is sitting at his desk in the corner, lets out a loud, hacking cough.]

Hermione: "Sorry, anyway, like I was saying, it's my turn to exchange a gift for sec-"

[Theo abruptly begins coughing again.]
Draco: [with oppressive bewilderment] "I don't understand, Granger. You're giving me something... nice?"

Hermione: [sheepishly] "Well, after you gave me that book of p-"

[Theo makes a loud, unpleasant retching sound.]

Hermione: "Sorry, one second—Nott, are you dying?"

Theo: "Hm? No, I'm fine."

Hermione: "Right. Anyway, Malfoy, since you gave me that book of poe-"

[Harry enters, shoving the door open with a bang. The others slowly turn to stare at him.]

Harry: "Oh, hello."

Hermione: "Hi Harry. Do you need something?"

Harry: "Hm? What? No, carry on."

Hermione: "Oh. Well, as I was saying, after I read the p-"

[Theo and Harry cough loudly in unison.]

Draco: [with disgust] "Do you want to grab some coffee, Granger? Apparently if we stay here much longer, we'll both get the plague."

Hermione: "Oh." [She pauses, considering it.] "Yes, alright."

[Cuts back to Theo and Harry interview.]

Theo: "There were some logistical issues, so for ease of use, we put a taboo on the words 'secret santa' and 'poetry.' But don't worry, we fixed it so that they wouldn't die."

Harry: "The trade-off being that they would, however, be instantly swarmed by bees."

Theo: "Yeah. Taboos aren't great charms, to be honest with you. There's a definite underlying hint of darkness that you really can't shake."

Harry: "Right. So anyway, we thought day four might be more interesting, but—"

Theo: "But, much to our joint dismay—"

Lee, from off-screen: [wailing] "OTP!"

Theo: [grimly] "—it was not."

[Cuts to office footage.]

Hermione: "What's this?"

Draco: "Hm?"

Hermione: [exasperatedly] "Malfoy, do not start with me—"

Draco: "What's what, Granger? There's no need to get so beatifically shrill."
Hermione: "What's this tree, Malfoy?"

Draco: "Which tree?"

Hermione: "This one."

[Camera pans out to reveal a willow tree draped in blossoming enchanted flowers, many of which have fallen onto Hermione's desk and buried her paperwork beneath a snowy layer of petals.]

Draco: "Oh, that?"

Hermione: "Yes. This."

Draco: "It's a wishing tree."

Hermione: "What?"

Theo: [with confusion, and palpable disappointment, as if he were hoping for something much worse] "What?!"

Draco: "It's a wishing tree. If you take one of the flowers, you can make a small, unobtrusive wish. A reasonable one, though—like possibly fewer bees."

Hermione: "Oh, true." [She grimaces.] "I had no idea there were so many bees in the Ministry."

Draco: "Right. So anyway you just, er, make a wish, and—" [He waves a hand.] "It'll come true, provided it's not, you know. Alchemy, or something theoretically impossible, like understanding the answer to why you're dating Weasley."

Hermione: [with surprised awe] "Malfoy, this is so poet-"

[Theo ducks preemptively, covering his head.]

Hermione: "-ic."

[Theo pops back up, relieved.]

Hermione: "Really, almost as thoughtful as that book of poe-"

Theo: [as a loud, warning buzzing sound commences] "Oh no."

[Cut back to Harry and Theo.]

Harry: "It's possible we're responsible for a global bee shortage."

Theo: "Possible, but unlikely."

Harry: "Right. And anyway, we changed the taboo again, so it's fine."

Theo: "Yes. We also added the word 'bees' to the list, just in case."

Rita: "So what happens now if they use any of those words?"

Harry: "Hm? Oh, they die."

Theo: "He's joking. They won't die."
Harry: "We're pretty sure, anyway."

Theo: "TBD."

Harry: "No, but what will happen is they'll be forced into a simulation in which they have to fight each other to the death."

Theo: "But not actually die."

Harry: "We're pretty sure, anyway."

[Cuts to Draco and Hermione. They are in the throes of a fencing competition, which has destroyed the entire office. After an expert series of parries and feints, Draco taps Hermione in the chest with his sabre and they stop, both removing their helmets and attempting to speak between breaths.]

Draco: "What is that, another tie? 2-2?"

Hermione: "Yes, I think so. That was a good one, actually."

Theo: [from beneath a desk] "Maybe you guys should like, stop speaking to each other. Try getting some work done, maybe?"

Draco: "Well, wait. We were working, weren't we?"

Hermione: "Yes, I think so, and then we got interrupted."

Draco: [puzzled] "What were we talking about?"

Theo: [rubbing his temple] "Oh boy."

Hermione: "Well, I was just saying that I wasn't expecting much from you, but that book of poetr-"

Draco: [with a strike of fervor] "EN GARDE!"

[She breaks off as the simulation once again takes effect and both she and Draco resume their combative stances, replacing their helmets on their heads. Theo sighs, climbs into what appears to be a fort made from a pile of bookshelves, and continues doing his work.]

[Cuts back to Theo and Harry.]

Harry: "I'm not ready to call it a failure yet, but I'm not ready to call it a success, either."

Theo: "They do seem to be getting along, at least."

Harry: "That's true."

Theo: "How's Weasley taking it?"

Harry: [frowning] "I haven't seen him in a while, now that I think about it. I think he might be undercover, actually."

[Cuts to footage of Ron. He is painted bright blue.]

Ron: [whispering] "I'm infiltrating a pixie ring for whereabouts of the stolen goods. Or pixies, actually—TBD. Either way, they are notoriously judgmental creatures, so I've had to spend most of the day working on blending in properly and rising to the top of their social hierarchy. Luckily,
Pansy's been very helpful with that."

[Cuts to Pansy interview.]

Pansy: "It's really easy, actually. All societies are essentially the same. Step one: be beautiful. If you can't be beautiful, be rich. Step two: find the current leader and damage them psychologically. If that's going to take too long—or, if in the rare event of proper leadership they can't be destroyed by virtue of insults and passive-aggressive comments about their intellect and/or weight, rise to the top incrementally. Win over each member. This can take some time, so lacking all else, the ideal situation is for everyone to find themselves in oh, I don't know—say, for example, a dangerous hostage situation, wherein you can win the respect of the group by expertly negotiating their release."

[Cuts back to Ron and the pixies. Daphne enters, dressed in an elaborate silver tiara and hoisting a large muggle chainsaw.]

Daphne: "You are all my prisoners!"

Ron: [in fluent pixie] "Chill, guys, I've got this. I'll negotiate our release."

[Cuts back to Pansy.]

Pansy: [shrugging] "Look, Weasley isn't beautiful or rich. Knowing which cards to play is an equally important strength for social domination."

[Cuts back to Harry and Theo.]

Harry: "Huh. Well, I'm sure he's fine."

Theo: "Cool. Brunch, then?"

Harry: "Oh, sure. Let me just grab my brunch cape."

Theo: "I thought you weren't into capes."

Harry: "You know, I thought I wasn't? But for some reason I just felt like I needed one."

[They exit the corridor, passing by a life-sized poster of Cormac enthusiastically wearing a cape that reads 'Mimosa Time.' Meanwhile, footage cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "I have to say, I'm surprised by how well things are going with Malfoy. I mean, granted, I'm very sore and I keep inexplicably losing my train of thought, but we've been getting quite a lot of work done, too."

[Cuts to office footage.]

Draco: "You know, I think Hogwarts could stand to have some non-magic classes in its curriculum."

Hermione: [surprised] "Really?"

Draco: "Sure. I mean why aren't there art classes? Or photography, or music, or literature? And there's no expository writing classes, which means half the students that go there have about the same spelling capacity as the average concussed troll—"

Hermione: "That's true, and I have some experience with concussed trolls." [She pauses and then,
thoughtfully, and with surprised pleasure: } "You know, I actually think this is great idea, Malfoy. I think I may have underestimated your interest in liberal arts."

Draco: "Who said I had any interest in your artsy liberalism, Granger?"

Hermione: "You like to write, don't you?"

Draco: [scoffing unconvincingly] "And how would you know that?"

Hermione: "Well, after seeing your book of po-"

Draco: [with a groan of obvious fatigue] "EN GARDE!"

They both reach sluggishly for their helmets, feeling blindly for their sabres. Footage cuts back to Hermione interview.

Hermione: [nursing a sore bicep] "In any case, maybe I was wrong about us not working well together."

Camera pans out to reveal Luna on her right side, drinking a mimosa.

Luna: "Yes, but the important thing is that I wasn't wrong."

Hermione: "Hey, where'd you get that?"

Luna: [sipping loudly] "It's kind of invitation-only."

Hermione: "Oh."

Camera pans out further to reveal Gilderoy on Hermione's left side, also drinking a mimosa.

Gilderoy: "This juice makes me feel things!"

Camera pans out further to show Severus lying on a beach towel in the middle of the floor, drinking his mimosa from an elaborate straw. He is wearing a 'Mimosa Time' cape.

Severus: "I feel like I'm forgetting something."

Camera cuts to Hogwarts.

Sorting Hat: "Come out, come out, Bowler Hat. You said three o'clock sharp, and here I am, ready for a reckoning!" [The hat brandishes a large shotgun, aiming it into the darkened corridor.] "THIS IS THE EYE OF THE STORM, MY FRIEND!"

Cuts back to office footage.

Severus: "Eh. [He shrugs.] "Probably wasn't important."
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode XIX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XIX

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 19.

[Scene opens with Marcus, Neville, and Cormac.]

Marcus: "Longbottom, you've got to do something about these nightmare plants. They're crowding my desk. And also, they're poisonous and I might die."

Neville: "Oh, they just need to be re-potted, that's all. They're in those rebellious teen years where all they want is to establish possession over their surroundings."

Marcus: "What, like a dog pissing on trees?"

Cormac: "First of all, that's totally obscene. And secondly, it's more like humping."

Marcus: "For fuck's sake, McLaggen—"

Neville: "No, no, he's right. There's a definite layer of sexual underpinning."

Cormac: [loftily] "That's called missionary, Longbottom. And should you really be doing that with your plants?"

Neville: "No, I probably shouldn't."

Marcus: "I—hold on. You shouldn't and you aren't, right?"

Neville: "Pass."

[Ginny enters.]

Ginny: "Oh, hey guys. Is Zabini around?"

Marcus: "No, not at the moment. Why?"

Ginny: "Well, I got his invitation to the Slug Club reunion and I was coming to RSVP, but I actually have a few questions first."

Cormac: "Well, to answer your first question: no, we probably shouldn't."

Ginny: "I don't—what?"

Cormac: "Unless you really want to. In which case—" [He shrugs.] "Fine."

Ginny: "Is this about sex?"

Cormac: "No, those are just my standard answers to the usual first round of questions with regard to crudités. If you have questions about sex, though, I'm going to need more details. For example,
will there be any operation of heavy machinery?"

Ginny: "I highly doubt it."

Cormac: "Well, then the answer is a gracefully ambiguous maybe."

Ginny: "Look, I'm just—I just don't understand, like, any of this. I mean, why is this event black tie? Isn't it just half a dozen people? And why is it being held at Hogwarts? I really thought it was just going to be, you know, inside the Ministry somewhere."

Neville: "Well, Blaise moved it to Hogwarts after he found out that the Ministry quidditch game was going to be held there."

Ginny: [surprised] "What? Is that Pansy's doing?"

Marcus: "Actually, I believe Parkinson wanted to build a stadium specifically for it, but apparently that budget request wasn't approved."

[Cuts to Seamus and Dean.]

Seamus: "Look, I wanted to make it work."

Dean: "We just couldn't get around the unforgivable excess."

Seamus: "You say unforgivable, I say necessary."

Dean: [skeptically] "You say necessary?"

Seamus: "Well, worth watching, at least."

Dean: "Better."

[Cuts back to the office.]

Neville: "I also heard Pansy had nude statues commissioned of her and Daphne for it."

[Cuts to Pansy and Daphne.]

Pansy: "What? Nude statues for a quidditch game? Longbottom should be fired, that would be completely insane."

Daphne: "Yes. Who would do that, honestly?"

Pansy: [scoffing] "Ridiculous."

Daphne: "That statue was for our living room."

Pansy: "Yes, because we aren't unhinged narcissists."

Daphne: [nodding] "We're private ones."

Pansy: "By the way, did we tell you? We're moving in together."

Daphne: "By which we mean Pansy got evicted."

Pansy: [shrugging] "Potato, potato. Apparently not all landlords can handle a little bit of lip these days."
Daphne: "You told him you were going to ‘cock-slap him so hard his dentures would fall out of his cunt purse,’ and then you cursed all the items in his kitchen to periodically explode."

Pansy: "Yes, and like I said, apparently not all landlords can handle that."

[Cuts back to the office.]

Ginny: [tentatively] "This all seems a little bit excessive. Is this all Zabini's doing?"

Neville: "There's really no way of knowing."

Marcus: "We don't even know if he works here."

Cormac: "Who, Blaise?"

[Cuts to Marcus and Oliver.]

Marcus: "Actually, we were the ones who thought it would be best if we just had the quidditch game at the Hogwarts pitch, since it is technically the closest to an operational infirmary."

Oliver: "Yeah. In terms of crisis management, Hogwarts is probably the best place to be."

Marcus: "Plus, it's pretty safe. I mean, people have only died there…” [He pauses, considering it, and frowns.] "Okay, well, retraction: a lot of people have died there."

Oliver: [quickly] "But not of quidditch injuries."

Marcus: "Yes, right, saved it. They definitely died from murder labyrinths and bathroom snakes, not quidditch."

Oliver: "Right. So anyway, we figured that's the best place for it."

[Cuts back to office footage.]

Marcus: "I guess there are worse places to be. Plus it is a bigger venue, which might be necessary, seeing as it seems like everyone is bringing a date."

Cormac: "Hold on. How did you get back here so fast?"

Marcus: "What?"

Ginny: "Wait—I'm not bringing a date. Should I be?"

Neville: "I'd ask you to go with me, Ginny, but I'm bringing Luna."

Ginny: [surprised] "Oh, I didn't know you two were—"

Luna: "He doesn't mean me."

[Camera pans out to reveal Luna perched on Neville's desk, stroking the leaf of a garishly violet plant.]

Neville: "That's Luna."

Ginny: "I know that's Luna."

Neville: "No, I meant that."
[Camera pans out further to show Gilderoy leaning over, attempting to lick the leaf of what is quite obviously a poisonous herb.]

Neville: [*sternly*] "Hey, what'd I just say?!

Gilderoy: [*sighing*] "No licking."

Neville: "Exactly, no licking—"

Gilderoy: [*sulkily*] "I hate that rule."

Ginny: "Seems like a pretty good rule, honestly."

Gilderoy: [*sniffing disapprovingly*] "Red-mouth pretty-tits seems to disagree."

[Cuts to Rita glancing in a small silver compact, applying her signature crimson lipstick. She catches the camera behind her and turns, sparing it a glare.]

Rita: "Jordan, what the ever-living fuck do you want?"

[Camera abruptly jostles, cutting back to the office.]

Ginny: "Well, whatever. See you guys there, I guess. Oh, and Kingsley, I'll have my notes for that Knockturn investigation on your desk by three this afternoon."

[Camera pans out to reveal Kingsley standing beside the bookcase near the door, holding a variety of coats.]

Kingsley: [*gruffly*] "Thank you."

Ginny: "No problem."

[She leaves.]

Neville: [*thoughtfully*] "You know, I did find it a bit odd that the coat rack didn't say anything to me this morning."

Marcus: "Sorry, you thought *that* was weird?"

Neville: "Well, usually it says something to compliment me when I set my coat on it. Something like 'that ass looks toooight in them trousers' or 'damn son, noice cardie,' or—"

Cormac: [*interrupting*] "That's not the coat rack. That's me."

Neville: "I—what?"

Cormac: "Coat racks don't talk, Longbottom."

Neville: "Yeah, but—"

Cormac: "And hey, listen, I appreciate your work attire. I dig your whole business casual, bureaucrat-on-the-brink vibe, you know? [He shrugs.] "No hobo, obviously."

Marcus: "Did you just say 'no hobo'?"

Cormac: "Yeah, I mean. I have my own clothes. I'm not homeless. I just appreciate how Longbottom wears his cardies, so, you know—no hobo."
Seamus: "Meh. Sounds gay."

Cormac: "What?"

Kingsley: [whispering] "So listen, I've been in this office for over four hours."

[Kingsley turns back to the camera] "Frankly, I'm very proud and relieved to report that during that time, nothing life-alteringly disturbing was said or done in my presence."

Cormac: "Guys, question. Would it be better to fuck a boggart?"

Marcus: "Better as opposed to what? Not fucking it?"

Cormac: [scoffing] "Don't be ridiculous."

Neville: "A boggart is just a manifestation of your fears, McLaggen. What would you even be fucking?"

Cormac: "Myself, only with smaller calves."

Kingsley: [sighing] "Nevermind. Forget everything I've ever said."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: I can't believe we're on day 19? What even the fuck? By the way, this ends on December 24, but a new one shot will post on the 25th, because as far as I can tell the true meaning of Christmas is the selfless offering of unmitigated filth.
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode XX

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XX


[Scene opens with Dean and Seamus.]

Seamus: "So, get this: apparently Weasley and Granger are, much like my preferred method of whisky consumption, on the rocks."

Dean: [scoffing] "Sea, don't be ridiculous."

Seamus: "What? I didn't make this up, Dean. According to Gossip Girl's memo this morning, they're really not doing well."

Dean: "Okay, fine, but you definitely don't take your whisky on the rocks."

Seamus: [indignantly] "Sometimes I do, Dean. You don't know everything. Sometimes I'm in a different room from you." [He pauses.] "Or, you know, somewhere else in the same room."

Dean: "Okay, first of all, you don't even drink whisky, and I know that for a fact. The last time I tried to pour you some you told me to 'get out of here with my toxic masculinity' and 'bring you a Cosmopolitan as Godric Gryffindor intended,' which can't possibly be right—"

Seamus: "Honestly, don't you read? It's notably his signature drink."

Dean: [sighing] "I really don't think that's in any way canon."

Seamus: "None of this is, Dean. And more's the pity for it, frankly."

Dean: "True."

Seamus: "Anyway, I have to say, I was getting bored with that whole Granger-Weasley pairing. I'm glad we finally get to see what else is out there. I mean, will Granger finally get with Potter? We've been talking about that possibility for years. Or hey, who knows, maybe Weasley will get with Potter." [He shrugs.] "Weirder things have happened, right?"

Dean: "I really don't think they have. And do you really think they were all just biding their time until they could swap around?"

Seamus: "I really don't see any other reason for it."

[They pause.]

Dean: "Eh. Fair enough."

[cuts to Ron and Hermione.]

Rita: "So, I take it you both have seen the latest from Gossip Girl?"

Ron: "Yes, we have, and one of us is taking it very poorly."
Hermione: *stiffly* "I assume by that you mean me?"

Ron: "What? No. You've been here for two minutes, I have no idea how you're taking it. *I'm* taking this very badly."

Hermione: *with stark indignation* "What? Are you saying this is somehow worse for you than it is for me?"

Ron: "Of course it is. I mean, do you even know how hard the last couple of days have been for me?"

*[Cuts to Ron, Pansy, and Daphne.]*

Ron: "Right, so, it turns out that Harry's little so-called 'pixie theft' was actually a massive magical narcotics bust tied to a kidnapping ring, so technically the pixies were both stealing and being stolen."

Daphne: "Yes, and naturally the first thing we did was accidentally implicate Weasley by making him the leader of what we didn't realize was the equivalent of a dangerous armed mob."

Pansy: "In my defense, the whole thing seemed very normal. There were maybe one or two mentions of murder and abduction but, to be honest, that's pretty standard in all my conversations." *[She shrugs.]* "What can I say? I like what I like."

Ron: "Well, anyway, I got arrested for a second there—"

Daphne: "But luckily, we'd had the foresight to change his emergency contacts to us."

Ron: "That, and Harry was the one who did the arresting, so he sort of already knew I wasn't a pixie mob boss."

*[Cuts to Harry.]*

Harry: "Honestly, I did stop to question it for a second. I'm not suggesting that I believe Ron's a dangerous criminal, of course, but I definitely *am* suggesting that he had a worrying amount of control over those pixies."

*[Camera pans out to show Pansy eyeing her fingernails next to him.]*

Pansy: "Oh, that was me—I taught him how to more effectively threaten their families. At first he was just trying to intimidate them with, I don't know, some line about swimming with the fishes? And I was like Weasley, I can't believe I'm saying this, but sex really doesn't seem like the answer at this particular moment."

Harry: "Oh." *[He shrugs.]* "That makes sense."

*[Cuts back to Ron, Pansy, Daphne.]*

Pansy: "We had also changed the details of his medical records, so it's sort of unfortunate that he was only arrested and not, you know, stabbed."

Daphne: "You mean fortunate, right?"

Pansy: "Eh. I said what I said."

Ron: "Hold on, you did what?!"
Pansy: "In my defense, I just wanted to see what would happen."

Ron: "That's not a defense!"

Daphne: "I'm sure we'll have another chance, though."

Ron: "What?"

Pansy: [brightly] "Well, that's true. There's a lot of other ways for him to get gravely injured, I suppose."

Daphne: [cautioning] "Only if he breaks up with Granger, though."

Ron: "What?"

Pansy: [surprised] "Really, Daphne? What is this supposed to be—morality?"

Daphne: "Well, yeah. I mean look, I may not have any ethics, but I do have some scruples."

Ron: "What?"

Pansy: [shrugging] "Well, all I have are urges, so—"

Daphne: "Still. He'll have to break up with Granger or it's not an option. Okay?"

Ron: [frantically] "What's not an option?"

Pansy: "Ugh, fine." [She sighs heavily.] "Well, break it off then, Weasley. What are you waiting for?"

Ron: [uneasily] "You're not talking about my bones, are you?"

Daphne: "Only one of them. And that's really more of a euphemism than anything."

Ron: "Oh."

Pansy: "By the way, how was Azkaban?"

Ron: "I didn't actually have to go to Azkaban. I turned over the evidence I'd gathered during my undercover operation."

Pansy: [disappointed] "Oh."

Daphne: [to Pansy] "I take it Potter didn't accept your bribe then, Pans?"

Pansy: "Apparently not!"

[Cuts back to Ron and Hermione.]

Ron: "So yeah, I've had a rough couple of days."

Hermione: [irritably] "And what do you think I've been doing, then?"

[Cuts to footage of Draco and Hermione's office. Their desks are no longer situated across the room; now her desk is pushed against his, and their paperwork is sprawled over both surfaces.]

Hermione: [eyeing the paperwork thoughtfully] "Okay, so I think we've finalized all the curriculum
requirements, plus we've updated the safety manuals, so all that's left are the emergency walk-throughs I have to do, and then—"

Draco: "I can do those with you if you want, Granger."

Hermione: [surprised] "Really?"

Draco: "Well, yeah, of course."

[She stares at him.]

Draco: "What?"

Hermione: [furiously] "WHAT THE FUCK, MALFOY?!"

Draco: "EXCUSE ME, YOU PETAL-FACED WREATH OF MAGNIFICENCE?"

Hermione: "Don't do that. DO NOT DO THAT AGAIN—"

Draco: "DO WHAT AGAIN?!"

Hermione: "YOU KNOW WHAT YOU DID YOU HORRIBLE, CONCEITED, MONSTROUSLY BREATHTAKING WORDSMITH—"

Draco: "LISTEN UP YOU CELESTIAL EMPRESS, I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU'RE SHOUTING AT ME—"

Hermione: "I'M SHOUTING? YOU'RE SHOUTING, YOU PORCELAIN-SKINNED INVEIGLER—"

Draco: "IF YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY, GRANGER, THEN JUST COME OVER HERE AND SAY IT TO MY FACE!"

Hermione: "FINE! HOW CLOSE IN YOUR FACE DO YOU WANT ME?!"

Draco: "JUST LAY IT ON ME, GRANGER!"

Hermione: "I—" [she pauses, frustrated.] "I CAN'T! I'M DATING RON!"

Draco: "AND WHOSE FAULT IS THAT?!"

Hermione: "YOURS!"

Draco: "YOU'RE RIGHT. I SHOULD HAVE JUST KILLED HIM WHEN I HAD THE CHANCE!"

Hermione: [hastily] "No, no, wrong direction—"

Draco: "What? Sorry, just got sort of swept up in it—"

Hermione: "YOU WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE A DEATH EATER, MALFOY! YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO JUST—YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO—"

Draco: "WHAT, LOVE YOU?!!"

Hermione: [torn] "Well—YES!"
Draco: "WE NEVER DISCUSSED THAT! HOW IS THIS POSSIBLY MY FAULT?"

Hermione: "DID YOU FORGET ABOUT THE MURDER THING?"

Draco: "THAT WAS MURDER-ADJACENT AT BEST AND YOU KNOW IT!"

Hermione: "THAT ISN'T EVEN A THING!"

[Cut to Cormac.]

Cormac: "Oh, murder-adjacent is definitely a thing. It's when someone gets inadvertently murdered, but you just happened to be standing next to it."

Draco, from out of camera view: "No, no, it's—"

[He stomps over, stooping to whisper in Cormac's ear.]

Cormac: [listening intently] "Mhm, mmhmm, okay so you tried to kill Dumbledore but didn't, because you almost killed Weasley instead? Mm, right, yes, okay—and you definitely poisoned some mead? And—Imperius curse? Oh. Hm. Definitely some intent there but, mmhmm, yes, I see." [Draco steps away and he nods.] "Yes, okay."

Draco: [hopefully] "Okay?"

Cormac: "What? Oh, no. Sorry, I mean to say that in that case, murder-adjacent is definitely not a thing."

Draco: "What the fuck, man?"

Cormac: [shrugging] "I don't make the rules, Malfoy. I just comment unnecessarily on them."

[Cut back to Draco and Hermione.]

Draco: "SO WHAT NOW, THEN? IT'S JUST 'NOT A THING' AND I'M TOO LATE?"

Hermione: "YES! IT'S NOT A THING, AND YOU'RE TOO LATE!"

Draco: [swallowing] "Oh."

[They pause.]

Hermione: "You know I'm with him, Malfoy." [She sighs.] "You should have said something five years ago."

Draco: [frustrated] "YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE THE BRIGHTEST WITCH OF YOUR AGE, GRANGER!"

Hermione: "THAT LITERALLY MEANS NOTHING! A HOGWARTS DROPOUT SAID THAT TO ME! AND A WEREWOLF, AND AN ESCAPED CONVICT—"

Draco: "SO WHAT, THEN?"

Hermione: [exhaling] "So nothing."

[They pause for several minutes.]

Draco: "So." [He clears his throat.] "Should we just do those walk-throughs tomorrow?"
Hermione: *uncomfortably* "Yeah, sure. That sounds fine."

[Cuts back to Ron and Hermione.]

Ron: "Look, I don't know what you've been doing, Mione. Working?"

Hermione: *irritated* "Do you even know what I do?"

Ron: "I—" *He pauses.* "It's something about paperwork, isn't it?"

Hermione: "Ron! Seriously?"

Ron: "What?! It's not like you take any interest in activities I like! Do you even know where I was the past three days?"

Hermione: "I don't know. Quidditch?"

Ron: "That's? That's not a place."

Hermione: "Oh pipe down, Ronald. If this is about a spider again, I swear—"

Ron: "Seriously?"

[She rises to her feet, storming off.]

Ron: "I ALMOST GOT ARRESTED!"

[Cuts to Harry.]

Harry: "I did consider taking Ron to Azkaban just to see what it would be like. Plus Pansy offered me a lot of money, and I may be rich, but I'm not stupid."

Theo: "Well, carting Weasley off to wizard prison would have fit in nicely with the year of pranks."

Harry: "Is that really a prank, though? Or just like, a vaguely terrible thing to do?"

Theo: *shrugging* "You tell me."

Harry: "Well, in general, this whole prank war business is not entirely a success. You might have been right about me not being any better at them."

Theo: *resting a comforting hand on his shoulder* "Hey, don't beat yourself up over it."

Harry: "I wasn't. I'm fine."

Theo: "Oh. Oh good."

[He reluctantly removes his hand.]

Harry: "You can put that back, if you want."

Theo: "Oh."

[He replaces his hand.]

Harry: "Besides, there's still time, don't you think?"
Theo: "Eh, it's not promising, but sure. I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt."

Harry: "Thanks. How's your other prank going, by the way?"

Theo: "Hm?"

[Cuts to Hogwarts.]

Sorting Hat: *hysterically* "HE HAS MY WIFE!"

Minerva: *sighing* "For the last time you cunting swine, you don't have a wife."

Sorting Hat: "BECAUSE HE TOOK HER!"

Minerva: "He's a hat—"

Sorting Hat: "HE'S A MONSTER!"

[Cuts back to Theo and Harry.]

Theo: "Eh, it's pretty much on schedule."
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode XXI-XXII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XXI-XXII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 21-22.

[Scene opens with Severus and Luna.]

Luna: "What have you been up to? You've been rather quiet."

Severus: [painting a lime green bowler leading a threatening army of knife-wielding Santa hats] "Oh, just getting into the holiday spirit."

Luna: [surprised] "Holiday spirit?"

Severus: "Yes. You know. That thing that seems to infect everyone like a virus."

[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "Coincidentally, 'holiday spirit' is also what I call my penis."

[Cuts back to Severus and Luna.]

Luna: "I didn't realize you were so enthusiastic about Christmas, Severus."

Severus: "Does that surprise you?"

Luna: "A bit, yes. The words 'jolly' and 'festive' don't really spring to mind as things I would expect you to enjoy."

Severus: [scoffing] "You're referring to the commercialities of the holiday. But Santa Claus is, of course, a scam."

Luna: "You know, people often say that. But they say the same things about nargles and flu shots, so—"

Severus: "Well, in this case, they're correct. The myth of 'Father Christmas' comes from Odin, the Norse god, and the traditional corresponding Viking celebrations of the winter solstice, i.e. the demonic plunging of the world into much deserved, near-unceasing darkness, casting all the wretchedness of humanity into a burdensome void of nothingness at the whims of our apathetic overlords." [He sighs contentedly.] "A charming time of year."

Luna: "Right, yes."

Severus: [continuing] "As I was saying, Odin was of course a ghastly specter who would lead some of his uncivil god friends, a handful of ghosts, and all his various celestial sword-whores on a grisly hunt above the rooftops, terrifying children and forcefully breaking into their homes to leave them threatening gifts of toys and candies."
Luna: "Hm. So, I suppose the proper words to describe the holiday spirit would be…"


[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "Yeah, that sounds right."

[Cuts back to Severus and Luna.]

Severus: "Not to mention the implication of blind obedience to a capricious, terror-inducing deity in exchange for the promise of sweets."

Luna: "Oh."

[She looks somewhat lost, as though the very core of her beliefs has been called into question. Severus, meanwhile, offers her a box of candy.]

Severus: "Fizzing Whizbee?"

Luna: [accepting it] "Oh!"

[Cuts to Dean and Seamus interview.]

Rita: "So, have you two read the new memo from Gossip Girl?"

Dean: "I have a question. Why do you always ask us about Gossip Girl?"

Seamus: "Yeah! Riddle us that, Miss Thing. You make it sound like all we do all day is sit around here talking about our colleagues!"

Dean: "It's incredibly prejudicial, you know."

Seamus: "Yeah! Do you realize how much you've given into gratuitous stereotypes by repeatedly asking us specifically to discuss it?"

Rita: [confused, and artfully offended] "Excuse me?"

Seamus: "I mean, of course we're expected to be the ones gossiping, aren't we? Because this whole thing is a small-minded, discriminatory, heteronormative cockfest of an exercise, isn't it?"

Dean: "Yes. Frankly, it speaks volumes that you would regularly choose to pose this question to the two of us over everyone else who works at this office."

Seamus: "Yes! Just because we are an openly Irish couple—"

Dean: [haltingly] "Wait, no. What?"

Seamus: "Hm?"

Dean: "I—that's, no. First of all, I'm not Irish."

Seamus: "Openly ginger, then."

Dean: "No."

Seamus: "Openly prone to arson?"
Dean: "Also no, but—closer?" [He considers it.] "No. Nope. That's still not right."

Seamus: "Openly conservative."

Dean: "No, I was trying to say that we—wait." [He frowns.] "You're a conservative?"

Seamus: "I notoriously oppose big government, Dean. You know this."

Dean: [bemused] "But Sea, you work for the government."

Seamus: "Yes, and I think I've made it very clear my work here is almost entirely an exercise of self-loathing."

Dean: "Well, fine. But still, as we were saying—"

Seamus: [to Rita] "Listen you bigoted hussy, just because we are two men in a loving, supportive venture capitalist startup does not mean we are the only people who can be consulted about Gossip Girl."

Dean: "That's still not—" [He shrugs.] "You know what? What he said."

Rita: "Fine. Forget I asked, then."

[They pause.]

Seamus: "Okay, but did you guys read it, though? It was juicy as fuck."

Dean: "It really, really was."

[Cuts to Theo and Draco in the office.]

Theo: "Hey, did you see Gossip Girl's latest memo?"

Draco: [absentmindedly] "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll read about Finnegan and Thomas' torrid sex life later, Theo."

[Cuts to Seamus and Dean.]

Seamus: "Oh, yeah! We're also gay!"

Dean: "Slipped your mind, did it?"

Seamus: "There are just so many other ways I define myself, Dean."

Dean: "Such as?"

Seamus: [ticking them off on his fingers] "Entrepreneur. Maverick. Animal lover. Coffee drinker. Leather enthusiast. Connoisseur of artisan cocktails. I could go on; I mean 'habitual consumer of dick' has to be what, twentieth on the list?"

Dean: [gently] "Okay, right, but in terms of relevance—"

Rita: "Basically what I get from this is that you're rightfully accusing me of belittling you to a pair of gossipy queens."

Dean: "Yes, that."
Seamus: "Ohhhhh." [He pauses.] "How dare you?"

[Cuts back to Draco and Theo.]

Theo: "Draco, bud, I really think you should read it."

Draco: "Well, I can't. I'm late for these Hogwarts walk-throughs and Granger's going to give me one of her horrifyingly arousing lectures any minute."

Theo: "Yes, true, but before you go—"

Draco: "Love you, mean it—"

Theo: [hastily] "Yes yes I love you too, but—"

Draco: "BYE!"

[He leaves. Theo heaves a sigh.]

Theo: "So, anyway. I take it you needed something, then, Minister?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Kingsley standing in the corner wearing a camouflaged suit of armor. He flips up the visor, looking grim.]

Kingsley: "What exactly does this department do for the Ministry, Nott?"

Theo: "Um, well, the prank war is sort of headquartered here."

Kingsley: "Is that the explanation for this office being in literal shambles?"

[There are discarded sabres on the floor. Most of the furniture is irrevocably damaged.]

Theo: "Fine and no."

Kingsley: [dubiously] "Yes and no?"

Theo: "Fine. More 'yes' than 'no,' but—"

Kingsley: "What about the changes to Hogwarts curriculum? Those are Miss Granger's doing, correct?"

Theo: "And Draco's, yeah."

Kingsley: "And you've been…?"

Theo: "Fine, thank you. And yourself?"

Kingsley: "I meant more along the lines of what you've been doing."

Theo: "Oh, well I recently learned how to flambé. Great for parties. Less great for love-making, but you know, there's a sensitive balance."

[Cuts to Pansy.]

Pansy: [shrugging] "It happens. This is why we have liability waivers."

[Cuts back to Theo and Kingsley.]
Kingsley: "Okay, so let me get this straight: your department doesn't do anything at all, except for a weird loophole Miss Granger found in an old contract containing a clause that enabled her to take complete bureaucratic control of Hogwarts."

Theo: "Yes."

Kingsley: "So all this work—all of it has been for the school?"

Theo: "Yes."

Kingsley: "Hm. And how much of it was done by you?"

Theo: "Sorry, do you mean this stuff?"

[Camera pans over to Theo's makeshift fort of desks and bookshelves.]

Kingsley: "No. This stuff."

[Camera pans to a small pile of paperwork on Hermione's desk.]

Theo: "Oh. Yeah, none of it."

Kingsley: "You do realize you're essentially useless, then, don't you?"

Theo: "I've heard that before, yes. But don't say it too many times or you'll incite my daddy issues, Minister, and I simply don't have time for an unhealthy sexual attachment to you right now."

Kingsley: [tutting quietly] "I'm afraid this is unacceptable, Theodore."

Theo: "That's another thing my father used to say to me, sir! You've got a real knack for it."

Kingsley: "I have to say, I'm rather disappointed."

Theo: "You sound just like him!"

Kingsley: "I'm going to leave before this gets worse."

Theo: "Dad, is that you? No, no, I'm kidding. I mean, it is verbatim his usual abandonment threat, but I do totally see how in this particular instance leaving would be completely necessary."

[Cuts to Kingsley interview as he walks through the halls.]

Kingsley: "Well, clearly we're going to have to trim the fat around here. I've been to every office at this point and granted, there's a spectacular mess going on in all of them, but the Department of Magical Contracts and Tortfeasor Comeuppance is definitely going to have to be absorbed into something else, if not severed outright. [He pauses outside the door to the Auror office, pushing the door open.] "Luckily I still have Potter to count on, right?"

[Harry looks up from his desk, a bit startled at Kingsley's entrance.]

Harry: "Need something, Kingsley?"

Kingsley: "No, nothing Harry, nothing. Carry on." [Sighing happily, he turns to the camera.] "Isn't it nice to have one office that runs smoothly?"

[Behind him, Theo's head pops up from underneath Harry's desk. Harry shoves him back down]
and smiles awkwardly as Kingsley turns to beam approvingly at him.

Luna's voice, from beneath the desk: "Ooh, what are we doing under here?"

Theo's voice: "What?! How did you—"

Gilderoy's voice, also beneath the desk: "Hey, I was here first!"

Theo's voice: "How long have you been there, exactly?"

Gilderoy's voice: [morosely] "Shrill voice nipple queen says I'm not allowed to say."

Kingsley: [frowning] "Sorry Harry, did you say something?"

Harry: "Hm? Oh, nope! Just filing some paperwork, you know. The usual. Anxious to get out of here, you know how it is."

[There is a thud beneath the desk.]

Kingsley: "Well, I'll leave you to it, then. I'm sure you'd like to leave before the festivities tomorrow—must be full of holiday spirit, eh, Harry?"

Theo's voice: "Oi. Phrasing."

[Cuts to Cormac.]

Cormac: "For the record, I call it that because it always comes too early and never lasts as long as you'd like. And also, it drains your wallet." [He pauses, brightening.] "And people have written songs for it!"

[Cuts back to Harry and Kingsley.]

Harry: "I wouldn't say I'm full of holiday spirit at the moment." [He clears his throat, half-smiling.] "Though I expect I'll be accosted with it later."

Kingsley: [curiously] "Oh?"

Harry: "Well, we'll see. Who knows? Maybe I'll pass on some of my own holiday spirit instead. Inject it into a few other—" [He cuts off, doubling over, as there is a loud clatter beneath the desk.] "I didn't mean—not an actual few, I was just—it's a saying, but anyway—" [He exhales, shaking his head.] "Just the one person, sorry."

Luna's voice: "Aww!"

Kingsley: [confused] "Well, I would think you'd want to spread your holiday spirit around to everyone you meet, Harry, not just one person."

Harry: "Well, sometimes I think so too, Kingsley, but I think society generally prohibits it."

[Cuts to Daphne and Pansy.]

Daphne: "It's the goddamn patriarchy, man."

Pansy: [eyeing her fingernails] "Thanks, Shacklebolt."

[Camera pans out to show Kingsley standing behind them, arms folded.]
Kingsley: "So are you two planning on working, or—?"

Daphne: "Oh, let's see. Pans?"

Pansy: "Hm, hm, hm…" [She rolls a die.] "Well, it came up 'masturbate for an hour,' so yeah, we will. Probably in an hour."

Kingsley: "Did you say 'probably'?"

Daphne: "Definitely. Maybe."

Pansy: [nodding] "That sounds right."

[Cuts back to Kingsley interview.]

Kingsley: [wearily] "Unfortunately, we do really need their department."

[Cuts to Hogwarts.]

Minerva: "Where is your insufferable partner in tyranny, Mr Malfoy?"

Draco: "Who, Granger? I don't know. She's normally oppressively punctual."

Minerva: "She's a real thorn in my side, that one."

Draco: "I know. Personally I'm hoping to have her excised."

Minerva: "Like a tumor?"

Draco: "Ah, no. What's the one for when you're possessed by spirits?"

Sorting Hat: "EXORCISM!"

Draco: "That's the one, thanks."

Sorting Hat: "EXPULSION OF DEMONIC PLAGUES AND THE CURSES WHICH WREAK HAVOC UPON YOUR LINE!"

Draco: "Yeah, cool. Sure."

Albus, via his portrait: "For the record, I'm looking forward to being rid of Miss Granger's shenanigans myself."

Minerva: "Oh shut up, you thigh-skimming jizz harmonica. You're not even really here! I've always had it harder than you."

Albus: "Oh, please. When? When you were dropping babies on muggles' doorsteps, or when you were haplessly counting on a pair of pre-pubescent to help a hippogriff escape?"

Minerva: "When I was your deputy! I was always the one sending out the letters, dealing with the errant children, sorting through the class schedules, doing all the real work—whereas you, the actual headmaster, just sat there and—"

[She comes to an abrupt halt, her eyes widening.]

Draco: "Professor?" [He leans forward, snapping his fingers in front of her face.] "Professor, did you just have a stroke?"
Albus: "Try holding a mirror under her nose."

Sorting Hat: "Yes, try that, or FEASTING UPON THE ENTRAILS OF YOUR ENEMIES!"

Draco: "Professor, if you're dead, this really isn't going to look good for me." [He pauses, frowning.] "Though I think it would be classically murder-adjacent, but I'll have to double-check. To be honest, I don't think I really have a handle on the definition."

Minerva: "First of all, I'm alive, you trumpeting moron."

Draco: "Oh. Well, phew."

Minerva: "But secondly, I did just have a stroke—"

Draco: "Yikes."

Minerva: "—only it was of GENIUS!"

Draco: "Oh." [He pauses.] "Eh, still bad."

[Behind them, the door opens and Hermione enters.]

Hermione: [out of breath] "Malfoy, I'm sorry I'm late, but I have to tell you someth—"

Draco: "WHAT IS IT NOW, YOU RESPLENDENT MOONFLOWER?"

Hermione: "CAN YOU NOT YELL AT ME? I'M TRYING TO HAVE A NORMAL CONVERSATION WITH YOU—"

Draco: "THEN BY ALL MEANS CONVERSE, YOU PULCHRITUDINOUS DROP OF AMBROSIA!"

Hermione: "LISTEN YOU DERANGED SLICE OF MANIA—"

Draco: "OH, SO I'M JUST THE SLICE, AM I?"

Hermione: "YOU'RE THE ENTIRE LOAF, MALFOY!"

Draco: "WELL THEN BUTTER ME UP, GRANGER, I'M TOAST!"

Albus: "Are you understanding any of this?"

Minerva: "Don't talk to me, I'm having an epiphany. And what are you doing here?"

Albus: "Me? I live here!"

Minerva: "Not you, you asinine dick maraca. Him."

[Camera pans out to reveal Gilderoy perching on the corner of Minerva's desk, voraciously tickling her desk plant.]

Gilderoy: "Epiphanies and orgasms are similar but different!"

Albus: [shrugging] "Well, he's not wrong. A good epiphany will certainly make your toes curl if you do it right."

[Cuts to Pansy.]
Pansy: *skeptically* "Toe-curling? That's it?" *She scoffs.* "He's doing sex wrong."

Harry: "What are you doing in here?"

*Camera pans out to reveal she is in the Auror office.*

Pansy: "Oh. I was looking for Weasley."

Harry: "Why?"

Pansy: "To discuss him being on our team for the match tomorrow, of course."

Ron: "What?"

Pansy: "Oh, there you are."

Ron: "You're sitting on my lap."

Pansy: "Am I?"

Ron: "Yes. You just came in here and sat down."

Pansy: "Oh. I thought you were a chair."

Ron: "I'm not."

Pansy: "Well, good to know."

Ron: "What's this about being on your team?"

Harry: "Yeah, Parkinson. You know that all the Aurors play on the Auror team."

Ron: "It's kind of why I look forward to it, in case you missed that whole thing. You know, because I like winning, and the Aurors always win?"

Pansy: "Wait a minute. Are you saying the not-Aurors lose?"

Harry: "It's at least being heavily implied, yes."

Pansy: *darkly* "Well, I hate that. I hate it. I don't like it. I'm—I hate it."

Ron: *whispering* "Harry, I'm frightened—"

Harry: *hastily* "Well hold on, Parkinson. I mean, there's a first time for everything, I suppose."

Pansy: *thoughtfully* "Hm. That's true. That is how virginity works."

*Cuts to Hermione and Daphne.*

In unison: "Virginity is a social construct of the patriarchy to assign irrelevant values to women as currency."

*They glance at each other.*

In unison: "Awww!"

*Cuts back to Pansy.*
Pansy: "Well, how about this, then: Weasley, you play for our team, and if you win, you get the Head Auror position. If Potter wins, he gets it."

Ron: *scoffing* "There's no possible way that Harry would ever agr-"

Harry: "Done."

Ron: *squawking* "What?!"

Pansy: "Excellent!"

Harry: "Sounds good to me. Also, if you get Ron, then I call Nott."

Pansy: "Done!"

Ron: "Wait a min-"

Pansy: "No, shut up Weasley, it's good. Nott's a horrific quidditch player. He might actually die during the game, and that's a win for everyone."

*Cuts to Theo and Harry interview.*

Theo: "She's right. I'm pretty terrible at it." *He turns to Harry.* "You know, it's almost like you're trying to lose, Potter."

Harry: "Hm, me?" *He shrugs.* "Hey, I still have Ginny, plus the other Aurors are much better than Pansy and Daphne, seeing as I'm pretty sure they haven't actually played before and possibly still don't know the rules."

Theo: "Still. That's a pretty generous bet, you know."

Harry: *innocently* "Well, maybe I'm just full of holiday spirit, Nott."

*Cuts to Cormac interview.*

Cormac: "Potter? No. I mean sure, it happened once in a dream, but who hasn't had that dream, am I right?"

Chapter End Notes

*a/n: For sally. And for annabell213’s first trip to the UK today!*
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XXIII

Summary: The Real World, continued. Olivie Advent Day 23. Yes, I know it's late. EVERYTHING IS A MESS. Enjoy this for now, and the concluding Day 24 post will be here shortly.

[Scene opens with Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "So, I'm sort of having a small issue."

Rita: [not unkindly] "Is it your hair?"

Hermione: "What? No."

Rita: "Well, then you're having two issues, but continue."

Hermione: "Okay, so, there's something I need to tell Malfoy, but I just can't seem to find the right time to do it. [She sighs.] Historically, I really struggle with timing."

[Cuts to footage of Hermione from second year.]

Hermione: "Hey, have you seen Harry? Or Ron? It's important. I just found out that the creature in the Chamber of Secrets is a basilisk."

Cormac: "Coincidentally, 'basilisk' is also what I call my penis."

Hermione: "Yeah so, that's cool, but could you maybe tell them? I have a feeling it's going to come after me soon because, you know. Muggleborn and all that."

Cormac: "Roger that, Granger."

[She leaves. Harry and Ron enter the corridor.]

Cormac: "Oh, hey, Granger wanted you to know something."

Harry: "About what?"

Cormac: "My dick."

Ron: "Interesting. Go on."

[Cuts back to Hermione.]

Hermione: "In retrospect, I probably should have clarified which part I wanted him to tell."

Rita: "Riveting. So is this about Gossip Girl's memo from yesterday, then?"

Hermione: [fidgeting] "Yes. I have to be honest, I really thought Malfoy would, um. Comment on
it? But then yesterday was sort of a bad day for him in general, I think."

[Cut to footage from the walk-through.]

Draco: "Okay, so, in terms of emergency exits—"

Hermione: "Malfoy, listen, before we go any further, I really need to talk to you about something."

Draco: "Is it about the staircases?"

Hermione: "No. Wait. Why?"

Draco: "Because I really feel like we've been going in circles. Didn't we just pass this portrait of Dumbledore?"

Hermione: "That's not Dumbledore, that's Professor Lockhart in a wig. And also, it's not a painting, he's just standing there."

Gilderoy: "The scary one said to make myself useful."

Draco: "Do you mean McGonagall?"

Gilderoy: "Is that the brown shouty one?"

Draco: "I genuinely don't know."

Gilderoy: "The one who likes murder?"

Hermione: "Well, this is appropriately troubling, but anyway, as I was saying—"

[An owl drops in with a letter addressed to Draco, releasing it into his hands.]

Draco: "Hold that thought, Granger. This is marked with the Minister's seal."

Hermione: "Right, but just really quick—"

[The letter leaps from Draco's hands, unfolding itself and clearing its throat to speak in Kingsley's voice.]

Kingsley: "To Draco Malfoy: the Department of Magical Contracts and Tortfeasor Comeuppance is hereby disbanded. You are asked to kindly relinquish your Ministry badge by the end of the day. Happy holidays!" [There is a brief sound of rustling papers.] "Mafalda, how do I turn this off?

Yes, I know the message would be better delivered in person, but who has the time—yes, yes, I realize it's the holidays. In fact I said happy holidays, didn't I? No, it's not the same as adding 'lol' to the end of a passive-aggressive owl. Why? Because it is! The 'lol' is just a bald-faced lie, Mafalda. Nobody's laughing out loud and we all know it—yes, I'm aware it still reeks of disingenuity, but I'm allowed to say something, aren't I? Yes, I know I just fired him, but that doesn't mean I oppose him as a person. Can I not wish to be rid of someone professionally while also wanting them to enjoy the holidays in some, I don't know—abstract way? It's not my fault his job is redundant! I didn't invent the Ministry. Mafalda—come on. Come on, Mafalda. Faldy, come on sweets, don't look at me like that. Come here. I didn't mean to upset you, I'm sorry. Why don't you just sit here and—" [A loud shuffle.] "FUCKING HELL, how did you get in here again?! This is a matter of national security! What do you mean the thing is still recording?" [Another shuffle.] "Oh, for fuck's sake—"

[The letter dissolves into nothing, leaving Hermione and Draco in silence.]
Hermione: *gently* "Malfoy, I'm so sor-

Draco: "Wait a minute. WHAT?!"

*Cuts back to Hermione interview.*

Hermione: "So yeah, it was kind of, um, not the proper thing to bring up right after he'd just been fired, you know? Seemed like a selfish thing to do."

Rita: "Didn't you also get fired?"

Hermione: "Oh, I had actually already quit my job that morning. That's why I was late." *She grimaces.* "Not that McGonagall seemed to know that."

*Cuts to Hermione and Minerva footage.*

Minerva: "Granger, I've decided something."

Hermione: "Oh?"

Minerva: "I'm going to ruin your life."

Hermione: "Oh."

Minerva: "And I'm going to do it by offering you a job."

Hermione: "What?"

Minerva: "You heard me. Rather than let you stick your greedy little Ministry fingers where they don't belong, I'm going to make the school's business *your* business. You feel me?"

*She leans back, sliding on a pair of sunglasses and fist-bumping Albus' portrait behind her.*

Hermione: "I'm sorry, what's the job?"

Minerva: "Deputy headmistress."

Albus: "Otherwise known as official bitch-ass ho!"

*Next to him, Armando Dippet's portrait lets out a loud whoop of agreement.*

Minerva: "Would you driveling imbeciles please shut your gaping dickholes?"

Albus: "Fine. But only because we want to, and not because you said so."

Armando: "Yeah!"

Minerva: *grumbling* "Fine."

Albus: "You'll get to say things like that soon, Minnie. It's the best."

Armando: "It really is."

Minerva: *sighing* "I'm sure."

Hermione: "Okay, so I really don't understand what's happening. Did you just ask me to be deputy headmistress of Hogwarts?"
Minerva: "Yes. Responsibilities include: general responsibility, 80% of the work and 5.7% of the credit, total command of school functions while receiving approximately 15% of my salary, and obviously all relevant labor implied therein. I will, of course, maintain uncontested veto power and the freedom to ship my students at will."

Hermione: "I'm sorry, did you say 'ship' them?"

Albus: "Yes! How else do you think you went to the Yule Ball with Viktor Krum?"

[Cuts to Year 4 footage.]

Albus: "You're going to ask Miss Granger to the Yule Ball. I've seen you watching her in the library and I like it. I ship it. It is decided."

Viktor: [with his hands up] "Is—is that a gun?"

[Cuts back to Minerva and Albus.]

Minerva: "Basically, Granger, it finally occurred to me that I've been doing everything wrong. I wanted the privileges of being headmaster, but because I didn't have a second-in-command, I was having to do all the work, too. Obviously that has now been rectified."

Hermione: [tentatively] "May I ask what's in it for me?"

Albus: "No, you can't!" [To Minerva] "See, Minnie? This is why it's fun."

Minerva: "Oh, hold on. I'll tell you what's in it for you, Miss Granger."

Hermione: "Okay, so—"

Minerva: "But only because I want to, and not because I'm in any way obligated."

Hermione: [sighing] "Fine."

Minerva: [impressed] "You're right, Albus. That is fun."

Albus: "Yaass, bitch!"

[Cuts back to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "She eventually explained that I'd be able to continue improving the school's safety and curriculum if I wanted. I'd just be doing it as part of Hogwarts' faculty instead of as a Ministry employee."

Rita: "Oh. So is that why you quit your job?"

Hermione: [blushing] "Oh, no, actually, it isn't. I had quit because, um." [She pauses sheepishly.] "Well, because dating within Ministry departments is frowned upon."

[Cuts to Pansy and Daphne.]

Daphne: [frowning] "Wait. Is it?"

Pansy: "Huh. Not sure I knew that."

Daphne: "Well, should we quit?"
Pansy: "Why, so as to avoid being frowned upon?" [She scoffs.] "Please. I frown upon at least thirty people a day and none of them have come even close to dying yet."

Daphne: "Unfortunately."

Pansy: "Yeah, exactly."

[Cut to Seamus and Dean.]

Seamus: "Yeah, we know about that rule too."

Dean: "But as you might have guessed, nobody ever asks us if we're dating."

Seamus: "We told them that this is platonic hand-holding. What are they going to do, disagree?"

Dean: "Yeah. Plus we also convinced them that 'bro kisses' were a thing, so, you know. Lost cause, pretty much."

[Cut to Cormac.]

Cormac: "What? Bro kissing is totally a thing." [He turns over his shoulder.] "Hey Longbottom, bring that tight ass over here."

Neville: "What's up?"

Cormac: "We kiss, right?"

Neville: "Sure. Platonically, obviously."

Cormac: "Exactly."

Neville: "That, and sometimes our mouths get bored."

Cormac: "Yes, and then we progress to 'bro makeouts,' which is similar but more complex."

Neville: "Exactly. You know, when my plants are busy."

[Camera pans out to Marcus, who glances up sharply.]

Marcus: "What did you just say, Longbottom?"

Neville: "Nothing."

Cormac: [to Marcus] "Bro kiss, my dude."

Marcus: [resignedly] "Yeah, fine. Later."

[Cut back to Hermione interview.]

Rita: "Ah. So the rumors are true, then."

Hermione: "That Ron and I broke up? Yeah, that's true."

Rita: "Gossip Girl seemed pretty excited about it."

Hermione: "Yeah. She seems to have not enjoyed us very much."
Rita: "Nobody does."

Hermione: "What? Some people do."

Rita: "Stupid people."

Hermione: [frowning] "That's—I really don't think that's—"

Rita: [interrupting] "Anyway, I take it that's what you wanted to discuss with Draco?"

Hermione: "Well, yes. But unfortunately the rest of the day didn't go much better."

[Cuts back to Hogwarts footage.]

Draco: "I can't believe it. I'm fired? I almost never get fired. Not even Voldemort fired me. Granted, I came close to death a couple of times, but fired?"

Hermione: [gently] "Isn't it better to be fired than, I don't know—murdered?"

Draco: [scoffing] "Believe me, Granger, I'd much rather be permanently dead than temporarily undignified. It's like you don't even know me."

[Another owl flies in, dropping a letter in Draco's hands.]

Hermione: "Oh. Uh oh. I don't know if you should open that one."

Draco: "Why? It's just from Pansy—"

[Pansy: "DRACO MALFOY, HOW DARE YOU?! WHAT KIND OF NERVE—I CAN'T EVEN—YOU COME INTO MY HOUSE AND JUST—NO, NO, DAPHNE, I'M FINE. I'M FINE. PUT THE VIBRATOR AWAY, I'M CALM. OKAY, WHERE WAS I? RIGHT—DRACO. HOW DARE YOU GET YOURSELF FIRED?! I'VE ALREADY ARRANGED FOR YOU TO BE ON MY QUIDDITCH TEAM, AND NOW YOU CAN'T EVEN PLAY? BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT?! EVEN IN THE MINISTRY ANYMORE?! HONESTLY, IT'S LIKE YOU DON'T EVEN CARE ABOUT MY NEEDS. NO, DAPHNE, PUT IT AWAY, THOSE AREN'T THE NEEDS I'M TALKING ABOUT RIGHT NOW. DAPH, I'M SERIOUS, I—OKAY, FINE. JUST—QUIETLY. I'M STILL WORKING ON THIS HOWLER. YES, OKAY, RIGHT THERE. OOOOH YES, THERE, MM YES GOOD, OKAY, WHERE WAS I—OH YES. DRACO, YOU SELFISH MOTHERFUCKER, HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO WIN N- OH, MMMM YEP. YEAH, LIKE THAT. NO, WAIT, LOWER. YES, THERE. THANK YOU. OKAY, YOU KNOW WHAT? JUST TURN IT OFF, I THINK I'VE SAID EVERYTHING. NO, NOT THAT, KEEP THAT GOING, I MEANT TURN THE—YES, THE RECORDING, OKAY—"

[The letter dissolves in the air, leaving Hermione and Draco in silence.]

Hermione: [tentatively reaching out] "Malfoy, are you—"

Draco: "WHAT the FUCK?!"

[Cuts back to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "So yeah. It was sort of a day of more pressing things, I think."

Rita: "Sounds to me like you're kind of a pussy, actually."
Hermione: "What?"

Rita: "Hm?"

Hermione: "Well, look. It could have been worse."

Rita: "Could it, though?"

Hermione: "I mean, at least there were no bees."

[Draco appears, brandishing a sabre.]

Draco: "EN GARDE!"

Hermione: [sighing as she puts on her helmet] "Oh no."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Be back in a few hours with more nonsense!
The Real World: Ministry of Magic, Episode XXIV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Real World: Ministry of Magic
Episode XXIV

Summary: The Real World, concluded. Olivie Advent Day 24. Merry Christmas!

[Scene opens with Ron interview.]

Ron: "So, the Ministry quidditch game was pretty, um… interesting this year, I guess you could say."

Rita: "That's putting it lightly."

[Cuts to footage from the game.]

Pansy: "Okay, so, on the Auror team, we have Potter, she-Weasley, Theo—" [She pauses.] "Okay, he doesn't even work for the Ministry anymore, but fine, whatever."

Harry: [shrugging] "I gave him a day pass."

Pansy: "Sounds fake, but I don't care. So anyway there's you guys, some other Aurors, whatever, blah blah blah. And on my team, we have me, Daphne, Weasley, and also these professional quidditch players."

[Marcus, Oliver, and Viktor Krum line up behind her, arms folded.]

Harry: "I thought you guys were officiating?"

Pansy: "They were, but then I remembered that I really don't care about rules."

Oliver: "And I assume this goes without saying, but we were coerced."

Viktor: [grumbling] "I hate this school."

Daphne: "Oh, hush. You all liked it."

Marcus: "We didn't not like it, but that's not the point."

Harry: "Wait a second. These three don't work for the Minister- well, depending on whichever Marcus that is, I guess—"

Marcus: [confused] "What?"

Pansy: [airily] "Well, Potter, I also gave them day passes."

[Harry and Pansy eye each other carefully. Harry sighs.]

Harry: "Fine."

Pansy: [gleefully] "Let's play!"
Ron: "Spoiler alert: we won. Though it does feel a bit like an empty victory?"

Rita: "Understandable."

Ron: "But anyway, can we get back to this meeting?"

[Rita: "Oh, sure. Carry on."

Kingsley: "Sorry, so Ron, you were saying that you and Harry made a bet, and now you're Head Auror because you won a highly illegal quidditch game?"

Ron: "Er, yes."

Kingsley: [thoughtfully] "Well, I suppose you did just have that big pixie bust. You aren't totally unqualified."

Luna: "Aww! That's sweet."

[Rita: "Oh, my God—"

Kingsley: "How the actual fuck do you keep getting in here?"

Luna: "Who, me?"

Kingsley: "Yes, you!"

Luna: "Oh. I thought you meant him."

[Kingsley: "OH MY GOD—"

Severus: "Relax."

Seamus: [sighing morosely] "I just want to KNOW—"

Severus: "Fine. You want to know the truth? I'm a ghost."

Rita, Ron, Kingsley, Seamus, Dean, and Blaise: "WHAT?!"

Luna: "Ooh, when did you get here, Blaise?"

Seamus: "Who, Blaise?"

Dean: "Do you mean Blaise?"

Kingsley: "Do you even work here?"

Ron: "Who, Bl-"

Blaise: [to Ron] "Don't, Weasley. You'll ruin it."
Ron: [sighing] "Fine."

Blaise: "But to answer your question, I don't actually work here."

Rita: [surprised] "What? Are you a ghost too?"

Luna: "No. Only Severus and I are ghosts."

Rita: "Wait a minute. What?!"

Luna: "Yeah. I've been dead for three years. That's how I keep getting in here undetected."

[There is a moment of stunned silence.]

Kingsley: "Well, I'm... guiltily relieved?"

Luna: "That's nice."

Ron: [awkwardly] "Super sorry about your death though, Luna."

Luna: "It's fine."

Rita: "I'm actually not sure how we didn't notice this before."

Luna: [sympathetically] "Well, you're all fools."

[Cuts to Luna and Severus interview.]

Luna: "For the record, we're definitely not ghosts."

Severus: "Yes. We're very much alive."

Luna: "Kingsley just has terrible security."

Severus: "The worst. Also, we personally disabled all the wards."

Luna: "Yes. That, and everyone who works in this Ministry is, as I've mentioned, a fool."

Severus: "Yep."

Luna: [brightly] "Hey, we should burn it down!"

Severus: "We should."

Luna: [shrugging] "Later, maybe."

Severus: [kindly] "Well, we'll see where the afternoon and/or the inevitable revolution takes us."

Luna: "Right. Anyway, where were we?"

Severus: "Spaghetti time?"

Luna: "Spaghetti time!"

[Severus offers her a fork, holding up his plate of spaghetti.]

Theo: [popping his head in] "Year of pranks, baby!"
Rita: [to Blaise] "Hold on. If you don't work here, then what exactly do you do?"

Blaise: "Oh, I'm a showrunner. I've been poking around here looking for ideas, and I think I found one. Get this—*Gossip Girl*. It's a show about someone who pretends to be an anonymous source in order to get the attention of the person they're secretly in love with."

Rita: "Sounds stupid."

Blaise: "You can be in it, if you want."

Rita: "Sounds genius!"

Lee, from out of screen view: "HOLD ON A MINUTE—"

[Cut to Theo and Harry interview.]

Theo: [to Harry] "You know, this whole Gossip Girl thing did seem suspiciously convenient this time around. I mean, it's almost as though you and I wouldn't be together if not for Gossip Girl."

Harry: "Sure. Almost."

Theo: [shrugging] "Well, anyway. I guess she's done now? I haven't seen anything new since yesterday."

Harry: "You sure? This memo came this morning."

[He hands Theo a piece of parchment.]

Theo: "Oh." [reading aloud] "Will you go out with me, xoxo Gossip Gi- hold on." [He pauses, looking at Harry with confusion.] "Is this—did you—" [He falters again, stunned.] "Potter, are you Gossip Girl?"

Harry: [innocently] "Well, you said you wanted a prank war."

[There is a long pause.]

Theo: "You motherfucker. You motherfucker, you are the fucking king of pranks."

Harry: "Thank you. I know."

Theo: "Well wait, hold on. What happened with our other prank? You know, with Draco and Granger?"

Harry: "Oh, right, that. That wasn't really a prank. It was more of an ambiguous 'break up Ron and Hermione because they keep making me tag along and I'm tired of couple's brunch' sort of thing than a prank."

Theo: "Right, sure, but what happened?"

Harry: [to the camera] "Lee, can you roll that?"

[Cut to footage from the girl's bathroom at Hogwarts.]

Moaning Myrtle: "Still not playing in the quidditch game, huh?"
Draco: "This time is different, Myrtle. And anyway, what rhymes with 'crippling sensation of guilt'?

Myrtle: "Rippling temptation of filth!"

Draco: [considering it] "Well, I suppose that's not totally off base—"

[Hermione enters, out of breath.]

Hermione: "Malfoy!"

Draco: "WHAT IS IT, YOU DESPOTIC SPRING BREEZE—"

Hermione: "Just—stop for a second, okay? Don't say anything."

Draco: [indignantly] "Well that's terribly rude, you golden-flushed sun princess—"

Hermione: "I just need to get this out, okay? Can you— [She swallows hard.] "Just listen, okay?"

Draco: "Fine. What is it?"

[Hermione shakily unfolds a piece of parchment, clearing her throat.]

Hermione: [reading aloud] "I hate the way you talk to me / And the way you cut your hair / I hate the way you drive my car / I hate it when you stare."

Draco: [bewildered] "Car? What in the name of Salazar's emerald phallus is a car?"

[Cuts to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "Yeah, so, I kind of borrowed this poem." [She sighs.] "Look, I'm not very creative, okay? Besides, he'll never know."

[Cuts back to Draco and Hermione.]

Hermione: "I hate your big dumb combat boots / And the way you read my mind—"

Draco: [interrupting] "Combat boots? Granger, these boots are from Twilfitt and Tatting's and I've been comfortably assured by my mother and Theo that they suit my aesthetic perfectly. Also, I've never once used legilimency on you, but if you'd like me to start—"

Hermione: [continuing] "—I hate you so much that it makes me sick / It even makes me rhyme."

Draco: [sighing] "Well, that's accurate."

Hermione: "I hate the way you're always right / I hate it when you lie / I hate it when you make me laugh / Even worse when you make me cry." [She sniffs a little, and Draco visibly softens.] "I hate it when you're not around / And the fact that you didn't call / But mostly I hate the way I don't hate you." [She pauses, wiping her eyes, and glances up at him.] "Not even close, not even a little bit, not even at all."

[There is a pause.]

Myrtle: "Honestly? That was terrible."

Draco: [uncertainly] "Granger, I don't understand. I thought you said—"
Hermione: "I broke up with Ron."

[Cuts to Ron interview.]

Ron: "Okay, first of all it was mutual, but—"

Pansy: "Shut up, Weasley."

Ron: [hastily] "Right, sorry, as you were."

[Cuts back to Draco and Hermione.]

Draco: [disbelieving] "You—you did?"

Hermione: "Yes." [She takes a deep breath.] "And there's something else."

Draco: [tenuously optimistic] "What?"

Hermione: "I've been made Deputy Headmistress at Hogwarts, which puts me in charge of hiring. And—" [She exhales.] "And I'd like to offer you a job as an English professor, if you're up for it."

Myrtle: [scoffing] "What, this guy? He can't even write a poem without my help!"

Draco: "Myrtle, what rhymes with 'go away'?"

Myrtle: "Flow balle- ah, nope, I heard it. Continue."

Hermione: "So, um. Would you do it?" [She fidgets.] "To clarify, it would mean that we'd both be working here."

Draco: "Together, you mean?"

Hermione: "Er, yes. It would mean we would be, um, close-proximity work associates."

Draco: "Mmhm, yes, I see." [He pauses, considering her.] "And is there anything else you'd like to ask me, Granger?"

Hermione: [furiously flushed] "Er, I don't. I, um." [She trails off.]

Draco: "Granger." [He sighs.] "You stupid, stupid sun goddess."

Hermione: "WHAT?"

Draco: "DON'T YELL AT ME. WE'RE HAVING A MOMENT."

Hermione: "WE'RE ALWAYS HAVING A MOMENT!"

Draco: "AND IT DIDN'T OCCUR TO YOU THAT THAT MIGHT MEAN SOMETHING?"

Hermione: "IT DID, BUT—" [wailing] "BUT I'M THE DUMBEST GIRL IN SCHOOL, MALFOY!"

Draco: "OKAY, NOW YOU'RE JUST BEING RIDICULOUS—"

Hermione: "BOOKS! AND CLEVERNESS! THERE ARE MORE IMPORTANT THINGS—FOR EXAMPLE, MY EMOTIONAL QUOTIENT IS PITEOUSLY LOW, AND—"
Draco: "GRANGER, YOU RESPLENDENT FOOL, I'M GOING TO KISS YOU NOW."

Hermione: "You are?"

Draco: "Well, if you want me to. I mean, if you'd rather not, then—"

Hermione: "DON'T RUIN IT, YOU BEAUTIFUL HELLSCAPE!"

Draco: "GOD, I LOATHE YOU."

Hermione: "I LOATHED YOU FIRST!"

[They kiss.]

Myrtle: "Aww!"

[The kissing escalates voraciously.]

Myrtle: "Okay, gross. That's enough. I died a virgin." [She pauses.] "Actually, you know what? Keep going, I died a virgin. I'd like to see where this goes."

[Cuts back to Theo and Harry.]

Theo: "I think that prank went well, actually."

Harry: "What about the other one?"

Theo: "Hm?"

[Cuts to Hogwarts. The Sorting Hat is laughing maniacally, lightning striking in the background as he stands over the lime green bowler hat, which hangs precipitously from the window.]

Sorting Hat: [dramatically] "DAS… VI… DANIYA!"

[The bowler hat falls below, swept on the wind and into the lake while the Sorting Hat continues its haunting cries of laughter.]

Theo: "Ehem."

[Camera pans out to reveal Theo and Severus sitting behind the Sorting Hat.]

Severus: [licking his finger, turning a page of the Quibbler] "You know he has a horcrux, right?"

Sorting Hat: [abruptly choking] "What?"

Theo: "A horcrux. You know, an object imbued with his soul? He'll just come back to life."

[There's a long pause.]

Sorting Hat: "NOOOOOOOOOO!"

[Cuts back to Theo and Harry.]

Theo: "Oh, right, that one. It's on hiatus, I guess? Depends how long a horcrux hunt takes. I think it's going to be a few months' worth of camping, though, so I've got some time."

Harry: "That sounds right. And what are you planning to do now that you've been fired?"
Theo: "What, like for money? I'm independently wealthy."

Harry: "Oh. Right."

Theo: "What about you? Now that Weasley's been made Head Auror instead of you, I mean."

Harry: "Oh, I quit my job. Turns out I'm also independently wealthy, and more importantly, I hate being an Auror."

Theo: "Yeah, that was becoming increasingly apparent."

Harry: "Well, anyway." [He gestures to the parchment in Theo's hand.] "Are you going to answer Gossip Girl's memo or what?"

Theo: "Are you just going to continually refer to yourself as Gossip Girl?"

Harry: "I might. I think it suits me."

Theo: "Fair. What's your offer?"

Harry: "Well, we're rich, we're young, and we're magic. We could travel the world?"

Theo: "Hm. How about a caper of some sort?"

Harry: "That works too."

Theo: "I feel like I would enjoy committing an elaborate heist."

Harry: "Year of crime?"

Theo: "Year of crime!"

Harry: "Well, we should probably stop filming this, then."

Theo: "Oh, right, good shout."

[Cuts back to Kingsley's office.]

Blaise: "So anyway, I'm going to leave now. First of all, I have to get back to Hogwarts for that Slug Club reunion, and secondly, this show is over. I hired all the camera people for my new show."

Lee: "YOU DID WHAT?!"

Blaise: "Also, it's probably going to come out soon that Rita and Gilderoy are like, a thousand percent fucking."

[Cuts to Pansy interview.]

Pansy: [innocently] "What's that? Stay in my lane?" [She smirks.] "Bitch, they're all my lanes."

[Cuts back to Kingsley's office.]


[Gilderoy pops up from beneath her dress, gasping for air.]
Rita: [sighing] "That may or may not be valid."

Kingsley: [skeptically] "May or may not?"

Rita: [shrugging] "More 'may' than 'may not,' but—"

Luna: [to Gilderoy] "How was it, Professor?"

Gilderoy: "Like a savory pie!"

Lee: "EVERYONE GET OUT!"

[Cuts to Slug Club reunion gala at Hogwarts.]

Minerva: "Granger, why are there so many cunting baboons in my house?"

Hermione: "Don't worry, Professor. I'll take care of it."

Minerva: "YOU CERTAINLY WILL, DEPUTY BITCH ASS."

Hermione: [sighing] "Is that—should I just get used to that, or—"

Minerva: "Come on, Albus. We're going to sing karaoke and try on poison rings."

Albus, via his portrait: "Yeah!"

[They leave. Camera pans over to Blaise and Ginny.]

Blaise: "Oh, hey Weasley. So I heard there's going to be some sort of sexy game later."

Ginny: "That wouldn't happen to be—" [She glances down at the programme.] "Seventy-five to ninety minutes in heaven, would it?"

Blaise: [slyly] "That's the one. And I mean, who knows, maybe we'll get each oth-'"

Ginny: "Hey, want to just ditch this and have sex?"

Blaise: "I—what did you just say?"

Ginny: "This party is lame. I'd rather be fucking you."

Blaise: "Oh."

Ginny: "We could have dinner first, if you want. You know, if you want to date or something." [She tilts her head, considering it.] "You don't like, throw your socks on the floor without warning, do you?"

Blaise: "I only wear Italian loafers. I don't own socks."

Ginny: "Perfect. So, you in?"

Blaise: [surprised] "I guess I am, yeah."

Ginny: "Well, good. I'm glad all I had to do was ask."

Blaise: [clearing his throat] "Yeah... pretty weird if someone had actually like, paid a fortune to have an unnecessary party as an elaborate scheme. Or, you know. Something."
Ginny: "What? That's insane. Who would do that?"

Blaise: "No idea."

[They leave. The camera pans over to where Cormac, Marcus, and Neville are standing together in the Great Hall.]

Marcus: "Let's give Longbottom another turn. I'm convinced one of these days he's going to get it."

Neville: "Pomona Sprout, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Filius Flitwick."

Marcus: [pleasantly surprised] "Whoa, weird. That was actually pretty norm-

Neville: "...have all been arrested for various counts of smuggling and racketeering."

Marcus: "-al. Nevermind. [He pauses.] "But since you brought it up: fuck Pomona, marry Filius, kill Justin."

Cormac: "That sounds right."

Neville: "Anyway, it turns out McGonagall needs a new Herbology professor, so I think I'm going to come teach at Hogwarts. At the very least, it'll give me a place to put my plants."

Marcus: "That's true."

Cormac: "Oh. [He looks disappointed.] "Well, I'm going to miss your sassy cardies, Longbottom."

Neville: "Well, you could probably come if you want, McLaggen. They do need a new Charms professor, after all."

Cormac: [brightly] "I am uniquely average at Charms."

[Cuts to Cormac interview.]

Cormac: "Coincidentally, that's also one of my euphemisms for fucking."

[Cuts back to Slug Club reunion.]

Neville: "Yeah, so, you should apply. And then we can keep bro-fisting."

Marcus: "Do you mean fist-bumping?"

Cormac: [gleefully] "Nope!"

[Camera pans over to Draco and Hermione.]

Draco: "Granger, it's simple. If the Defense Against the Dark Arts position is still cursed, then we'll just create another class and call it 'The Dark Arts Can Fuck Right Off.' Simple, job done."

Hermione: [groaning] "Malfoy, we can't possibly call it that. Do you even hear yourself?"

Draco: [holding a hand to his ear] "Sorry, what?"

Hermione: "ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!

Draco: "OKAY, LISTEN UP, YOU SHOUTY VIXEN—"
She cuts him off with a kiss. Camera pans to Theo and Harry chatting together as Rita approaches them, dragging Gilderoy behind her.

Rita: "Well, needless to say, it gives me great pleasure to finally get out of this hell hole. Goodbye forever, Harley Porthouse—"

Gilderoy: [to Rita] "Ooh, sweetheart, it's pronounced 'Har-lay,' but we'll get there."

Harry: "Bye, Rita. How did Lee take the news, by the way?"

Rita: "I'm not sure he noticed, honestly."

Gilderoy: "Is that the crying one?"

Theo: "What?"

Gilderoy: "The crying one. You know, the one who dies?"

[Camera pans out to reveal Lee sniffling next to Theo and Harry, intermittently sobbing 'OTP' and 'JUST THROW ME IN A RIVER' as he lets out a loud wail.]

Harry: "Ah, yes. He's dead. It's happened before."

Theo: "I wouldn't worry about it."

Luna: "Yes. In fact, many of us are dead."

Severus: "And we're all doing just fine."

Lee: "OH, JUST SHUT THE CAMERA OFF, WOULD YOU?!"

Harry: [glancing around] "Hold on a minute. Where's Ron?"

Lee: [wailing] "WHO CARES?!"

[Camera jostles, and then footage cuts out.]

[Scene reopens with three people in a bedroom, none of their faces visible. The camera has clearly been placed on something approximately waist-level, and a golden statue of two naked women is visible on the left.]

Woman's voice: "Okay, we're good to go. You ready?"

Man's voice: "Wait, hold on. Is that a camera?"

Woman's voice: "Just try to ignore it, okay? Just relax."

Second woman's voice: "Or don't. Doesn't really matter. You already signed the papers. You're in this for a long-term contract."

Man: "Well, okay, I guess—"

[There is a rustle of clothing.]

Woman 2: "HOLY SHIT. Is that your dick?"

Man: "I—yes?"
Woman 1: "Oh my god. Oh my god, it's—"

Woman 2: "Listen, I never cry, but—"

Woman 1: "It's beautiful."

Woman 2: "It's fucking majestic."

Woman 1: "I've seen some amazing things in my life, but this is—this is breathtaking."

Woman 2: "It's sort of like… when you see the sunrise for the first time?"

Woman 1: "Honestly? I really think I could conjure a patronus right now."

Woman 2: "We wouldn't even need one. The dementors would take one look at that dick and fucking weep."

Man: "...thank you?"

Woman 1: "I mean, I suspected, but—"

Woman 2: "I didn't. I am genuinely surprised. Thank god we didn't kill you."

Man: [alarmed] "Wait a minute, when was that on the table?!"

Woman 2: "Shut up. We're busy."

Woman 1: "I honestly still can't get over how pretty it is."

Woman 2: "I know, it's—it's like, delicate, almost? But also austere, like a deer in the forest."

Man: "You're actually crying, aren't you?"

Woman 2: "It's just—we worked really hard for this."

Woman 1: "Yeah. We broke, like, a lot of laws to get here."

Woman 2: "Right. And it was a pretty big gamble, too."

Woman 1: "Totally. You could have had a pencil dick."

Woman 2: "Or like, a stubby one. And sure, girth is more important than length, but still. Nobody wants a goblin dick."

Woman 1: "Or an elf dick."

Woman 2: "Could have had a ghost dick, even."

Woman 1: [shuddering] "True."

Man: "What the hell is a ghost dick?"

Woman 1: "It's not important."

Woman 2: "The point is, I'm just really, really proud of us."

Woman 1: "Yes. Immensely."
[They sigh contentedly.]

Man: "So, um. Should we get to it, then?"

Woman 1: "What, sex? Yes, definitely."

Man: "Oh. Okay, cool."

Woman 2: "Buckle up, dickhead. We're going for a ride."

Woman 1: [*whispering*] "XOXO."

[Footage runs out.]

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Tomorrow I'll add my D/Hr Advent fic to the collection and then that new one shot I've been relentlessly teasing. Merry Christmas and happy holidays! You're all an utter blessing, and I thank you endlessly for being here.
A Gentleman's Guide to Incandescence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Gentleman's Guide to Incandescence

Pairing: Dramione (Draco Malfoy x Hermione Granger)

Universe: Post-War, EWE

Rating: T for language, suggestion

Summary: Written for the 2017 D/Hr Advent and the prompt "traditions." A thousand thanks for the nomination and inclusion in this event, and a few more to SallyJ Avery for her ever-reliable eyes on this!

In sum: it's not like they're going to burn the place down.

You can find this one shot posted here: A Gentleman's Guide to Incandescence [ AO3 ]. Again, just merrily posting in Amortentia on FFN without disturbing the chapter enumeration on AO3.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Thank you again for the nomination! I love being part of the Advent, and be sure to check out the other fics. And tomorrow... more.
Survival Techniques

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Survival Techniques

Pairing: Parkweasel (Pansy Parkinson x Percy Weasley), background Nottgrass (Theo Nott x Daphne Greengrass)

Universe: Post-War, EWE

Rating: M for language, sex

Summary: Beds are cold in the winter; Pansy needs someone to fill hers. Inspired by an advent edit by aurorarsinistra.

I. (Need)

"You know what I need?" Pansy prompts, contemplating her glass of Ogden's before raising it to her lips. "A winter boyfriend."

"What?" Daphne asks, making a face. "You mean a snowman?"

"No. A winter boyfriend. You know," Pansy says emphatically, "a boyfriend to sleep with while it's cold and fuck through the major commercial holidays, but immediately break up with as soon as the snow melts."

"That," Daphne says, chewing the thought slowly, "doesn't really make sense."

"Beds are cold in the winter," Pansy replies smartly. "It's a survival technique."

"Well, fine," Daphne says, shrugging. "Have someone in mind?"

At that, Pansy sets down her now-empty glass, scanning the room for prospects.

It's discouraging right from the start; the one in the corner, just within her periphery, is far too short. His friend, who wanders over by the bar, is much too loud.

The one leaning against the opposite wall is promising for a second, but his hair is too long, and not in a sexy way.

The one glancing listlessly around the room looks too much like her ex.

One man shifts, though, and his motion catches her eye. He looks like he's here after work, too, which is promising—because it means that he works, and that's never (rarely) a bad thing. From where she sits she can see his tailored dress shirt, the slim cut of his trousers. He's lean and tall, which isn't exactly outside her usual taste, but she can see the light glinting from the corner of a pair of tortoiseshell glasses, which is considerably less her style. If they're for fashion, that's no good, but he doesn't look fashionable, per se.

She suspects, approvingly, that he probably needs the glasses to see.
"What about him?" she asks, nudging Daphne, and Daphne cocks her head, considering it.

"Can't see his face," she notes. "Red hair, though."

"Is it? Looks darker."

"Auburn?"

"Does it matter?"

"Kind of."

"Hm." Pansy considers it, watching him order. He does it smoothly, the bills tucked between his fingers and in towards his palm, flashing it just long enough for the bartender to see and take his offer seriously. He takes his whisky straight, she notes; she watches him tuck his wallet back into his pocket and raise the glass to his lips with a quiet, unassuming motion.

She still can't quite see his face.

But by now, she's willing to risk it.

"Be right back," she tells Daphne.

"Sure you will," Daphne replies spiritedly, toasting her as she goes.

Pansy checks her hair, refreshing the waves with a twist around her finger, and adjusts her cleavage. Then she taps him on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," she begins sweetly, and he turns.

"Oh," she says, blinking.

"Oh," Percy Weasley agrees, and she regrets every moment of her life that's led to the horrendous now.

II. (Mistaken)

"Sorry," she says bluntly, "I just thought—"

—thought you were someone else, she wants to say, but he barely blinks, almost as though he knows the sentence is actually meant to end with I thought you were hot from far away, but now that I'm here, I'm fully aware this can't happen; but just so you know, you're unexpectedly hot up close, too, and it's only that I'm so fucking repulsed by the entire prospect of who you are that I need to bail immediately.

"Right," he says, a bit clipped.

"Right," she agrees. "So, anyway, sorry about that, I was—"

"Would you like a drink?" he interrupts.

No, she wants to say.

No, she should say.
"Are you paying?" she asks bluntly.

He nudges his glasses further up his nose.

"That was implied," he says.

"Fine," she says. "I'll have an Ogden's."

He flags the bartender down with a sly motion, as though in the last five minutes the two have established some kind of code. The bartender nods, the transaction appears to be complete, and then Percy motherfucking Weasley hands Pansy her glass.

"Want to sit?" he asks.

She glances around apprehensively (someone might see, after all), but over at her table she can see that Theo's here now, and Daphne's nuzzling his neck in greeting.

Her stomach turns.

"Fine," she permits. "But somewhere else."

He gestures to the bar's patio. "Outside?"

She shrugs. "Fine."

It's a nice night, and they settle in at one of the highboys. She crosses one leg over the other, wondering what they could possibly have to say to one another.

He sips his whisky.

She watches his mouth, briefly.

Then she watches the way his fingers curl around his glass.

His nails are trim but neat. The fingers themselves are long, narrow, ink-stained. He's wearing a battered watch, but it's tasteful. Nothing ostentatious. In fact, there's nothing all that ostentatious about him. His color palette is subdued. His nature, in fact, is subdued. He doesn't seem nervous. He doesn't seem much of anything.

"I'm just staying until the bottom of the glass," she says. Obnoxiously.

He nods curtly. "Likewise."

She blinks, but tries not to betray her surprise.

"So," she attempts. She's a little frustrated that she's the one who loses the battle against silence, but he seems like he might not speak if she doesn't, and she's never been comfortable without some tangible shield of flirtation. "What are you here for?"

"A meeting." He takes a sip. "It went well."

"Oh."

"And you?"

"Sex," she says, with a carefully cultivated boldness.
His gaze cuts sideways.

"Are you implying—"

"Not with you," she assures him bluntly, pointedly raising her glass. "We're just having a drink."

He nods.

They both take a sip.

"What kind of knickers are you wearing?" he asks neutrally, and she promptly chokes, sputtering on a too-large swallow.

"What?" she manages, coughing.

"Lace?" he guesses, his gaze flicking over her. "I'd guess lace. Silk, maybe? Seems impractical, but if you're here for sex—" he trails off, shrugging. "I don't take you for the cotton type, but I suspect you could be surprising."

She, meanwhile, suspects that he's fucking with her.

"They're lace," she admits, crossing her legs a little tighter.

He eyes the liquid in his glass.

"What color?" he asks.

She straightens. "Black," she lies, with confidence.

He chuckles, leaning towards her.

"Liar," he says.

She blinks.

"What color are they, then?" she prompts, and he leans down, adjusting the laces of his oxfords and seeming to consider the air between them before pausing, his voice low.

"They're green," he says, and to her utter displeasure, she shivers. "With pale pink embroidery. Excellent taste," he determines, now leaning away from her and settling back in against the chair. "I think black would have been rather overdone."

She knows he can't see them, but that's much too specific to be a guess.

"Did you just use legilimency on me?" she demands, and he shrugs.

"I'm a very talented wizard," he informs her.

"Fine," she growls, glaring at him. "Then tell me what I'm thinking now."

He shakes his head.

"No," he says without elaboration, and then he adds, "Why don't you tell me what I'm thinking instead?"

She frowns.
She doesn't want to, but also, she really, really wants to.

She forces indifference.

"It's dirty, isn't it?" she guesses dully, and he shrugs.

"Your friend over there," he says, aiming his chin over his shoulder to reference where Daphne and Theo remain inside the bar. "From where she's sitting, she wouldn't see if I were to—" he pauses, his fingertips brushing her knee. "May I?" he asks, and for reasons she cannot possibly fathom, Pansy uncrosses her legs at his prompting. "From where she's sitting," he continues, his fingers drawing up the inside of her knee and pausing at the midpoint of her inner thigh, "she wouldn't be able to see this. Or this," he adds, as Pansy swallows and lets him part her knees further, his fingers now brushing the curve of her thigh. "I could keep going," he adds, raising his glass to his lips with his free hand, "but I think you see my point."

He withdraws his hand and Pansy exhales sharply.

"But," he says, "seeing as I've reached the bottom of my glass—" He drains it, pointedly setting it down on the table. "I think my time here is done."

Pansy stares at him.

And stares.

"Are you serious?" she demands.

He rises to his feet.

"Would you like to continue?" he asks.

She bites her lip.

Bites it hard.

"No," she says, rightfully. "This can't go anywhere."

"Yes, I agree," he says with a nod. "Seems foolish to pursue it."

"Glad we're on the same page," she says coolly, and he nods, already looking over his shoulder and preparing to leave.

"But," Pansy attempts, her throat suddenly quite dry. "If you were to, um, finish what you started, I guess I'm just curious—"

He steps a little closer, digging a business card out of the inner lining of his pocket and handing it to her. He catches her wrist loosely as she accepts it.

"I'd have liked to keep going," he says, "but tonight's not the night."

When he releases her, she glances down at the card.

_Percy Weasley_
_Office of the Minister_

"It's enchanted," he says. "Use it for access to my Floo, if you wish."
She looks up at him, surprised.

"My office Floo," he clarifies, biting back a chuckle. "So don't do anything too drastic."

"I'm not actually going to use this," she reminds him.

He shrugs.

"Goodnight, Miss Parkinson," he says, leaving her behind with his empty glass.

III. (Ambition)

RSVPing to Daphne's engagement party with a plus one a month ago was not one of Pansy's best ideas.

"A little ambitious," Daphne agrees gently.

Pansy sighs.

"Draco will be there," Daphne reminds her quietly.

"I know," Pansy half-moans, wanting to die. "I can't go alone."

Daphne hesitates. "Well—" she says, and her gaze flicks to where Percy Weasley's card sits on Pansy's dresser, untouched for the past two weeks.


"Pans," Daphne attempts, in a voice that Pansy knows contains bad news.

She sighs.

"Draco won't be alone, will he?" Pansy guesses, and Daphne winces in answer.

Of course he has a date.

*Of course* he has a date.

Pansy picks up the card.

"Fine," she exhales grumpily, heading towards her Floo.

When she walks into Percy Weasley's office, he's still working. He glances up at her and she comes to a halt, freezing in place while he adjusts his glasses.

"Yes?" he says.

"I," she begins, and can't quite cough it out of her throat. "What are you," she sputters instead, "some sort of secretary?"

He blinks.

"Undersecretary," he says. "To the Minister."

"Oh." She chews her response. "Is that prestigious?"
His mouth barely quirks, in the subtest possible indication of amusement.

"To some," he permits. "But I don't think you're here for my prestige."

Her mouth falls open, and then snaps shut.

"What do you do?" he asks.

"Go to parties," she hurls back, daring him to mock her.

He rises to his feet, declining the opening.

"You need something," he notes, almost as if he's guessing.

"Is that legilimency?" she sniffs.

His mouth twitches. "Observation," he corrects. "Of course, my perception of social behaviors is often rather flawed, so—"

"I need a date," she confirms. "An engagement party for my friend Daphne."

She pauses, and he waits.

"Tomorrow night," she clarifies.

His brows arch, surprised.

"Tomorrow night," he echoes, stepping around his desk. "Rather last minute."

"I know." She stiffens, unapologetic. "So, will you go or not?"

"Depends," he says, taking a step towards her, and then another.

He brings them face to face and tilts his head down, considering her.

"Ask me nicely," he says.

She rolls her eyes.

"Please, then," she says.

He steps closer.

He smells clean, like a sea breeze, and—very much against her will—she glimpses a comparable blue in his eyes.

"Ask me," he murmurs, "nicely."

She swallows.

"Will you please go with me?" she asks. "I need your help. I—" she exhales. "I need you to say yes."

He lets a beat of silence pass.

Then—
"Dress robes?" he asks.

She exhales the breath she didn't know she was holding.

"Yes," she says.

"Will black and white robes be acceptable?" he prompts.

"Yes."

"And you will be wearing—?"

"Green," she says, and feels her cheeks flush hot at the memory when she meets his eye.

He half-smiles. "And I will be your—?"

"Boyfriend," she supplies, flinching. "If you can stand the lie."

He glances down, eyeing her hand, and then he reaches for it. He holds it to his lips, brushing them slowly, tenderly (agonizingly) across her knuckles, the whole of it more breath than contact.

"Very well, Miss Parkinson," he says, half-bruising her with the impact.

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IV. (Convenience)

In the end, she spends the entire night avoiding Draco.

"There you are," Percy says quietly, rounding the corner to where she's pressed flat against the corridor wall, wishing to dissolve into it. "You know, if you want to leave—"

"I can't leave," she snaps. "He's—" she withers. "He'll see."

Percy says nothing.

"It's just hard," she manages after a few beats of silence, "because it used to be the four of us. You know? Since we were kids. But now Daphne and Theo are getting married, and Draco has something real, and I," she concludes, swallowing. "I have—"

"Me?" Percy prompts, with a faint air of self-deprecation.

She sighs.

"I just meant," Pansy amends, "that he has someone he cares about, and who cares about him, and you're—"

"Convenient," Percy replies.

"Yes," Pansy concedes miserably. "You're here because I begged."

Percy pauses.

"No," he says. "I'm here because I wanted to be." He pauses again, sipping his glass of wine. "Though, coincidentally, I did enjoy hearing you say please."

She sighs again. Less sulkily this time, or so she intends.
"Sorry I keep ditching you," she exhales. "I really just—"

She breaks off, recognizing Draco's voice, and feels the blood drain from her face as she recognizes a woman's voice with him.

"I," she attempts helplessly, their footsteps growing louder, and Percy glances down at her.

"Close your eyes," he says.

"Wh-"

"Close them," he murmurs, and places his hands on her hips, aligning them with his.

She obeys, and she feels his lips brush her cheeks, first, and then her nose, and then each of her eyelids, Draco's voice coming closer.

"Relax," Percy says, and draws her chin up, his lips meeting hers.

She gasps, her eyes fluttering open.

Percy's eyes float shut.

She deepens the kiss, pulling him towards her, and she briefly registers the sound of Draco's footfall coming to a halt as Percy yanks her dress up, sliding his palm against the outside of her thigh and fitting himself between her legs.

The footfall resumes, the echo of it fading in the opposite direction, and only then does Percy lean away.

Pansy, lamenting the loss of him, tangles her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck. He matches the pressure with his fingertips, digging them into her waist.

"Don't stop," she whispers.

He looks her in the eye, gauging the truth of it.

Then he apparates them away.

V. (Pillowtalk)

"God, I love your pussy, Pansy, your cunt is so fucking wet, so fucking wet for me. Could fuck you like this all night, all fucking night, Pansy, fuck, you're so good. You're so good. You're so fucking hot, Pansy. You're so beautiful. You're so fucking beautiful and you feel so good, so fucking good, fuck. Do you like that, Pansy? Like it when I fuck you like this? You want it harder, Pansy? Deeper? Tell me. I want to watch you, want to see your face when I make you come. You're so fucking hot, Pansy, fuck—come on, come for me, baby—"

She comes so hard she can't see.

"Fuck," she whispers, shuddering hard, and he pauses, brushing her sweat-slicked hair back from her eyes and staring intently, voraciously, at her face.

"You're so fucking gorgeous when you come," he says without hesitation, and for some reason, she believes him.
VI. (Pretense)

She isn't sure what to make of their night together, so she decides to make it nothing.

Three days go by.

Then he shows up in her bedroom Floo.

"Are you still my girlfriend?" he asks simply, and she frowns.

"That was just—"

"Pretense, yes," he agrees. "But are you able to continue?"

She thinks about it.

"It won't be pleasant," he says, in a tone that suggests she really shouldn't ask.

"Maybe if you ask nicely," she sniffs, and he steps towards her, backing her against her bed and throwing an arm around her just before she falls back onto it, lowering her carefully near the edge.

"Very well," he says, and lowers himself to his knees, his hands tracing the inside of her thigh.

"Please," he says, sliding her skirt up. "Will you"—to the curve of her thigh—"accompany me"—his breath against the cotton of her knickers—"to a family dinner"—she stiffens at that, but his tongue darts against her clit, brushing it through the fabric—"please?"

"You said please twice," she informs him, inhaling sharply as he nudges the fabric inside and buries his fingers inside her, his tongue sliding against her knickers once again.

"I'm asking you very nicely," he murmurs to the lips of her cunt, chastely kissing them through the fabric, and she foolishly murmurs something like agreement, letting him lay her back against the bed.

VII. (Indignation)

"Oh, right, almost forgot Perce was here. No use making jokes, is there?"

Pansy watches Percy swallow, eyeing his plate as he methodically flexes his fingers.

It's been several hours of this already, with only brief intermissions.

"Oh, you know how serious Percy is. Always so terribly caught up in things, isn't he?"

"No, Mum, the de-gnoming situation in the garden is serious. Excessive taxation is serious. Overpopulation of the planet is serious. Percy, on the other hand, is bloody funereal."

"Remember the time he tried to convince us that bureaucracy was actually some sort of beautiful, ingenious thing? Honestly, we can do magic and it's paperwork he loves—"

"Stop it," Pansy erupts without warning, slamming her fork down against the table and startling everyone into silence. "First of all," she announces, catching the motion of Percy's gaze dropping apprehensively to the table and ignoring it entirely, "he doesn't love the bureaucracy itself, you twits. He enjoys the satisfaction of his work, which is something none of you blithering idiots can say—joke shop owner, low-level meter maid, professional ball juggler," she accuses hotly, pointing
a declaratory finger at each of the stunned freckled morons. "Secondly, he manages to be far more interesting than all of you combined, and he doesn't have to stoop to idiotic puns and tasteless sarcasm to do it."

She throws her napkin down, glaring over at the Weasley matriarch.

"And as for you," she snaps at Molly Weasley, "if you didn't plan to love all your children equally, then you shouldn't have had so many. And THANK YOU FOR DINNER, IT WAS LOVELY," she finishes, kicking her chair back and heading for the Floo.

She grimaces when she hears footsteps following behind her; hears her mother's voice in her head—behave, Pansy, hold your tongue!—and curls her fingernails anxiously into her palm, flinching at the pathetically delayed input from her better judgment. This was his family, after all; he had wanted her to make things easier, to help him simply blend in, and what has she done instead?

"I'm sorry," she sighs without turning. "I know I shouldn't have lost my temper, but—"

"Thank you."

She blinks, turning to face him.

"What?" she asks, bewildered, as Percy takes a series of slow, prowling steps towards her.

"I said," he repeats, backing her against the mantle of the fireplace, "thank you."

His hand slips under her skirt, startling her into a gasp as he kisses her.

"What are you—"

He catches her sheepish mewl of pleasure on his tongue, pressing himself against her.

"Quiet," he murmurs, "or my family will hear you."

She pauses for a moment, utterly confounded, and draws back to look at him. His mouth, bitten and red from her kiss, twists up wryly in what appears to be softened amusement, and in a moment of devious recognition, Pansy feels her own lips curl up in a matching smile.

"Oh god," she says loudly, tugging him closer. "OH, PERCY, YES—"

He growls his approval into her neck, drawing one of her legs over his hip as she fumbles with his belt, half-laughing into his mouth.

"OH, YES, RIGHT THERE—"

"There?" he murmurs with a chuckle, and despite the theatricality of the entire situation, she still can't help a moan of approval.

"PERCY, YOUR DICK, IT'S HU-"

"Too much," he cuts in gruffly, and she giggles as he digs his nails into the skin of her thigh.

"Sorry," she whispers insincerely, letting her head fall back with a groan.

VIII. (Defense)
"So," Daphne says neutrally. "Do you like him, then?"

"I told you," Pansy grunts impatiently, "I just need a boyfriend through the winter, and he's a genuinely good fuck. It's not like it's going to last."

"But you're seeing him tonight," Daphne muses. "Even though you saw him last night?"

"I'm sure the effect will wear off shortly," Pansy airily remarks, holding up a pair of black stilettos and looking to Daphne for approval. "Hey, do these say 'authority' to you?"

"They say 'sex,' I think," Daphne supplies.

"That works too," Pansy determines, nodding with approval.

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**IX. (Roleplay)**

"The Minister will see you now," Pansy calls, legs crossed expectantly from where she sits behind his desk.

He opens the door slowly, nodding slyly as he looks at her.

"Madame Minister," he opens, inclining his head.

"Mr Weasley," she returns primly. "Is there something you needed?"

"I brought you the forms you requested," he replies, with practiced solemnity.

"Bring them to me."

He steps forward, slowly running his thumb along the line of his lower lip.

"WW-426," he begins, setting it down on her desk. "Signed and dated, just as you asked—"

"And the others?" Pansy prompts. "Is everything as I requested it?"

"I don't know what you mean, Madame Minister," he replies coolly, watching her as she rises to her feet, stepping around the desk to reach him. "What else did you ask for?"

"I asked," Pansy says, sliding her hand down the front of his trousers, "for you to make sure I was satisfied in every way. And do I look—" she trails off, rubbing her palm against the stiff head of his cock. "Satisfied, Mr Weasley?"

He inhales sharply, shifting against her hand.

"Ah-ah," she warns, shaking her head. "I didn't say you could move, Mr Weasley. Did I?"

"I don't think I can satisfy you very well without some degree of motion, Madame Minister," he replies, his gaze dropping to her bare chest and sliding, with some degree of restraint, down the lines of her torso, falling to her stiletto heels and dragging approvingly back up. "Perhaps if you were to give me some instruction?"

She grabs hold of his tie, yanking him towards her.

"Fuck me on my desk, Mr Weasley," she instructs him, "and do it well, or you'll be fired for your incompetence."
He picks her up without a word, clearing the desk of its papers and setting her down on top of it with his arm wrapped tight around her ribs.

"You know," he murmurs in her ear, "I'm aware this is your fantasy, but I think I'm quite enjoying it myself."

"Did I say you could speak, Mr Weasley?" Pansy prompts, pulling the tie from around his neck and letting it drop to the floor as she lays herself back against the desk. "I believe your instructions were to satisfy me, not bore me."

He yanks her hips towards him, smiling darkly.

"I suppose you don't want me to tell you how hard I'm going to fuck you, then?" he prompts neutrally. "And I probably shouldn't say anything about how wet I'm going to make you, or how much you're going to beg for me—"

"Put your dick in me," Pansy pants, wrapping her legs around his hips, "or you're fired."

He smiles.

She knows he is going to toy with her when it's his turn; but that, she supposes, is the benefit of going first.

It's not currently her problem.

"Yes ma'am," he permits, just before impressively fucking himself straight to an imaginary raise.

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X. (Roleplay, Part II)

"Miss Parkinson," he says, making a soft tutting sound. "Out of bed this late, are you?"

"I'm just going to meet my boyfriend," she replies, which is improvised, but he doesn't seem opposed. "Please don't tell the headmaster."

"Well, I'm afraid I'm going to have to," he says. "I am Head Boy, after all."

"But if you do, I'll be in trouble," Pansy whispers, biting her lip. "I'll lose my Prefect badge."

"Well," he muses, circling her, "I suppose you'll just have to make it up to me, then, won't you?"

"I'll do anything," Pansy assures him, laying it on thick. "Anything you want, Weasley—just please don't tell anyone you saw me."

He steps closer.

"Anything?" he asks.

She trills with anticipation.

"Anything," she promises.

He smiles.

"Tell me, Miss Parkinson," he murmurs. "Are you a good girl?"

"Always?" he muses. "So you've never touched yourself, then?"

"Never," she whispers, feeling a thrill of excitement.

"Well," he says. "I'd be remiss if I didn't help you, I think." He takes a step back, resting his hands on her hips. "Perhaps you should take this off," he suggests, and she obliges, removing the old Hogwarts uniform she'd dug up from her school things. "And these," he adds, his gaze flicking to her white cotton knickers.

She obediently steps out of them, never taking her eyes from his. "Is that all?"

He gestures to her blouse and she removes it, letting it fall slowly from her fingers.

"I'm nervous," she says.

"Don't be," he replies. "Now tell me, Miss Parkinson," he says, with a breathy air of contemplation. "Is your pussy wet?"

"Yes," she whispers.

"Wetter than when your boyfriend looks at you?"

"Yes."

"Wetter than when he touches you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you fascinate me," she says, surprising herself with the truth, and he seems to catch the look of startled wonder that must have filled her eyes.

"Touch yourself," he says.

She shivers.

She knows he's going to make her work for this one.

XI. (Fitting)

"Here," he says, tossing her a faded crimson jumper.

She makes a face as she catches it.

"Really?" she prompts skeptically, holding it up with a grimace of something that she's pretty sure he can tell is disgust. "It has your initial on it."

"Or," he suggests, "it has your initial on it."

She considers that for a moment.

"It is very soft," she grumbles in concession.
"You don't have to wear it," he says, shrugging, "if you don't want to. I'd just as happily have you sleep in nothing."

He himself is sleeping in next to nothing, slipping under his covers in his underwear and nothing else. She, on the other hand, is immensely cold, and she shivers at the prospect, glancing skeptically at the ruins of her white oxford where it sits discarded on the floor.

"Fine," she says, and pulls the jumper on. It's a little lumpy and long, probably even for him, and it skims the tops of her thighs. "How does it look?"

His mouth quirks.

"Very fitting," he says, and beckons to her.

She sighs, climbing in next to him.

"I don't cuddle," she warns him. "I don't like it."

"Fine," he agrees. "This is purely a matter of sleeping, isn't it? Sleep however you like."

She lies down on her back, and he on his.

"Goodnight," he says, in a perfunctory sort of way.

"Goodnight," she agrees, and he rolls onto his stomach, his head turned away from her.

She lies down on her back, and he on his.

"Goodnight," he says, in a perfunctory sort of way.

"Goodnight," she agrees, and he rolls onto his stomach, his head turned away from her.

She closes her eyes.

Opens them.

She scoots over slightly so that the barest centimeters of skin are touching, thigh to thigh.

His arm shifts, draping itself over her hips.

She closes her eyes again.

She falls asleep almost instantly.

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XII. (Habit)

"Goodnight," he says, turning out the light the next night.

"Goodnight," she agrees, and turns onto her side, facing the wall as he faces the door.

_I don't like cuddling_, Draco had said to her once.

_Neither do I_, she'd replied, and they'd gotten in the practice of sleeping back to back, operating in separate spheres. She was used to sleeping on her right side, and he on his left. It was habit, a natural inclination. It hadn't seemed like the beginning of the end, even though it probably had been.

Here, in the strangeness of now, Pansy accidentally lets out a slow exhalation at the memory. Horrifyingly, it emerges as something like a mournful sigh.

She feels Percy shift in bed, nudging her shoulder with his.
She waits for a moment, feeling the warmth of him, and then she slides her hand behind her, resting it on his thigh.

He loops his pinky through hers, squeezing it once.

They fall asleep back to back.

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**XIII. (Holiday)**

"Happy Christmas, Miss Parkinson," he murmurs to her as they stretch out on the carpet beside the fireplace. "Was this a sufficient gift?"

She thinks about it.

Then she leans over, resting her hand on his bare chest.

"Tell me more about the liability waivers," she beckons at a murmur, not quite ready to be finished with him. His gaze cuts slyly to hers.

"First," he says quietly, tracing his fingers up the curve of her inner thigh, "you have to file form WW-414 to submit a request for permit."

"Oh god," Pansy exhales, parting her legs for him. "And then?"

"And then," he continues, rolling over to settle himself between her knees, "you have to submit to the Ministry Events department office on the third floor. With," he adds, taking a handful of her hair and speaking low in her ear, "three sickles for a filing fee."

"Fuck," Pansy breathes, letting her head fall back when he releases her. "And after the permit?"

"If the Unspeakable grants the permit," Percy goes on neutrally, "you are then responsible for filling out form HP-12 and taking that upstairs"—he pauses, bending his lips to her neck—"for someone in Wizard Accounting to approve."

A gasp cuts between them. "And?"

He chuckles, his lips taking a lazy, torturous path from her torso down, down, down, lower, yes, _there—_

"And then," he says gruffly, capturing a moan between her lips. "If you're lucky," he clarifies, the words murmured into her cunt, "more paperwork."

"Oh god," she gasps, the feel of his lips so furiously decadent that she closes her eyes, wondering whether she has ever had a Christmas as thoroughly rewarding as this one.

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**XIV. (Friends)**

"Theo," Pansy says, "this is Percy. Percy, Theo."

They shake hands in a perfunctory way. Theo has never really been her friend; only Draco's. But having been Daphne's boyfriend since they were sixteen, there was some obligation that Theo come along to assuage their collective curiosity—if only at his soon-to-be wife's insistence.

"And this is Daphne," Pansy continues, feeling the lurch she always does at the introduction.
Daphne is beautiful—naturally beautiful, unlike Pansy, who requires beauty charms and a certain amount of pliability from her hair to distract away from the nose she unrelentingly hates—and there is always a brief pang of wondering on Pansy's end if they (whoever any given 'they' is) might find Daphne the more desirable object of attention.

"Daphne's my best friend," Pansy adds, even though they all know this, because she immediately feels guilty for her unpleasant internal monologue.

"Hi," Daphne offers with her usual radiance, sparing Percy a dazzling smile.

He nods. "Nice to meet you," he says.

Then he reaches for Pansy with his free hand, lightly touching the inside of her elbow.

She takes comfort from it—from the benefit of his proximity—but it doesn't register as anything more. Not right away.

Despite the signs (like that one), Pansy doesn't actually realize right away how nervous Percy is. In fact, it only occurs to her in stages.

First, he babbles something incomprehensible about the principles of queuing, which even Pansy has to admit is outrageously mundane.

Then he fails to laugh at a joke Theo makes, hurriedly making up for it with a strangely misplaced chuckle.

Then, when the light touch against Pansy's elbow evolves to an arm wrapped tightly around her waist, it finally dawns on her.

"You're doing fine," she assures him, leaning in to say it in his ear. "They like you."

Percy lets out a breath, turning to spare her half a smile, and that's when she notices something else: that he doesn't look at Daphne—or anyone—the way he looks at her.

Not even close.

XV. (Ours)

"Pansy," he says. "May I ask why there's a dog on my sofa?"

"You can ask," she replies, "but I don't think he'll answer."

Percy sighs.

"Very funny," he says.

The truth is that she found the dog, the giant Saint Bernard, wandering around in the snow in Diagon. She already checked; he's not an Animagus. He's just a dog, and a hungry dog, too, and because she couldn't take him home—where her mother would sniff her disapproval and her father would cast an unsympathetic veto—she took him here, instead.

She explains this with slightly more panache, leaning into the humor of the situation, but she wonders if Percy can see that she genuinely doesn't want to let the poor fur-laden menace go.

"He's sweet," she attempts, though even she knows that's a meager offering at best. "See?" she adds
hopefully, as the dog begins to pant heavily in Percy's face, promptly fogging up his glasses.

"Well," Percy says uncomfortably, "I'm not generally a dog person."

She grimaces and nods, deflating.

"But I suppose if he needs a home," Percy continues, looking pained, and then he trails off, letting her draw her own conclusions from the fact that he has now allowed the dog to vigorously sniff his face, knocking his glasses askew.

Pansy turns to face him, swallowing exuberance in favor of something passably refined.

"Do you know," she finally says, "I hate almost everyone I know, but I think, at this moment, I hate you the least."

The dog expresses something similar, lurching down and resting his slobbering chin atop Percy's immaculate trousers.

"Well," Percy permits, clearly fighting his own discomfort. "What will you name him, then?"

"Me?" Pansy asks. "He's your dog."

Percy blinks, turning slowly to face her.

For a second, she's terrified he'll change his mind, say no, call her a fool; treat her to a buffet of mockery and disdain. Which, she abruptly realizes, is something she would expect from anyone else in her life.

Instead, he says, "Our dog."

She buries her face furiously in the dog's fur, hoping Percy doesn't see the look of total madness on her face. She's fairly certain it's something that's part smile and part encroaching sobs, but either way, it's an outrageous, unbridled flood of emotions. It's definitely something inadvisable, too, because there will almost certainly be a time after him. She's sure of it, in fact. There will be the time before him, the time of him, and then the time after him, and so she hides her inconvenient satisfaction.

"Fine," she sniffs eventually. "Except he lives here, and you have to take care of him most of the time, so you should probably name him."

Percy nods, patting the dog's head with a truly resplendent awkwardness.

"Ronald," he decides.

Pansy fights a laugh. "Isn't that your brother's name?"

"Yes," he admits. "I'm not very good at names."

Pansy straightens to wrap her arms around his neck, pulling him towards her.

There will be a time after him, she knows, but right now that's not her problem.

"Actually," she says, "I rather think you are."

XVI. (Bonding)
For a while, the dog renders them domestic. Ronald, who is more often referred to by Percy (for reasons Pansy doesn't fully understand) as 'Dog Quixote' or 'Dog Giovanni,' relentlessly follows Percy around his flat, panting up at him with such a slavish expression of adoration that gradually Percy, too, begins to look some degree of fond. He and Pansy now spend most of their nights doing nothing together on the sofa, one of Percy's arms slung around Pansy's shoulders while the other absently pats Ronald's head, reading in comfortable silence while a long series of January storms rages outside.

"Come on," Pansy says eventually, tugging at Percy's belt and luring him out of their sluggish coma of contentment. "It's been all day, Weasley. I want to hear you write sonnets to my pussy."

"But," Percy protests helplessly, glancing at where the dog is eyeing them from his spot on the sofa. "He's watching."

Pansy groans, pulling away. "If I'd known the dog was going to interfere with my sex life, I might not have rescued him," she grumbles unhappily, and Percy catches her face in his hands.

"We can close the door," he suggests, and though Dog Quixote seems vaguely displeased by the prospect of them tripping over each other to his bedroom, she figures he'll get over it.

---

**XVII. (Fixation)**

She's never met a man who enjoys cunnilingus as much as he does. He seems to genuinely revel in it, too, not merely perform it, and he does it with a fascinating contemplation; a thriving shiver of sensations, as if the taste of her is not enough without the feel of her, without the capture of her breath between his hands.

She also didn't realize there were so many ways to have her pussy licked until she met him. He sucks her clit while she lays back on the kitchen table, kneeling at the edge of it and draping her legs over his shoulders; he slides underneath her when she climbs into his lap, leaving her helplessly straddling his jaw. He does it in the shower, on his knees while her back presses against the too-cold tiles; he does it from behind while she's on all fours, his fingers wrapped around her thighs. He makes a wreckage of her, her legs shaking from the smallest motions of his tongue, and she wonders if she ever truly repays the favor.

"Do you feel that?" she whispers after she groans, her hips arching up as her own sensations cascade in waves and her fingers tighten in the soft strands of his hair. "Do you feel the way you make me come?"

He gives her a look like his soul is fucking escaping his body.

"Pansy," he says, more shudder than sound, and then, all at once, she no longer wonders.

By virtue of her wanting, she can see her debt is more than repaid.

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**XVIII. (Saints)**

"Saint Valentine was murdered," Pansy comments, eyeing the inane display of pink and red hearts coming from Twilfitt and Tatting. "He was tortured and killed and hastily reburied, and somehow I'm supposed to want to buy chocolate?"

"Perhaps it was more commercially viable than death," Percy suggests blithely, "and seeing as there's already a holiday for severed heads and cobwebs, Valentine's Day had to select a different
"Well, when you're right, you're right," Pansy permits, shrugging. "Though I would think there's plenty of room for more murder-related holidays."

"In fairness, Halloween is more about death and the spiritual otherworlds than murder," Percy remarks, humming to himself as he considers it. "So, if you want, we can make Valentine's Day a murder holiday. Presuming you don't actually intend to commit any homicide," he cautions her. "In which case, I must request that you refrain."

"What if I don't kill you?" Pansy suggests brightly. "I could kill someone else. We could do it together," she adds, and nudges him. "Come on. Wouldn't it be romantic?"

"What, a joint killing?" Percy says. "I'm flattered, but appropriately on edge, I think."

"You know, I think you'd know what to do," Pansy comments tangentially. "How to get away with it, I mean. You would know which spells are tracked by the Ministry, and how fast things decay, and what times of day to dispose of a body, and basically everything monotonous that normal people get caught with, you know? I think you'd be the only person in the entire world who could fully get away with it. Ooh look, pretty," she says, pointing to some sugar-spun garlands in the windows of his brother's shop, but then she realizes that he's paused somewhere behind her.

She stops, turning towards him with a frown, and takes a few steps back to where he's abruptly come to a halt, staring into nothing.

"What is it?" she asks him, bewildered.

"That," he rasps, swallowing heavily, "is perhaps the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"What?" she demands, wondering what exactly she even said aside from idly suggesting he pursue a career in serial killing. "That's insane."

"You realize that most people think I'm useless," Percy informs her, with so little hesitation it makes her heart hurt. "I know it, and I'm sure you do too. I'm aware that most people find me dull, and they consider my conversation topics trivial and mundane. But you, you just—"

He breaks off, choking slightly on emotion, and Pansy is more than a little alarmed.

"Um," she begins, resting her hand lightly on his arm. "There, there—"

"I would happily help you kill someone," he promises her firmly. "Provided your life was at stake," he amends, "or possibly if it were to save the entirety of mankind. There are of course caveats," he clarifies unnecessarily, "but provided I approved of your motives, then I would willingly aid in your homicide."

"Weasley," Pansy chides playfully. "People can hear!"

"Let them," he invites, with a decided dearth of shame. "Anyone who isn't at least a little afraid of you, Miss Parkinson, lacks a terrifying amount of self-preservation."

She leans into him at that, raising her chin on instinct when he turns to brush his lips thoughtfully against hers.

"And that," she informs him, "is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me, so we're even."
He pauses, something half-said forming on his tongue, and she wonders if he knows what he wants to say. She thinks that she knows, and for once, she hopes that she's wrong, because she isn't sure she's ready yet. She can feel her legs twitch beneath her and she knows if he says it before she's ready, she'll run.

She'll run, and then it'll progress to the time after him, and at this moment, she's absolutely certain that that's the very last thing that she wants.

"Pansy," he murmurs, and she holds her breath.

Feels it swell, and waits to burst.

"Hungry?" he asks neutrally.

She exhales.

"Sure," she replies.

"Too bad," he says, "because I'm planning to fuck you like I just got away with murder."

She shivers.

"Fucking twisted," she proclaims, relishing the contortions of his mind.

She wasn't hungry anyway.

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XIX. (Important)

She and her mother fight often. It's nothing new.

Pansy's always been a disappointment to her mother. She couldn't hold on to Draco, after all; she had one shot at a decent pureblooded engagement and she failed, and to begin with, she's not as pretty as her mother was, nor as docile or as sweet, and so Pansy has always been a thorn on the rose of perfection that is Dahlia Parkinson's life. Pansy is the only child, the only hope, and thus the only disappointment. This is nothing new.

So yes, this is far from their first fight about Pansy's failings, but this fight is slightly different than the others, because the words "I love him" slip out tearfully without warning. Of course, in the moment that it happens Pansy's pretty sure she's just saying it, and that it doesn't mean anything at all. It's just something she says, isn't it? Something she throws out like a weapon when she fights with her overbearing mother.

She said "I love him," like an idiot, and then, like an idiot, she ran.

She checks his flat first, but he's not there. Dog Quixote is, and he gives her a quizzical stare, so she pats his head and dries her tears in his fur but she keeps going, passing through the Floo to Percy's office.

"Weasley," she announces, "I need you to—"

She breaks off as she sees him sitting with a member of the Wizengamot. They're clearly drinking something expensive and discussing something Private and Important and Pansy has a rush of memories—of her father closing his office door to keep her out, of "I'm busy right now, Pansy," and "you can show me later, Pansy," and "Pansy, it will have to wait"—and in the spirit of
crippling nostalgia she backs away quickly, mumbling apologies under her breath.

"One moment," Percy offers to the Warlock, and Pansy freezes in place as he rises to his feet, coming towards her.

"Is everything okay?" he asks quietly. He's analyzing her, she can tell; it's an investigatory question. *Is everything okay*, the first step to assessing the problem.

"It can wait," she says, and he nods.

She's about to head shamefully back through the Floo when Percy's voice cuts through the room again.

"Warlock Hawkworth," he beckons formally, "have you met Pansy Parkinson?"

Pansy recognizes the Warlock's name from countless newspapers; from the important sections of the paper, too, the ones she tries to read but doesn't always manage. Her mind buzzes as the Warlock says something along the lines of *no, no, haven't had the pleasure*—

"Isn't he important?" she whispers furtively to Percy, her fingers darting out to grip his waist. "I shouldn't be here."

Percy glances down, assessing her a second time.

"You're my girlfriend," he tells her. "You're important."

She blinks.

She has never thought of this as being true before.

"Do you mind talking with him?" Percy presses quietly. "If you'd rather not, I understand."

"Me? But—" She blinks again. "Are you sure that I won't—" She drops her voice. "You know. Embarrass you?"

He looks bemused, as though that particular prospect has never occurred to him before.

Then he leans over, kissing her cheek, and nudges her towards the Warlock.

"Pansy's a very talented witch," Percy says firmly. "Top of her class at Hogwarts, and quite a charming conversationalist. I think her perspective would be quite valuable to you, Warlock," he says, and he continues on, saying something about retail or development or perhaps unicorns or pirates, but Pansy doesn't hear him.

All she can hear is *valuable* and *important* and she wants to cry again, only she wouldn't dare ruin this for him. So she smiles as politely as she can, sits as straight as her spine will permit, and lays her hand carefully (and respectfully) on Percy's knee.

He rests his hand on top of hers, brushing his thumb over her knuckles, and while the Warlock drones on about something only marginally coherent, she flips Percy's hand over, tracing her nails along his palm.

*I love you*, she writes, and his fingers contract slightly as he registers the message.

*Good*, he writes back on her knuckles, as the smallest, most unassuming of smiles traipses across his lips.
It's so miniscule a motion that the Warlock doesn't catch it.

In fact, it's so astoundingly him in its smallness that only she would catch it.

Because she loves him.

And he hasn't said it yet, but she knows. He has already said as much in all the ways that matter.

He loves her.

XX. (Spring)

"Snow's melting," he says, handing her a cup of coffee and nudging Dog Giovanni over before slipping back in bed beside her, gesturing out the window. "Nearly spring."

"Strange," she murmurs, letting the warmth of the mug bleed into her fingers. "I'm pretty sure there's something I was supposed to do when the snow melted."

"Oh?" he asks, turning to look at her. First thing in the morning his hair is always a mess, some of it sticking straight up while the rest cascades forward into his eyes, and her gaze traces the shape of it thoughtfully. "What was it?"

She considers telling him.

He is so appealing, and so endearing, and she wonders if there is anything left in her heart that she doesn't want him to have, so she considers telling him.

But it now seems so foolish a concept it disappears entirely, lost to the recesses of her idiot past.

"Did you fall in love with me on purpose?" she asks instead, indulging a strange, sudden curiosity.

"With intention, you mean?" he asks.

She considers it.

"Yes," she rules. "Sure, with intention."

"The steps were all there," he says. "The algorithm of it. I might not have bought you that drink. Might not have given you my card. Might not have felt the need to help you when you asked. So I suppose that's some evidence of intent, isn't it?"

She groans. "Just answer the question."

He turns, his gaze falling slowly on hers.

"I knew what I was doing when I fell in love with you," he says, and then corrects himself. "I didn't fall," he amends. "I went willingly." He pauses. "Does that make sense?"

"So there was a deliberate quality?" she muses.

"Yes," he agrees. "I certainly wasn't dragged."

They both sip their coffee.

"Will you go with me to Daphne's wedding?" she asks neutrally. "It'll be a whole thing," she adds,

He nods.

By now, he more than understands the subtext.

"That's in the summer," he remarks, his gaze drifting out to the melting snow.

"I know," she says. "No snow."

"No snow," he confirms.

"But I'll need you there," she says. "Survival technique."

He turns his head, half a smile pulling at his mouth, and brushes his lips against her forehead.

"Survival technique," he agrees.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Happy birthday AngelicaElizaAndPeggy! Also, go check out Aurora's edit on tumblr, and many thanks (as ever) for reading. The coming month will be primarily focused on finishing Nobility (which is the multi-chaptered expansion of Chapter 22, Chaotic Good, if you weren't already aware of that) but I do have a few unfinished drafts (and a few long overdue birthday gifts) to wrap up and put in here soon!
Things About You

Pairing: Nottgrass (Theo Nott x Daphne Greengrass)

Universe: Nobility prequel

Rating: M for sex

Summary: A birthday gift for oblivionbaby, whom I love and who loved Nobility (the full story expanded from chapter 22 of this collection, Chaotic Good.) A note: this story can stand alone, but the setting may be hard to follow without having read either Nobility or Chaotic Good.

Daphne Greengrass and Theo Nott are promised to each other as children in a court filled with turmoil and uncertainty. From the moment they meet, they only know one thing: they definitely do not want each other.

At six years old, Lady Daphne Greengrass understood a great many things about the world. Namely that her father was a great man at court, which made her wealthy, and that her recently deceased mother had been descended from a long line of titles, which made her noble. Daphne understood that she was expected to behave in precisely the right way at all times, and that the right way was not always the same way each time. She understood, too, that there were sides to all things—a right one, and a wrong one—but it was difficult to know the right one from a distance, and so it was important to keep her heart and her mouth distinctly separate entities until she could be sure.

She understood that her father kept her at court because her mother had born only two daughters, and so her own marriage was the only thing that would conceivably bring her parents the avenue for prestige they might have had if she had been a son. She understood clearly that one day very soon she would be promised to a man—a lord or a duke if she were lucky—and from then on, she would belong to him, and she would have to listen to him, the same way she listened to her father. She understood all these things, and lived beneath the weight of them, accepting them as true.

Mostly, though, Daphne understood that she was alone.

oOo

There were a few other children at court; mostly boys, the sons of nobles who were raised to follow their fathers' footsteps into battle to fight for one king or another. For now, it was the Peverell King, but his intended heir had long ago been killed, and the line of succession was still uncertain. Daphne knew when her father slid into a room with angry-looking men and shut the door it meant that something was going to happen, and more importantly, that she should leave.

So she did.

On one such occasion, the clatter of wooden swords brought her to the courtyard, where two boys were fighting—or perhaps playing, though they both had their teeth gritted, no doubt struggling to ensure the other would not win.

One of the boys was easy enough to identify. He was Draco Malfoy, the only son of Lucius Malfoy, whose pale blond hair always made him seem like the sleek golden strands on Daphne's
loveliest dresses; the ones she only wore at Christmas, or for especially extravagant things. He seemed to her to be a very valuable thing, if a bit cold. Not unlike her mother's jewels.

The other boy, she noted, was dark and slight and extremely thin, as if he were little more than a shadow; a slip of a thing, really, and far smaller than Draco, though they must have been the same age. The other boy had his dark brow furrowed, sweat dripping down his forehead, and as Draco aimed high, the other boy stumbled to counter, nearly slipping in the loose mud beneath his feet.

"Careful, Theo," Draco taunted, his pale hair glinting in the light. "Don't fall," he sang, and leapt forward, hitting the other boy—Theo, as it were, making him almost certainly Theodore Nott and therefore the son of a duke, although that certainly wasn't evident at first glance—square in the chest and sending him flying back in the mud, teeth gnashed together in pain.

"Stop it," Daphne interrupted, lifting her skirts and launching herself at where Draco stood laughing, gracelessly mocking Theo's collision with the ground. "Stop—it's not funny! Here, let me help you," she offered, turning to Theo and stretching out her hand. "Are you hurt?"

For a moment, he simply stared at her, his eyes widening slightly. They were dark, she thought, like the rest of him; there were shadows in his gaze as well as his motions, and she watched the rapid change in his expression, from shock to dismay to anger.

"Go away," he spat at her, shoving himself onto his feet and glaring over his shoulder. "We're busy."

Daphne, who had never been spoken to that way before, glowered defiantly back. "I'm just trying to help," she informed him, as his mouth tightened to a thin, mean line.

"I don't need your help," he retorted flatly, and then he shoved past her, heading back to Draco's side. She spun, furious, and saw that Draco was smothering dismay into his hand, attempting to conceal the motion. At first she thought it was because he, too, thought it was outrageous that Theo had spoken that way to her, but the closer she looked, she could see it wasn't that at all.

Draco was laughing, hard, his cheeks pink and his shoulders shaking, and Daphne gaped in disbelief. Whatever she'd done, Draco certainly thought it was very funny, but Theo clearly didn't think it was funny at all.

"Fine," she seethed, but Theo didn't look at her.

Daphne strode away, eyeing the mud on the hem of her dress and wishing she'd known from the start Theo Nott wouldn't have been worth a single soiled inch.

oOo

He was always like that. He was always scowling, or else glowering, always casting his dark gaze around the room with his back in a corner, like an animal in a cage. Daphne didn't try to speak to him again, and he didn't speak to her.

In fact, he spoke to no one, except for Draco.

It was strange, really, because in addition to being a contrast between light and dark, the two of them could not have been more different in temperament. Draco was a darling of the court, always being called upon to dance with someone—usually Daphne, who was the best of the girls—for the entertainment of idle nobility, all of them happy to praise him for his looks, his confidence, the sureness of his steps. Draco was no higher a noble than Theo, but it was difficult to remember that when they stood next to each other—one like a golden prince, and the other like a sharp-eyed
Theo always looked especially vicious when Draco was gone from his side, as if he might bite anyone else who tried to come closer. Sometimes, Daphne almost felt sorry for him.

Sometimes.

But then she would remember the way his face looked when he shouted at her, and abruptly, she wouldn't feel sorry anymore.

oOo

The more people began to whisper about the old King's failing health, the more Daphne saw her father taking meetings. She didn't concern herself with them much at all until she noticed that one man in particular seemed to take most of the meetings, and then one day he left looking especially pleased. Dangerousely pleased, she thought, like a snake that had swallowed a bird whole.

She knew who he was.

She knew what it meant.

"No," she whispered to herself, watching Lord Nott stride away from her father's chambers with a trunk full of her mother's jewels.

oOo

_I don't want him. Not him, not him, not him. Father, you don't understand, he's rude and horrid and angry, he's like a shadow, like the edge of a knife, I can never love him, I'll never love him and he'll never love me—_

"Why him, Father?" she asked quietly, stifling her temper, and her father shrugged.

"Because marriage to Nott's son means that someday, you'll be a duchess," he replied, as if that were the only thing that mattered, and perhaps in his world it was. "It is the highest title I can get for you, Daphne. You'll be an even greater lady than your mother, and your sister will bow to you —wouldn't you like that?"

_Not if it means I have to marry him!_

"Not Draco?" she asked tentatively, and her father grimaced.

"Lucius Malfoy is too dangerous to align with right now," he said, and when she frowned, he beckoned for him to come closer, sitting her on his knee and toying with the long plaits of her hair.

"The tides are changing soon," her father murmured. "This King is very ill and soon to die, and then there will be war, and in war, there are always winners and losers. You must try very hard to be a winner, even if you must lose." He paused. "Lord Malfoy fights openly for the Gaunt challenger, but if he loses, then the Malfoys will be destitute, tried and executed for treason. To side with them is to aim foolishly," he cautioned, and Daphne nodded.

"And Lord Nott?"

"He is a more quiet supporter," her father confirmed, "and therefore safer. Your title will be secure."
She thought of him again; of Theodore Nott, with his dark eyes and his slight limbs and the harsh line of his mouth. More than likely he would be cruel, like his very old father, and he wouldn't even know how to laugh, much less how to love. How would there ever be light in her life with him?

Sometimes, Daphne thought morosely, it was a very poor thing to be a girl.

Still, she knew what was expected. "Yes, Father," she said obediently, as he nodded his approval, absently stroking her hair.

As Daphne and Theo grew older, the betrothal started to mean slightly more than purely an arrangement between two noblemen—only it revealed itself in small, irritating ways. Like, for example, while the other girls at court were permitted to dance with the other boys, Daphne was always led directly to Theo, who had thankfully caught up to her height by then (but no taller, unfortunately). He was always sullen, meeting her eye with a fierceness the other boys didn't. They looked at her like a sweet to be unwrapped; Theo looked at her like a chore, or some equally unpleasant burden.

By then, Draco had learned to flirt, which only made things worse. He always greeted her with a smile, with a calculated little curve to his mouth when he said her name. He was graceful and poised, and Daphne nearly always forgot to notice Theo's slim presence beside him, carved into Draco's side. They were almost never without each other, as attached at the hip as they'd been as boys, and for all her attempts to sort it out, Daphne couldn't understand. Why would someone like Draco want someone like Theo always at his heels? It made no sense.

Personally, Daphne wished she could spend less time with Theo. She also thought, selfishly, that if her betrothal had been a gamble, it was clearly paying off on only one side. Lord Nott had bought her for his son when she was only six, not even knowing she would grow into a beauty.

What had she gotten in return?

Theo gave her his sullen glare from across the Great Hall, and she realized she'd been staring. He was still too skinny, his features still too harsh. The other day, too, she'd noticed a fresh bruise on his arm, and he'd caught her staring.

"Drills," he supplied, his voice clipped, and pulled irritably at his sleeve.

I didn't ask, she wanted to say.

Instead, though, she said nothing.

"How are you liking your future husband?" her father asked her, looking amused when she struggled not to make a face. "I'm told he has a rather reserved and studious nature," he remarked optimistically. "Seems to like books, or so I hear."

"Yes, well, he's hardly a warrior," Daphne murmured, and her father laughed.

"He may yet grow into his limbs," he assured her, "but until then, be certain he keeps to his reputation. That's your job, you know," he added slyly. "Men will always be quick to boast of their own prowess, but it's a woman's job to keep her husband careful in times of war."

"Is this war?" Daphne asked, surprised, and her father's mouth quirked.
"Everything is always war," he assured her. "But yes, now especially. Keep him in line," he warned. "If you do it well, he'll never thank you for it, because he'll never notice. But the noblest deeds are often the quietest."

"Am I to be so noble that I never make a sound?" Daphne complained, and again, her father laughed.

"Yes, maybe," he permitted. "But if you can keep your head, your jewels, and your title, then what does it matter whether you have a voice?"

Daphne bit her tongue, not wanting to tell her father she thought him enormously incorrect.

"Yes, Father," she agreed instead, and bowed her head, sweeping him a perfect curtsy.

For a while, Daphne tried to think of Theo as a project. Something, she reasoned, that could eventually be fixed.

"You spend too much time with Draco," she whispered to him as they dutifully rehearsed a pavane. Daphne, unlike her partner, knew the steps without pause, having been called upon to lead the dances more than once. Theo merely scowled at his feet, not lifting his chin for the hopeless need to stare at them. "His father is on campaign now, I hear—he could be tried for treason, you know, and he could lose everything. And if the Gaunt challenger loses—"

Theo's response was quick and ruthless. "I don't care," he said, a rare reply, and she almost tripped, startled by the sound of it. She regularly forgot how dry and harsh his voice was; almost like if aimed correctly, it could cut through glass. "And don't pretend like you don't like Draco, either. I see you looking at him from time to time."

Daphne felt her cheeks flush. "Well, you dishonor us both by ignoring my father's wishes, and you diminish the entire purpose of our betrothal," she reminded him under her breath, grimacing as he put his hands on her waist for the lift. "My father chose you for me instead of Draco because your title is—"

"Ah yes, my title." Theo looked at her then, mutinous, but she avoided meeting his eye as he set her none-too-carefully back on the floor. He might make a mockery of himself, she thought murderously, but she would do no such thing. She kept her gaze lowered, her head tilted dutifully, so that her father, unlike his, would never suffer the shame of having raised a defiant fool.

"I know perfectly well why my father bought you for me," Theo continued, "and why your father agreed to the price. But neither of them own me," he informed her, and dropped his voice as the song slowly came to an end, his head nearing hers as he bowed. "And as long as I live," he whispered, "I will choose for myself with whom I wish to stand, and for whom I deign to kneel. I promise you, it certainly won't be you who tells me."

She bit her tongue, not wanting to snarl at him, but found herself unable to prevent it.

"You will do as your father commands you," she hissed, "as I do my duty by my father, and—"

She broke off, startled, as the doors flew open with the violence of urgency; of news that could not wait. A grim, hard-ridden messenger strode in without pause, his lungs filled to bursting with panic as he faced the nobles around the room, the dancers pausing in the center of the hall.

"My Lords," the messenger called, breathless, "the Gaunt challenger has laid waste to the Duke of
Grimmauld's army. He is right now riding up to the gates to take the castle—"

There was a series of gasps and motion around the room as Daphne swallowed hard, looking for her father in the crowd. *There will be war,* he had warned her. *Men will die,* and *I may be one of them,* but *whoever I must fight for, you must always stay on the winning side,* Daphne—

"Go to your rooms," she heard in her ear, and realized that Theo was speaking into it, one hand on the ceremonial hilt slung around his hips as the other floated near her arm. His voice was still sharp, but it was edged now with something else. "Take your ladies and lock the doors, bar them. If the castle falls, they will come for you first—do not wait," he warned. "If you see the flags torn down, take to the castle ramparts and escape. Are you afraid?" he asked, and she looked up, startled, as she registered the way he stood with his entire narrow body blocking her, as if he would somehow shield her from the news that had burst through the doors.

"No, I am not afraid," she told him, though she was. "Are you?"

"Me? I am terrified." His mouth was a thin, grim line, and she didn't dare ask him how he knew why they would come for her. It seemed a very adult thing to know, and they felt hardly older than children. "I will feel better, though, if I know you will not be one of my concerns."

She realized then, amid the most inopportune timing, that while she'd thought for so long that his eyes were dark, small and shadowed like a bird of prey, in reality, they were green. Up close they were wider, richer, brighter, and she felt she might have understood now why Draco wanted Theo at his side. They seemed to be the sort of eyes that missed nothing.

"Don't worry about me," Daphne told him, and then hesitated, realizing she should leave him with some blessing, or some benediction, as his future wife. "Please don't die," she determined briskly, though it could easily have been contempt.

"I'll try very hard not to," he informed her, and then, across the room, she caught Draco's pale hair flashing, his voice booming through the crowd.

"NOTT!" he yelled, a call to arms, and Theo nodded, releasing Daphne.

"Go. Don't be a fool," he told her, already angling himself towards Draco. "Run if you must. That is your only duty to me—do you understand?"

She nodded, and he turned, striding away.

She knew she had promised to go, to hide, but she paused in the commotion to watch him, curious about what he would say when he reached Draco's side.

"Who do we fight for?" she watched him say to Draco. It was a fair question, considering the years of turmoil at court between the rival royal lines, and the other boy shrugged.

"Each other," Daphne watched Draco reply, and Theo nodded. It seemed that was enough.

Daphne watched two coltish boys ready themselves to fight like men, and then, determining that none of them were children anymore, she spun on her heels, letting the silk of her skirts trail along the cobbled stone of the castle as she ran the steps to barricade herself in her rooms.

The new King was as handsome as he was ruthless, or perhaps the other way around. He was more a man than anyone Daphne had ever seen, and though she would never be ill-composed enough to
stare the way the other girls did, she understood perfectly well why they did it. Most of the time, Tom seemed more vengeful god than human man, and his entire court feared him as much as they admired him.

In at least one respect, Lucius Malfoy's wager had paid off tremendously. His place at the King's side meant that Draco was favored, and because Theo had fought with Draco while the King had seized Hogwarts, Theo was favored, too. The Nott family had always been Loyalists, but now they were boastfully hailed as such; Daphne could see that Theo's title was worth even more now, and quietly, she was pleased, particularly once she saw her own father repeatedly leaving private audiences with the King.

Theo himself remained unchanged. She thought perhaps they'd had a moment, but the weeks following the castle's siege proved her wrong. He looked at her no differently; valued her no higher, by the looks of it, though admittedly not any lower. He'd fought on the winning side, and though Draco wore that honor in the way he carried his shoulders, strutting boldly through the halls, Theo remained unchanged.

From time to time, Daphne heard Draco's laugh cutting through the Great Hall, and she would always look up, curious, to see that the sound had been the result of something Theo had said. She wondered, disbelieving, at the possibility that Theo could have ever managed any humor at all. She wondered why it bothered her, or if it even did. It seemed unlikely that anything Theo Nott did would ever register important enough to embed itself in her thoughts, and yet she felt distinctly certain that she hated whatever he kept from her—whatever little flashes of humanity that he seemed only willing to give to Draco, and not to her.

For a time, she felt more alone than ever. She'd known her intended husband nearly all her life, and yet he remained a stranger still.

oOo

"He likes you."

Daphne jumped, startled, as she noticed that Theo had crept over to her side, pausing beside her in the hall. Another year had passed and he seemed to have been stretched through the entirety of it; astoundingly, he now towered over her, and he looked as though he was hardly done growing. Still, he remained as quiet and lost to the shadows as ever.

"Who?" she asked, trying not to betray precisely how alarmed she had been.

"The King," Theo replied, and she blinked. His gaze cut down to hers, oddly curious. "You didn't know?"

"I—I don't know what you mean," she ventured slowly, though in truth, she'd certainly caught the King's strange blue eyes on hers from time to time. It wasn't particularly surprising; others had stared often enough, so why should any man, even a King, not also find her something of interest? She knew she was liked—she was, as her father often praised, beautiful, valuable, and temperate—and she wasn't particularly surprised by the information.

Theo seemed to sense as much, and shrugged.

"You are the most eligible bride available at court, should he choose a noble," he supplied knowingly. "I'm told the King has been discussing you as a marriage prospect."

"But—" Daphne stared up at him, bewildered. "But I am already promised to someone."
"Yes, someone," Theo wryly agreed, chuckling under his breath. "Someone," he murmured, "who is practically no one, at least compared to a King. It is an honor for you, for your father. And I know how such things matter to you."

She turned, frowning. "You would release me from our agreement?" she asked, surprised, and he shrugged.

"It isn't up to me," he reminded her. "It's up to the King, to your father, to my father—to everyone else before either of us," he clarified. "But it would mean you would be Queen, and I'm sure the King would pay my father the value of the betrothal, so they'll be happy. And you too, I imagine," he added, glancing at her again. "You'd get a crown and a throne out of the deal instead of me."

Daphne carefully cleared her throat. "And you?" she asked. "Would you be happy to be free of me?"

Theo paused in place, tension spreading through his shoulders at the question.

"You're hardly mine," he told her stiffly. "I know perfectly well you don't like me."

"I—" Daphne toyed with her words, hesitating to answer. "I simply don't know you."

"You don't know Draco, either," Theo told her. "And yet I know you'd have preferred to be given to him."

"Yes, well, he is different," Daphne protested. "He's easy to understand, but you—" She hesitated again. "You and I have nothing in common," she insisted defensively, and he turned to face her, glancing down at her.

"You are right about that," he agreed, and then, after a long look at her, he turned away, disappearing down the corridor.

She wasn't given to the King. It seemed he had something else in mind, though nobody at court seemed to know what. He paid you numerous compliments, her father assured her, coughing slightly from the illness that had kept him from the hunt that day, but he doesn't wish to take a wife from the daughters at court. Perhaps he aspires to a foreign princess.

Daphne nodded, not wanting to reveal that she was relieved. Already, only months into the new King's reign, there was talk of nobles being slaughtered for their protection of the Peverell heir—the young man called Harry, who'd recently arrived at court bearing the title that had once belonged to the slain Duke of Grimmauld. Daphne had watched the King's blue eyes go hard at the sight of the roguish Duke, and upon witnessing the change in them, she'd been certain he would be no ideal husband, however desirable a man or powerful a monarch he might have otherwise been. She could sense no softness anywhere in his gaze, and breathed out a muted sigh of relief when she learned she had not been his choice, even though she could hear whispers at her back for how she must have somehow displeased him.

The day the gossip spread that Daphne had been passed over, she caught a flicker in the shadows from the corridor, recognizing Theo's shape. Without thinking, she walked towards him, leaving the whispers of the other spiteful girls behind and pausing, unsure of what to say, until he gestured into an alcove, concealing them from sight.

"You are still promised to me," he noted without expression.
"Yes," she agreed.

"Are you disappointed?" he asked neutrally, and she blinked.

"No," she replied, and watched him inhale.

"Well," he said, and before she could wonder what was coming next, he had bent his head towards her, his lips carefully brushing hers. It was over so quickly; barely a breath, and he had kept his hands at his sides, conspicuously not touching her, before he leaned away, prompting her to sway dizzily towards him. For a moment, she'd felt his softness, felt something tender and delicate and divine, and then just as quickly he was staring at her with his dark, discerning eyes, his mouth back to its usual line of constraint.

"There," he said, and she stood in place, waiting. "Maybe we had nothing in common before," he remarked, "but at least now we have a secret."

Then he turned, leaving her behind to stare at where he had been.

Her father passed away in the middle of the night one night, quickly and without much ceremony. The illness he'd sustained while hunting had never really cleared from his lungs, and Daphne was informed without much softness at all that her life had been transferred from her father's hands, her sister sent away until a suitable husband could be found.

"Do you understand what I've explained to you?" Lord Nott prompted gruffly, as if Daphne were somehow stupid or silly enough to have questions. Her father had died; now she, her sister, and her inheritance all belonged to her future husband's father. He could take it without giving her the marriage he'd once promised. He could shut her up in a manor house for the rest of her life, if he wished it. Daphne knew as much, and didn't look up at Theo, who stood silently beside his father.

"I do," she said, and paused. "Will I have to move my household, then?"

The old man replied with something of a grunt. "I have no room for you yet. But given the King's impending marriage—"

"Father," Theo interrupted, and Daphne fought the urge to look up, startled. "Is there any reason the marriage should not go ahead sooner rather than later?"

Daphne watched Lord Nott's attention cut irritably to his son, one brow arched without further comment.

"The King will need a Loyalist to run the future Queen's household," Theo continued, his voice light, as if to suggest he'd just thought of it. "Why not offer him someone from our house? Then we'd have the Queen's ear as well as the King's."

"I didn't think you particularly cared whether or not I had the King's ear," Lord Nott remarked, with a hint of offense, as if perhaps Theo had once disappointed him in a similar conversation. "Though I suppose you're not wrong." He paused, vacantly staring into the empty space above Daphne's head, and then turned back to his son. "Fine. I'll put her forth as an option for the Queen's ladies, and if he accepts, you'll be married within the week."

Daphne wired her jaw shut, imploring it not to drop.

"Well, we're done here," Lord Nott said, giving a brisk wave of his hand. Daphne read it as dismissal and rose to her feet, backing herself to the door and then turning sharply, half-running
through his quarters and frantically towards her own.

"Daphne," she heard Theo call after her while she silently fumed, not wanting to face him. "Lady Greengrass, wait—"

"You ambushed me," she hissed at him, spinning in place as he caught her. "You've been plotting that for some time, haven't you?"

He looked as though he would protest, but then he closed his mouth, snapping it shut and hardening against her fury. "Your father is dead," he reminded her, and she flinched. "I promise you, you do not wish to have your inheritance in my father's hands."

"And why would I like it any better in yours?" she snapped. "Why should I trust you to be any different?"

Theo blinked, taken aback.

"You think I'm like my father?" he asked, and like the first time she'd ever spoken to him, she could see without doubt that he'd heard something far worse than she'd intended. "Is that really what you think?"

"How am I supposed to tell the difference?" she demanded. "You are a man, same as he is. You want what's mine, same as he does!"

"I don't—" He broke off, jaw clenched, and ground his words into fine, invisible powder. "Fine," he said eventually. "Fine."

He turned, walking away, and Daphne reached a hand out, about to stop him, when she realized she had nothing to say. She didn't know what she'd done; she knew only that she was angry, and that whatever she'd said had been as effective as a slap across his face.

She wondered if she should be sorry.

She knew for certain that she was.

oOo

They knelt side by side at the altar and Daphne wondered if Theo could see her fingers shaking. Are you afraid? she remembered him asking on the day the King had won, and reminded herself that if she'd been asked the same question today, the answer would still be no. The answer should be no. She had lived through more terrifying things than this, hadn't she? This was only marriage. These were only vows. This was only forever.

She laced her fingers tighter, imploring them to be still. Beside her, Theo stiffly bent his head, and she stole a glimpse at him, watching. She saw his mouth curl around a shaky breath, and strangely, she felt something that might have been relief.

He was afraid, too.

oOo

The wedding feast was relatively small but still alarmingly excessive, and Daphne felt certain the costs had all come from her late father's wealth. Lord Nott drank the finest wine and ate plentifully, but beside Theo, Daphne merely picked at her food.
"She'll be the head of the Queen's household," Lord Nott declared, swaying slightly in his intoxicated state. "To the beautiful, rich, and highly useful Lady Nott!" he called, raising his glass. From across the room, Daphne saw Lucius and Draco Malfoy exchanging wary glances, unwillingly lifting their glasses in acknowledgement. "And to the benefit of her ceremonial role," Lord Nott added slyly, "which will ensure she only has to fuck my weedy prat of a son every seven days—"

Daphne froze, alarmed by the language before registering the words, and then noticed Theo tensing beside her. His knuckles were white where they sat in his lap.

"Is that true?" she whispered to him, and his mouth tightened. "About my role, I mean," she amended, horrified, and he let out a grim huff of mirthless laughter.

"Yes, that part is true," he confirmed. "You'll be expected to spend most of your nights with the Queen, once she arrives. I've arranged for you to have your own quarters near hers." He fidgeted for a moment. "And until then, you need not concern yourself with me, outside of what is necessary." His mouth twitched. "After all, I am a weedy prat. That part is also true."

She blinked, stunned.

"Is that what you think I want?" she asked, and he looked up, bemused. "That I—" she hesitated. "That I wish to be away from you?"

"You have never once wanted to marry me," he reminded her, as if she might have somehow forgotten. "At least this way you won't have to."

"Let the poor girl put my son to bed and be done with it!" Lord Nott crowed with a laugh, waving his goblet around, and Daphne felt her chair yanked back, turning only long enough to see Theo's face contorted with something she might have called apology as she was led away without another word.

oOo

Theo's chambers were much nicer than she expected. She supposed she regularly forgot how wealthy he was, and how well-titled, but clearly, being one of the nobles who had fought for the King had served him well. The fabrics on the bed were luxurious with warmth and there was a general finery to the room that she stared at, mindless, while the other ladies stripped her of her gown and freed the pins from her hair.

She understood enough about what was supposed to happen. The other girls hadn't been particularly secretive about it, though it sounded barbaric even in the most exuberant of terms. She climbed onto the bed, waiting, and imagined what Theo would be like; what he would look like, even. He and Draco were both men now, striding around court like the nobles they were, but still. It wasn't as if it were that easy to tell what he looked like under his clothes, and—

She shivered, considering it, just as the door opened, revealing Theo in the frame. For a moment he stopped, frozen, and stared at her. His eyes seemed to trace the glow of her hair against the candle beside the bed, and then, after another moment, he remembered himself, stepping inside the room.

"We don't have to," he said before she could speak. "If you don't want to. If you're not ready."

She stared at him. "But the marriage—if we don't, then—"

"I'll lie," he assured her. "It's easy enough to fake the details, and my father won't question it."
"Oh." She swallowed. "Okay."

It was a spectacular kindness, she knew. She wasn't sure how to thank him, though, so instead she shifted awkwardly, not looking up from where she had curled her toes under her feet, uncurling them slowly and then absently coiling them under again.

Theo lingered by the door, sliding his tongue over his lips in thought, and then nodded briskly. "Would you like something to drink?" he asked. "I can have some mead brought in, or—"

"No, I'm fine," she assured him. "I'm just—" She paused. "Can we just… talk, for a bit?" she asked tentatively, and Theo nodded with relief, abruptly stripping his shirt from his shoulders and sliding into the bed beside her, almost childlike with his motions.

"Yes. Tell me about you," he said, and she couldn't help it. She giggled, watching his eyes go wide. "What?" he protested. "I don't—I don't know anything about you. Just tell me something."

"Like what?" she asked, and he shrugged. Alone he was something different; without his father watching over him, he was brighter, more alive.

"Anything," he said. "Your regrets, your favorite things, your fears—"

"I'm not afraid of anything," Daphne replied, and Theo's mouth curled up at the corners in an expression she hadn't seen before. A smile, she realized, and wondered the moment she saw it how she could have possibly found him to be dark and foreboding.

"Of course not. Of course not." His smile broadened. "But if you were—"

"I'm a little afraid of what the Queen will be like," Daphne permitted, and he nodded sagely, as if he'd suspected as much and agreed. "And—" she hesitated. "And your father makes me nervous."

Immediately, she wished she hadn't said it. At the mention of the elder Theodore Nott, the light doused from Theo's eyes.

"I won't ever let him hurt you," Theo said, and Daphne opened her mouth to say that wasn't what she'd meant—of course he wasn't going to hurt her—when she realized that perhaps there was a reason he'd chosen those particular words. She remembered, too, the bruises on his arms, and the anger that had so long been coiled in his mouth, in his voice, in his actions, and then she wondered how she hadn't thought to consider the sum of those things before.

"I'm sorry," he continued, and she opened her mouth to protest that he had nothing to be sorry for, only this was the truest version of himself he'd ever been with her and she didn't want him to stop. "I didn't want him to control you. I thought it would be better if I—" A breath of hesitation. "I thought you would know that I was trying to help you. I'm sorry." He cleared his throat. "I thought you knew I only wanted to help you, but I know now that I should have asked you, first."

Daphne paused, unsure whether a man had ever apologized to her before. She wasn't sure she'd ever heard a noble apologize to anyone, much less to a woman; much less a lord to his wife. She let a few moments of silence pass before sliding down on the bed, bringing them to eye level.

"You're not what I thought you were," she remarked slowly, and Theo's dark brow twitched slightly with confusion.

"What did you think I was?"

"I thought you were—" She bit her lip, feeling foolish. "I thought you were mean. Angry."
"I often feel angry," Theo acknowledged. "But why would you think that?"

"You—you shouted at me. When we were children." She turned her head away, too embarrassed to look at him. "When I—when you and Draco were—"

"Ah." He sounded amused, and she chanced a look over at him, finding her suspicions confirmed. "Well, you embarrassed me. Draco teased me about needing a girl to defend me for weeks. Probably months, actually."

"I didn't mean to! And anyway, why is that so bad?" she insisted, sitting upright to scowl down at him and finding him laughing again. "Who cares if I'm a girl? Why should girls not be able to protect people?"

"Well, I was very stupid then," Theo assured her, tucking one arm behind his head. She could see the shape of his chest that way, and the definition of the muscle in his arms. "I didn't know at the time that you were afraid of nothing."

"You're teasing me," Daphne sighed, and Theo sat up, chuckling.

"No, I'm not, I promise." He smiled again, and she was relieved to see it. "You aren't afraid, and you're braver than me. And I have no doubt that you could have taken Draco easily. Even he knows it, I'm sure."

At that, she permitted a laugh of her own, and then she quieted, gradually made nervous again by the way he was looking at her. "I mean it, though, you know," she told him, looking down at her hands. "You're not at all what I thought."

A few seconds passed in silence. Then Theo reached out slowly, resting his fingers against the inside of her wrist until she managed to look up, locking her gaze on his.

"Let's go to sleep," he suggested, and she nodded, climbing beneath the covers and settling herself against the pillows while Theo reached over, blowing out the candle beside the bed. For a moment, just before the light went out, she watched the sinews of his back, the column of his spine.

She was his now, she realized.

She fought the sudden urge to reach out and trace the shape of his spine, tensing pathetically at his side until he had resumed lying down beside her.

"Goodnight," he murmured, and she opened her mouth to say something, to ask for something, though she had no idea what.

"Goodnight," she whispered, and imagined the shape of his smile on his lips, letting her breath slow to the rhythm of his.

\[\text{oOo}\]

She woke as the color of the sky started to change. It was early still, the sun not yet prepared to rise, but the pitch-black shifted discreetly to indigo as Theo shifted towards her, the bared skin of his shoulder pebbling slightly in the crisp air of his chambers.

"Theo," she whispered, and his eyes fluttered open. She'd guessed he hadn't been sleeping. "May I ask you something?"

She watched the motion of his throat as he swallowed. "Ask me."
"Will you kiss me again?" she murmured, and in the barest of morning light she saw his mouth twitch with surprise, his lips tentatively parting.

"You want me to?" he asked, and she felt her cheeks flush.

"Yes," she said, and nearly choked on a mismanaged breath. "That is, if you—if I'm—"

She broke off as he pushed himself up onto his left elbow, his right hand emerging from the sheets to gently cup her cheek. He slid his thumb down the line of her jaw, passing it briefly over her lips, and she closed her eyes, waiting.

"I want to," he said, his voice gravelly with morning, and then he tilted her chin up, brushing her lips with his again.

It was like the first time, only it wasn't. It felt the same, tasted something like it, but this time, with his hand curled around her face and the rest of them mere inches apart, she felt her pulse race wildly, leaping into her mouth as she pressed herself against him, the rest of her body answering the question his seemed to have asked.

She wanted to stop and ask him if he'd done this before—he must have, she reasoned; half the girls at court seemed to have had some dalliance or another with Draco, and it was unusual for any boys to enter a marriage wholly inexperienced—but whatever his answer might have been, it hardly seemed to matter. He was hers now, and she was his, and was it so terrible to be here with him, being touched by him like this? He rolled over her, his breath quickening, and then paused, his hips pressed against hers.

"We could," he began hoarsely, and stopped. "I know that for girls it's—it hurts, I know, but if you wanted, we could—"

"Let me see you first," she suggested, and he pulled away, yanking the covers free and fumbling with the ties at his britches. He slid out of them, leaving her to stare at the crevices in his stomach—hard and flat and lined with muscle, sloping down between his hips—and she followed the thin trail of dark hair that drew her eye down further, to the undeniable hardness between his legs.

He shifted onto his side, watching her watch him, and then tilted his head.

"Now you," he said, clearly holding his breath, and she drew her shift up her legs, obligingly pulling it over her head and discarding it on the floor. She waited for his gaze to travel slowly, from the line of her neck and over the curves of her breasts to her hips, her thighs, her calves and then back up, lingering on her lips as he swallowed again, that same curve of his throat swelling and easing.

"You," he said breathlessly, "are the most beautiful girl at court."

"Woman," Daphne corrected, half-laughing. "I'm Lady Nott, aren't I?"

"Yes, you're—" He swallowed painfully. "You're my wife." It seemed to register slowly, the truth of it dawning on him gradually, not unlike the sun rising from the window at his back. "You're my wife," he repeated, awed. "I can hardly believe it. Do you even know how many other men wanted you? How many would have stolen you from your promise to me in an instant, if they could have—"

"The marriage isn't consummated yet," Daphne informed him boldly, sitting upright. "I haven't really done my duty yet, have I?"
Theo let out a growl of dismay, positioning himself above her, and paused as he slid a hand between her thighs, his fingers testing the slickness between them as she sucked in a breath, somewhere between anticipation and need.

"Are you afraid?" he whispered.

"I'm not afraid of anything," she replied, and certainly not you, and definitely not this, I want you, I want you, I—

He slid inside her slowly, carefully, his weight braced on his elbows as she adjusted to the feel of him, her heels digging forcefully into the muscle of his thighs. She took a breath, then another, and when she nodded, he moved again, guiding his hips against hers with a cautious, astounding patience.

He exhaled as she winced. "Is this—"

"Yes, just—slowly," she said, tearing at the span of her lip she held tight between her teeth. "But—please, don't stop, I want to—" I want to feel you, I want you, I want you, please don't stop, please, please, don't ever stop—

He looked lost, his eyes wild and hazy, the lids half-shut. She pulled him down, one arm snaked around his neck, and kissed him; he kissed her back without hesitation, his tongue darting into her mouth this time and leaving her with a strange, unplaceable sensation of need. She sorted out after a minute or two that she could move against him, rounding her back every time he shifted his hips against her, and it made everything better, and unbearably so. It seemed everything was a clash, a commotion, a confrontation between parts of them, and she lamented how long she had dreaded it—how much time she had wasted—as something inside of her quaked and clenched and burst, flooding her limbs with a wash of satisfaction. She felt rather than heard a gasp that came from her lips, dissolving to an almost incoherent sound of anguish, and Theo choked out a groan, falling against her and resting his forehead against her shoulder.

It took a minute to catch their breaths; Daphne brushed her hair from her eyes, suddenly certain she looked an absolute mess, and Theo gently rolled onto his side, turning his head to look at her.

She wondered as she struggled to collect herself how she had ever thought his eyes weren't green, or that he wasn't kind, or that she didn't wish to have him. Everything she seemed to have known before seemed suddenly terribly wrong, and now, with the sun shining into the room, she knew she had wasted the entirety of a night she wouldn't get again for several more.

"Was it—" Theo hesitated. "Are you—"

"My Lady?" A knock at the door. "Are you dressed?"

Daphne reached hurriedly for her shift, tossing it over her as Theo scrambled to cover himself.

"Not yet," she called. "Just—just a moment, I—"

She turned, about to reach for Theo, but found he'd already risen to his feet, pulling his britches on and then reaching for his shirt, nearly dressed.

"Just one minute," Daphne called again, and Theo paused, glancing at her, his expression still somewhat tentative.

She didn't quite know what to say; she wanted to say something, but hadn't the slightest idea what. Instead she gaped, her mouth opening and closing like a fish, and he gave her something of a shrug.
"Have a good day," he offered without expression, and then he headed to the door, pulling it open and advancing through it.

She wondered when she would see him next.

"My Lady?" one of the maids asked, holding up fresh linens, and Daphne sighed.

"Yes," she agreed, "I'm coming."

Daphne spent the next night in the chambers he'd prepared for her, which were even grander than his. She imagined she could see him in the little choices he'd made; in the bedding he'd chosen to be the color of her favorite gown, the pale blue one she wore most often. The sheets were unforgivably soft, the tapestries beautiful and soothing to look at, but still, she couldn't sleep.

She kept feeling his lips against hers, his breath in her mouth, his voice in her ear.

I want to.

Nothing much had changed, really. They occupied separate spheres during the day, rarely speaking, and he danced with her the same way he always had, with the distinct sensation of not particularly enjoying it.

He barely looked at her, and it haunted her slightly, dizzying her with the prospect of what she might have done wrong.

She wanted to hear his laugh, watch him smile, but that was some other version of him. Some secret Theo she only got to have one night a week, if at all. She merely lived like a ghost, counting the days, until she could wait in his chambers again.

She waited on his bed for him, like she had the previous night they'd had together. He walked in, not meeting her eye, and said nothing. He slipped out of his shirt, lifting the covers just enough to slide in beside her, and blew out the candle beside the bed.

"I won't make you do it again," he said, and then turned on his opposite side, facing his back to her. He said nothing else, and didn't move, and if it weren't for the motion of his chest, she would have barely noticed he was breathing.

She stared at the canopy above her, watching the shadows move with the night, and wondered how she could possibly tell him that this wasn't what she wanted at all.

It only got worse. The next week was the same, and on the day of the fourth week of their marriage, she paced the floor of her chambers, certain she wouldn't be able to stand it. She wasn't brave at all when she was sitting on his bed, the portrait of a wife, silently waiting for him. None of her thoughts felt like her own when she was playing a role she still didn't quite understand.

She knew she'd have to draw him out of hiding somehow, and in her desperation to manage it, she did the unthinkable.

She ruined the steps of a dance.
"Ouch," Theo hissed, doubling over as she pounded her heel into his shoe, and she let out a facetious cry of dismay, tucking his arm against hers and weaving through the line of dancers to guide him out of the Great Hall.

"Let me help you," she crooned, easing him into the corridor and then waiting, impatient, as he gradually put weight on his foot again, scowling at her. "Oh, stop it, you're fine—"

"I'm not fine," he informed her irritably, with an outrageously sulky hint of disapproval. "You've never missed a step like that in your life, so why would you—"

"I needed to talk to you," she urged. "Please. Before we—" She hesitated. "Before tonight."

His expression tightened with apprehension.

"I told you, we don't have t-"

"That's not it, I—" she attempted, and stopped, stumbling. Once again, she found with displeasure that hesitation was ruining her best laid plans. "I wasn't—it's not that I—"

"Tell me." His voice was quiet, but firm. "Whatever it is, I promise I won't be angry."

It occurred to her she ought to be grateful, only she was too busy struggling with what to say.

"I—" she began again, and paused, still burdened by humiliation. "I want to," she whispered, managing nothing more than that, and Theo stared down at her, openly shocked.

"But—but your face, I thought you—I thought you hated it, hated me—"

"I didn't. I don't." She felt her cheeks flush, her gaze cutting sheepishly away, and after a moment of awkward silence had ticked by, Theo drew her chin up gently, giving her a curious glance of sympathy. The green of his eyes was obvious now, the color changing in the light, and then changing again the longer he looked at her, responding to the temperature of his thoughts.

"Please," he said eventually, scanning her face for something she hoped he managed to find, "in the future, try to tell me what you're feeling without destroying my feet in the process."

She gave him a weary smile.

"No promises," she said, and he rewarded her with his secret laugh.

oOo

That night, when he came to her, she didn't wait for him on the bed. She stood by the door and took his hand when he walked through it, not saying a word. His lips parted as if he might have said something, but she pressed a finger to his lips, first, and then hers, holding them both to silence. She always said the right thing, she knew, except for with him. With him, she seemed to be nothing but mistakes and misjudgments, and tonight, she wanted it to be them as they were, or as they could be; as they might be, if she ever learned to speak his language.

He watched her fingers as they drew up the hem of his shirt, the light scraping of her nails as they passed along the ridges of his stomach. He sucked in a breath, following the motion of her hands, and she carefully slid the fabric over his head, tracing the shape of his chest beneath the pads of her fingers.

He seemed to understand what she wanted. He stepped closer, still silent, and slid one side of her
dressing gown over her shoulder, baring the curve of it and cautiously—as if it might break—
bringing his lips to the bone. She felt the pressure of his kiss, trapping a breath in her lungs, and
settled her hands on his hips, her head falling back to let his lips travel to her neck and then up to
her cheek, resting near her eyelids as they fluttered shut.

She felt him inhale; felt herself echo the same breath.

"Last time," he murmured, his lips still pressed to her skin, "you seemed to be in pain."

"For a time, yes," she permitted, shrugging. After all, it was almost precisely as every other girl
had described it, only they'd left out most of the reward. Perhaps they hadn't had it, she suspected.
"But it wasn't terrible, and—"

"I think I can fix it," Theo said thoughtfully, and then he gestured to the bed. "Lie down," he
suggested, his voice once again assuming its softened alter ego, and she reached behind her for the
mattress, settling herself on top of it and waiting until he joined her, positioning himself between
her legs.

He drew the material of her shift up past her knees and then higher, adjusting her on the bed so that
her thighs fell on either side of his shoulders. "Hold still," he said very seriously, drawing her legs
apart, and then he lowered his head to the slit of her cunt, darting his tongue over it as she wriggled
from surprise beneath him.

The moment she felt his mouth on her, she determined that she hadn't the slightest idea what he
was doing, but that she never wanted him to stop. She found herself delirious with tension, her
entire body flooded alternately between chills and warmth, and by the time she felt certain her
limbs would detach from her body—by the time pleasure seemed to be escaping her in shudders—
she felt twisted up and wrung out and pressed impossibly thin, her toes curled and her fists
clenched while the rest of her seemed to float above the bed, impossibly disembodied.

"That," she exhaled when he lifted his head, "must be some sort of horrifying sin, or some kind of
terrible crime. You should probably be arrested."

He laughed, sliding his bare waist up against her until his hips were settled between her thighs; she
was still slick and sensitive and she gasped again, tightening her legs around him.

"We can stop there, if you want," he told her, toying with her hair. "I don't mind."

She blinked, surprised. He was hard already, she could feel him; from what she'd heard,
abandoning such a thing wasn't an ideal state for a liaison of any kind to end. She wondered why he
would possibly make such an offering until she realized he couldn't quite meet her eye, or else
simply didn't want to.

"Do you really still think I don't want you?" she asked, disbelieving, and he hesitated.

"It's hard to imagine why you would," he admitted, and for a moment, she wondered who she hated
more; his father, for almost certainly putting the initial concept in his head, or herself, for having
let him think it could be true. She slid her hand down his stomach, taking the length of him in her
hand, and waited until she heard the sound of his breath catching in his throat.

"I do want you," she told him, stroking him gently first, and then more firmly, noticing the way his
breathing faltered, his lips parted. "I do. And do you want me?" she asked when his hips began to
move against her palm, responding to her touch. She released him, laying back, and pulled him
closer, sliding her hands beneath his arms and up over the blades of his shoulders. "If you want me,
you can have me," she told him, as his eyes closed, briefly, and reopened, fixing on hers with uncertainty.

"Daphne," he murmured. "I—"

"Theo," she said back, holding him tighter. "Please. I want to."

That, finally, seemed to be enough, and when he slid himself inside her, she wished she could have captured the look on his face, or at least the shape of his mouth, or the feel of his lips. It seemed unfair to lose the memory to such a small, careless moment, to some apathetic beat of time.

For her, it was like colliding with the sun.

Tell me about you.

She wished she could answer the question again for him now; now that there was something worth telling.

She'd had no secrets before, but now—

_I can't take my eyes away from you_, she wanted to confess when she watched him, his head bent in conversation with Draco. _I think of you, relentlessly, at every hour. I worship with your name on my lips._

_I think I miss you, even though I barely know you_, she wanted to tell him when she stared at the canopy of her bed, lying awake in the chambers he'd so painstakingly prepared for her. _I want to hear what you think about this or this or this, about that, about everything. I want to see you smile. I want to make you smile._

_I long for you_, she thought when his eyes met hers across the Great Hall, fortune conspiring to bring them a moment of mutual wanting. _Can't you see it? Can't you tell?_

Tell me about you.

_I'm desperate for you_, she wished she had said, so that he would have never had to wonder.

He was different after that, in little ways. In ways she learned to look for. She used to wonder why Draco was always laughing in Theo's presence, and now she felt like she knew; the little oddities that nobody else paid any attention were precisely what Theo noticed. He was an able noticer, a practiced observer. He said things—little things, small insignificant nothings—and that was what made Draco laugh, and what made Daphne long to be in his place. She'd never been jealous of Draco before, but now she was hopelessly envious.

She'd been well assured of her own beauty since she was a child, but now she tried harder, fighting diligently for Theo's attention, however discreet. She feared he found her boring or silly, and even as she spent hours on her hair or on the stitching of her dresses she still wondered if he noticed, or if in the noticing he was displeased, or any number of countless haunting insecurities, any single one of them enough to fill volumes of their own accord.

Every day she woke without him she wondered if he thought of her, and if he did, what he thought of her. She wondered and wondered until she thought she might be sick with wondering, and then she wondered more. The Queen was coming soon, she knew, and each time she remembered, she
breathed a sigh of relief; of gratification for distraction.

Soon she'd be too busy to pine for him like some stupid servant girl, Daphne reminded herself. She'd be a noble wife, faultless and untouchable, dutiful and loyal and never wavering, never faltering—no matter what impenetrable idiocies plagued each beat of her heart. She reminded herself of this, of her father's many lessons and her birthright as she'd been taught, and she prepared herself for war. Her father had told her to always be on the winning side, which meant always preparing for the worst; always with a part of her waiting for the sky to fall, and therefore never investing too intently in whatever place she stood.

But then Theo would catch her eye across the Great Hall, and he would give her his secret smile, and she would melt into wonderings again, utterly feverish with all of it.

oOo

On the nights they spent together, Daphne forced herself to be calm, to be reasonable, to sit patiently, even as she wanted to throw herself in his arms. She waited, rooted in place on his bed as he came in the door, letting it shut carefully behind him.

"This," he began slowly, "is very difficult. I think I did a terrible thing."

"Oh?" she asked, holding her breath.

"Yes," he confirmed gravely. "Do you realize how long a week is? I never knew how tedious the days were before, or even how uniquely cruel a single hour can be." His mouth quirked slightly, and she let out a breath, relieved. "I thought you wouldn't want me like this," he added after a moment, looking down at his hands and resolutely avoiding her eye. "I thought it would be kinder to you to keep my distance, but—"

"I hate waiting," Daphne cut in bluntly. He looked up, surprised, and she shifted onto her hands and knees, crawling towards him to perch at the edge of the bed. "These nights without you," she clarified, reaching a hand towards him until he took it, walking unsteadily towards her. "I swear, Theo, I can hardly stand them."

"Your room," he exhaled, momentarily confusing her. "That's what's displeasing, then? Surely it can't be for lack of me."

She tugged him closer with a sigh, resting her arms gently around his neck.

"Yes," she wryly agreed. "The room is egregiously displeasing."

"Is it the tapestries?" he prompted. "Are they not to your liking?"

"I loathe them," she whispered, loosening his shirt from his britches and gradually sliding it over his head. "They're terrible."

"Oh. Oh, no." He stepped closer, brushing his lips against her shoulder. "The linens?"

"Rough. Scratchy. I toss and turn all night, and—" she gasped, stifling a whimper, as he drew his lips over her throat. "I never sleep. Not at all."

"Poor thing," he lamented softly, his fingers settling on the hem of her shift to lure it up the length of her thighs. "My god, you've been so mistreated. The bed," he murmured, sliding the thin fabric over her head and stroking a line between her breasts, "is it uncomfortable?"
"It's an abomination," Daphne informed him, letting out an inadvertent, girlish squeal as he wrapped an arm around her waist, tossing her back against the pillows and climbing onto the bed after her. "It's an affront to furniture," she added, tugging at his britches and none-too-carefully kicking them down his legs, stifling a laugh at their collective haste. "Frankly, I'd rather burn it to the ground."

"What a criminal appetite you have," Theo noted, sliding between her legs. "Well," he mused, his lips pressed firmly to hers, "if the bed is so terrible, and the tapestries so tasteless, then perhaps we should discuss a change in decorati-"

"We're done with this game," Daphne informed him, sliding her hand down to watch with satisfaction as he hissed through his teeth, responding to her touch. "You know perfectly well that it's for lack of you that the room will never be satisfying."

That, more than anything, seemed to shudder through his body.

"I am such a fucking fool for you," he whispered, and she opened herself to him again, tightening her arms around his neck.

oOo

"Was there ever anyone else?" she asked him, drawing mindless circles on his chest.

"Hm? Not really," he replied. "I—" He hesitated. "I've had some dalliances, yes, but nothing—not like this. I've been promised to you since I was six years old, and besides, I'm nothing special." He kissed the top of her head. "Certainly not standing beside Draco," he conceded wryly.

"That's not true," Daphne protested, and Theo arched a brow, skeptical.

"You preferred a betrothal to him instead when the arrangement between us was made," he said, and she sighed, rolling into her back.

"I didn't know you then," she said, and then, thoughtfully, "and in fairness, I couldn't have imagined you'd be like this."

"Like what?" He rolled over her, taking her hand and brushing his lips against her knuckles.
"Voracious? I didn't either," he said with a laugh, "though I never would have thought anything could feel like this."

She wasn't sure she wanted to ask if he meant her, or sex.

As it occurred to her, she didn't know if she really wanted the answer.

Unpleasantly, she felt a cold, mesmerizing chill, realizing how many nights they would inevitably spend apart, and how unlikely it was he'd be alone during them. Theo was, after all, a wealthy, valuable noble; even now, he stood only a few coffins away from the throne. He was desirable to any woman at court, whether he felt himself so or not, and Daphne had lived at Hogwarts long enough to know that every noble wife regularly turned a blind eye to her husband's indiscretions.

Her father had always warned her that everything was war, and that tides were constantly changing. How long, then, before Theo tired of waiting for her?

"Daphne," Theo interrupted, and she turned towards him, realizing she'd been staring into nothing as she'd unwillingly traveled the imaginary footpath of disaster. "I suppose I never asked if you might have wanted another man for a husband. Are you happy with me?" he asked, bracing himself
for her answer.

At the improbable question, she briefly considered who else she might have even been with. Draco? At one time, maybe, but not since. Harry, the Peverell knave? Certainly not, even if he'd ever been a viable choice, which he wasn't. The King himself had never entered her mind as an option. In fact, no other man had ever compared with Theo Nott, and that was the stunning, unlikely truth.

Betrothal or not, she'd belonged to Theo long before she even knew she had.

"I've never wanted another," she promised him, which seemed an underwhelming turn of phrase, but it appeared to be enough for him. He kissed her again, holding her in his arms.

"Should we sleep, then?" he asked, carefully restrained.

Sleep seemed an impossible waste of time. "We only get one night," she reminded him, and he smiled.

"I was hoping you'd say that," he replied, and slid one arm under her, rolling them both onto his back.

Daphne vaguely remembered that there had been a time she hated dancing with Theo; she recalled, hazily, that for several years of her life she had loathed the moments the dance would call for him to touch her waist, or pick her up. Always, she'd waited with displeasure for him to set her down, spending each moment aloft contemplating how subtly she might stab the heels of her shoes into his feet. Now, of course, dancing with him was an invigorating form of torture. Each time they touched was never quite long enough, and she found herself losing her impeccable rhythm more than once, always pausing beneath his desperate grip a beat too long before parting.

"This is unbearable," he murmured to her between gritted teeth, and she grimaced her agreement. "What day is it?"

"Not a day that matters," she replied, shivering as he brushed his lips ever so discreetly near her ear. "Can't you just—I don't know. Take me in the kitchens? A haystack? It seems to work for other women," she grumbled under her breath, and felt the reward of his furtive smile.

"You're my wife," Theo scolded in her ear. "You're not some scullery maid in a barn."

"Oh, hang it all," Daphne replied sulkily, and watched his shoulders shake with muted laughter. "Are you not suffering even remotely?"

"Oh, Daphne, I suffer endlessly," he assured her. "I have half a mind to stab myself in the leg just so no one can demand I leave my bed."

"Lot of good you'd do me with a stab wound," Daphne said, and considered it. "Though, I suppose I could work with that."

"Oh, don't tease me, please." He drew her close, holding her fingers a little too long again as they nearly missed the next set of steps. "Aren't I suffering enough?" He stepped back, permitting her to revolve gracefully beneath his arm, and added, "he's watching. My father, I mean." He paused. "And the King, too."

"Remind me again why we're doing this?" Daphne exhaled, glancing over her shoulder to find that
Lord Nott was, indeed, watching closely. "Something about decorum, I'm sure, or protocol, or something else equally stupid—"

"Ah, and here I thought you loved your sterling reputation," Theo tutted softly, chuckling again. "Remember how you used to admonish me for spoiling it?"

Daphne sighed, dropping into a curtsy as the song came to an end. She used to think a lot of things, and she no longer found any of them important.

"How much longer?" she asked under her breath, and per custom, Theo bowed.

"Three days," he said, and she discreetly made a face.

"I can't wait that long," she whispered.

"Neither can I," he replied, the shape of it more breath than words when they parted.

oOo

She'd barely undressed for bed before he came hurrying into the room, pulling her close without a word. She registered only the rustle of his clothing and the hurried, arrhythmic pattern of his breath as he bent his head to the line of her neck, his hands shaking on her waist.

"Daphne," he exhaled in relief, and she clung to him, burying her fingers in the folds of his shirt. "I haven't been able to sleep all week. I can't, I couldn't—"

"What do you do when you can't sleep?" she asked him, curious if his thoughts were anything like hers.

"Believe me," he growled salaciously, "it's nothing appropriate for your ears."

She laughed, muffling it into his shoulder. He was so tall, his shoulders so broad, his chest so defined, even with fabric between them; he was so unlike the boy he'd been, and she marveled at him, spreading her fingers out to hold as much of him as she could.

"What do you think about?" she asked.

"You," he replied easily. "Nothing. Everything." He nipped at her clavicle, sliding the fabric down to kiss the curve of her shoulder. "This. The way your skin feels," he murmured, running his fingers gently down her abdomen, "and the sound you make when I—" She gasped, fighting a tiny sound of satisfaction as he kissed her neck. "Yes," he proclaimed approvingly, "that."

"And then what?" she asked breathlessly, exhilarated by the thought.

"I think about the things I'd like to do when no one's looking. The ways I'd like to have you, if I could." His hands busied themselves with her shift, drawing the fabric up. "I swear, Daphne, you'd hate me if you knew the things I think about without you."

"What if I gave you something, then," she whispered, and he leaned back, bemused. "Something to think about when you're alone?"

"I—" he swallowed, eyes widening. "Like what?"

She smiled, shoving him back against the wall and tugging at the laces of his trousers, sliding her hand inside and waiting for the tell-tale hiss between his teeth.
"Pretend I'm not your wife," she advised him, and adjusted her shift, dropping to her knees as his
grip tightened on her arms, his breath quickening frantically.

"Daphne, no, this is—you shouldn't—"

But she'd taken him in her mouth already, ignoring his stifled protests. She knew enough about
this, she figured; it wasn't a particularly difficult task. Even the suggestion of this sort of activity
was undignified, but why risk losing him to some servant girl who had no need for dignity
anyway? She drew him in between her lips, sliding her tongue along the smooth shape of his shaft,
and looked up to find him staring, his legs already shaky as he leaned back against the wall.

She picked up speed slightly, sliding her fingers along the length of him that her lips couldn't
reach, and he dissolved under her touch, close to collapsing. She kept going, steadily increasing
speed until he clapped his own hand over his mouth, smothering a loud groan.

"Daphne," he choked out again as she slid her lips over him a final time, swallowing the taste of
him. He opened his mouth, clearly trying to formulate words and failing, and she rose to her feet,
arching a brow expectantly.

"Daphne, I—" A falter. "You, I can't—" Another pause.

"Lost for words?" she asked, distinctly pleased with herself, and he grimaced, pulling her back into
his arms.

"I will never wish to pretend you're anything but my wife," he said firmly in her ear, and she closed
her eyes, realizing now how much she hoped he meant it. She desperately longed to believe he
meant it, her father's advice or not.

Still, it could all so easily fade.

So she held him tighter, just in case.

After nearly two months, the King finally announced that he would be marrying Lady Pansy
Parkinson, the daughter of a Borderlands noble. A strategic match, Daphne knew; her father had
said as much would likely be any King's choice. This was, after all, a warlike King, and with many
enemies. He would want to secure his borders before anything else.

"As head of the future Queen's ladies-in-waiting, you will be responsible for running her
household," Lord Nott informed Daphne, as she let her gaze travel every few minutes to Theo,
savoring each covert moment of mutual regard. "She'll be a Loyalist Queen, and if you play your
cards right, she will reward our family well in the future."

"I'm well aware of my duty to our family, my Lord," Daphne assured him, sneaking another glance
at Theo, whose lips curled helplessly to a smile. "I'd be happy to befriend the Queen, and I'm
prepared to make her feel welcome at court."

This, like most things she said, was met with contempt.

"What do I care if she's welcome at court?" Lord Nott prompted crossly. "She's young, her only job
is to open her legs and have sons. Frankly, Tom may discard her yet."

"Father," Theo sighed, glancing apologetically at Daphne, who shook her head.

"No, you're right, my Lord," she agreed sweetly. "But for as long as she is useful to you, I will
make sure she is loyal to us."

"Good," Lord Nott said, still unreasonably agitated despite it being one of Daphne's characteristically faultless answers. "Go," he added lazily, waving a hand, and Daphne gestured for Theo to follow as she went, pausing just outside his father's door and waiting until he slipped out after her.

"What did you—"

She held a finger to her lips, shushing him, and he shook his head, looking amused.

"Every time I say something nice to him, it seems to poison him more," she whispered. "I'm pretty sure if I keep doing it, he'll spontaneously die."

"You minx," Theo murmured approvingly, backing her against the wall with his hands on her hips. "Are you ready, though? For the Queen," he clarified, looking vaguely concerned. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Of course not," she assured him, scoffing. "I've been a noblewoman at court my entire life, haven't I? There's nothing I'm not prepared for—and even if there were, it's certainly nothing you can help with. Unless you're suddenly very gifted at embroidery."

She'd meant it to be funny, but clearly he was distressed. "Ah, I don't know that it's only that," he warned cautiously, looking oddly serious. "This King is—" he hesitated. "Not like other Kings," he determined uncertainly, and Daphne glanced up at him, surprised.

"You sound nervous," she noted, and he shook his head.

"I only mean that his reign isn't quite secure, and the closer you are to his Queen, the more danger you're in if he falls, or if he's even displeased. The Peverell heir is still a threat, and—"

"Are you worried for me, Theo?" Daphne prompted, amused, and he nodded slowly.

"I swore I would protect you," he replied, and she looked up, recalling the moment he'd first stood like this, keeping her from harm; the moment she'd first noticed his eyes, though she only realized now that it was the way he'd looked at her that had paused her, not merely the color of them. "I swore it to myself the day I was betrothed to you, I swore it to you the day I married you, and I promise you, Daphne, I will not fail."

Daphne slid her hand up gratefully, curling it around the back of his neck.

"Theo, I—"

Tell me something about you, she heard him say, and felt herself respond.

I have always thought I stood alone, until today.

"I'll protect you, too," she promised, and he smiled down at her.

"Good. I'm glad," he said. "Then I'm in excellent hands, because you're not afraid of anything."

oOo

Daphne took to the new Queen easily, finding her to be cleverer than most. Pansy was a quick study, curious about the court and respectful of Daphne's knowledge and position. She was discreetly nervous, too, which was something Daphne found easily understood.
"Is your husband—" Pansy began, hesitating. "Is he… kind?"

It was the first question the new Queen had asked that Daphne had not known the answer to since birth. She gave a moment, considering it, and then answered honestly, feeling her cheeks heat at the thought.

"Prodigiously," she replied, and then, "I'm luckier than most."

Pansy nodded. She was a noble's daughter herself; she knew as much. "Have you been married long?"

"Not at all," Daphne replied, shaking her head. "Betrothed for ages, since we were children." She wondered for a moment if she should say something else—if she should admit her misconceptions, and the painful waste of time that had been her uninformed judgments of his nature—but opted not to, half afraid she might still jinx it if she spoke her feelings aloud. "But with the King choosing a wife the wedding was pushed up, so that the head of your house would be suitably—" She paused, thinking. "Experienced, I suppose. Tested, I think," she amended, "is the better word."

"How long ago were you married?" Pansy asked.

"Two months," Daphne replied. "I spend a night a week with him, and it's—" she hesitated, not wanting to admit that each night in his arms was somehow perilously consuming, guiltlessly sustaining, and yet never possibly enough, leaving her longing for him again each morning. "It's not something to fear, anyway. Marriage, I mean," she clarified, recognizing that it was the first time she'd stumbled during their conversation, though it seemed to have humanized her in a way that made the future Queen smile.

"You like him?" Pansy guessed. "Your husband?"

More than anything, Daphne thought, and bit it back, knowing such a recognition was only bound for disappointment.

"I honor him, of course," she said cautiously, "and I do not delude myself. I know it was a match made to deepen his coffers and strengthen my father's name, but—"

"I am certain he likes you, too," Pansy said knowingly, and Daphne felt warmed enough to laugh, though she hoped the Queen was right. It was a foolish thing to do, but still—

She hoped, she hoped, she hoped.

oOo

"Do you like her?" Theo asked, the sheets tangled around them as their legs remained lazily twined, her head resting delicately on his chest.

"I do," Daphne confirmed. "I'm happy to be head of her household." She twisted in his arms, looking up at him. "Partially because it will make the time away from you a little more bearable, I think. Or at least distracting enough that I can bear it."

He gave a quieter, sleepier version of his laugh, low and rumbling beneath her cheek.

"I half hoped you'd hate her. That maybe you'd beg me to release you from your service to her," he murmured playfully, toying with her hair, "and then we'd both be exiled back to my estate, so I could stay with you every night." He paused, releasing the coiled curl he'd wrapped around his finger. "I don't suppose you'd be up for committing treason, would you?"
"Stop," Daphne said with a laugh. "The King would never let you go."

"True," Theo agreed sullenly. "But someday when the King inevitably tires of my insolence and the Queen decides you're much too beautiful to serve her, I'll take you to my house, where I was born. There are so many gardens there, and trees," he said softly. "Everything smells and tastes different there. A little bit sweeter, I think."

"My father never liked going back to our estate," Daphne recalled, barely remembering it. The house had been drafty, and not very well cared for. "He much preferred the excitement at court, he said."

"As does my father," Theo replied, shrugging beneath her. "And I like it too, of course, but at times it's nice to hear silence. Real silence," he clarified, and she looked up, bemused. "It doesn't exist here. Not really. There's always footsteps somewhere, creaking on the stairs, voices and gossip and grunting and scolding. There you can hear the wind." He stroked her arm slowly, delicately tracing over it with the pads of his fingers. "And from time to time, you can hear absolutely nothing, and then it's as if time stops, just because you ask it to."

"Would you?" Daphne asked, looking up. "Ask for time to stop, I mean."

"With you? Always," Theo answered without hesitation. "I'd stop it now, in fact, if I could. Keep you here in my arms," he mused, his voice softening slightly as sleep danced along the edge of it. "Would you?"

Daphne considered it. "No, I don't think so. But only because I want to see what happens next," she clarified. "I want to see the gardens, to hear the sound of silence while I'm lying beside you in the grass. But then maybe we can stop time, if it'll let us. Or maybe I still won't," she amended, smiling to herself, "because I'll want to see us when we're older. When we have so many secrets shared between us that there's nothing I know about myself that you don't know, too."

His arms tightened around her, satisfied, as he rested his cheek against the top of her head.

"I suppose we should keep going, then," he said, as she felt her eyes close, surrendering her consciousness to the warmth of him.

"I suppose we should," she murmured, feeling herself drift to sleep.

oOo

"There are other women, you know," Daphne heard Draco say as he strode down the hall, and she tucked herself out of sight, catching his voice and then a predictably matching set of footsteps approaching. "How long are you planning to behave yourself so dully?"

"I've been married barely over three months," she heard Theo reply drily. "Do you really think I possess absolutely no self-control, Malfoy?"

"Well, you might, but I certainly don't," Draco scoffed. "What woman is worth six nights of celibacy?"

At that, Daphne heard the sound of a blade being pulled from a sheath, a series of rapid, shuffling footsteps, and then, abruptly, silence.

"Fine, fine," Draco muttered eventually. "Get that away from my throat, would you? I know you wouldn't actually stab me, you imbecile."
"I might," Theo replied, as Daphne heard him return the sword to the scabbard he typically wore at his waist. "For her, maybe I would. Did you ever think about that?"

Draco grunted his disapproval. "If I ever lose my mind over a woman, feel free to actually stab me," he added listlessly, and Daphne heard Theo's low chuckle.

"Believe me," he replied, "I am already counting the days."

Daphne waited until they passed, hiding a smile in the palm of her hand.

Perhaps it had been worth it to hope.

Daphne's days were filled with quiet combat, as her father had always warned her they would be. Her days were saddled with tiny, wordless wars, when she stood beside her Queen and faced an apathetic court. Her nights, too—six of them in a row, doomed to be repeated—were plagued with worry, and by the pain of knowing that her closest friend remained alone.

But one night a week, Daphne permitted herself a night without torment. One night per week, she gave herself only one task: learning a man she'd always known.

Tell me something about you; your regrets, your favorite things, your fears.

He was an only child, more comfortable being alone, and happier to observe than to be observed. He feared being made to fight in wars he didn't believe in, and also certain kinds of snakes. He regretted that he had not been softer when they were younger; that when they'd met, he hadn't learned much kindness yet. The tree outside his nursery had been his favorite thing, at first, and then the first sword he'd ever been handed, and then the dagger Draco had given him; and then, eventually, it had been her, and the way she'd first begun to smile at him.

"Like candlelight," he told her, whispering it in the dark. "How it flickers first, uncertain, and then it flames. It's not like how you smile at the rest of the court; for them, it's painted on—and true, it's beautiful, of course," he assured her, and she nodded, "like everything you do, and it's always the right smile for the right moment; but still, it's only for them, and not for you. Not like when you really smile."

"It's a secret," Daphne realized, surprised to find that what she liked about him was so perfectly echoed by what he liked about her, and Theo nodded.

"Yes," he agreed. "It's like a secret between you and me, and that's what I like best."

"It's something we have in common," she said, and he smiled his smile for her.

"Though not just that, of course," he reminded her, and then she smiled her smile for him.

"No," she agreed. "Not just that."

There was so much more that they shared, after all, and so many more things they would share well into the future. So many wars they would still fight together; so many more secrets they'd whisper into pillows and bare skin until the sun rose again, stretching its obtrusive rays over them both. She almost pitied it, really, that it could have so little power. That for all that it meant an ending to a night in Theo's arms, she still faced each day with him behind her, and was never alone again.

oOo
After a while, Daphne understood a great many things about the world. She understood that her father had been a great man at court, which had made her noble, and that her husband was the inheritor of a treasury to rival a king's, which had made her powerful. She understood that she was expected to behave in precisely the right way at all times, and that the right way was not always the same way each time. She understood, too, that there were sides to all things—a right one, and a wrong one—but it was difficult to know the right one from a distance, and so there was always a chance she could lose. There was always, always a chance she could lose, but she could stand the gamble if she trusted what was right, and if she remembered that Theo Nott believed (and she believed it, too, when he did), that she was a woman who feared nothing.

Perhaps she still didn't understand all things, but she understood one thing very clearly, and that seemed to amount to everything.

That in the end, what Daphne understood about the world and what she knew about herself each amounted to only one thing of importance, and that after a time, they were both the same.

\[oOo\]

_Tell me something about you._

Easy, she always thought.

_I love you, I love you, I love you._
3:35 p.m.

It's always hot in Vegas. Inferno hot, Harry thinks, and the glare from the pool isn't helpful. Saturdays mean club beats pounding while he sits aloft in his lifeguard throne and bakes, hovering somewhere between the circles of hell reserved for gluttons and sloths. If someone set fire to this town, he thinks, nobody would even notice.

He shades his eyes from the sun, sighing. Two children (where are their parents?) splash around wildly and two drunk women complain, looking to Harry for assistance. He's not here for them, Not as they are, anyway. His job is not to be dissatisfaction police for rich women gradually turning their skin to leather. He's here for when the couple in the corner inevitably tries fucking in the pool, or when someone gets drunk enough to try to dive into three feet of chlorinated cesspit (if that). He's the last line of defense between irresponsible fun and death.

Despite this, Harry recognizes the collective compulsion to find water. It calls to him, too. Funny thing, he thinks, being a lifeguard at the Mirage. It's a name so apt it should almost be funny.

He sighs again, rubbing at the sweat pooling under his sunglasses.

It's too fucking hot in Vegas.

4:43 p.m.

Vegas is so over. So fucking over, Theo thinks, and another glance around the Mirage pool does nothing to convince him otherwise. None of the swimsuits are in any way stylish. None of the tattoos are artsy. Too many people are drinking Miller Lite in one place than should be drinking Miller Lite at all, ever. Los Angeles, he thinks, even at its worst and most pretentious, is at least never trying this hard.

Theo considers going home early, but that's not happening. He isn't sure why he forgets every time that the drive back from Vegas to L.A. is always harder than the opposite direction. Drives to Vegas are comforting, full of promise, like diving directly into a sun-soaked pool (though not this particular pool, which would be to aim for certain death and very probably chlamydia). The other direction, on the other hand, is like leaping directly into the sun itself. And not in a good
Theo glances around, Draco pausing at his side. "No room," Theo says. Draco, meanwhile, is happily drinking a mai tai, which Theo wants very badly to knock from his hands directly into the pool. "Why'd you pick this hotel again?"

(The suite they have at the Mirage is fucking resplendent with the worst of the 1970s. It's retro, and again, not in a good way. Not to say there's a good way. But if there is, the Mirage is not it.)

"You hate every hotel," Draco reminds him. "I'm telling you, Nott, Vegas just is what it is. The city of sin," he adds, winking, as he fits his lips around a weed pen.

"I'm surprised you aren't more opposed," Theo notes, making a face. "None of this seems elite enough for you. And didn't you do coke last night? It's not 1982."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" Draco prompts lazily. "I didn't have any meth."

"Ah, see, you're joking, but it's not even a good joke," Theo points out. "Everyone knows pharmaceuticals are the new cocaine. Coke is Gen X, and meth, as literally everyone on earth agrees, is exclusively for midwesterners."

"That's fucking fascinating, Nott. Tell me more," Draco says drily.

"Remember ecstasy?" Theo muses, obliging. "Talk about a throwback—"


Exactly two chairs. In the shade (not ideal), next to a waterfall (noisy), directly adjacent to a bachelorette party with two unclaimed girls who are peering around like hawks (bad). They'll be wanting someone to bankroll them, surely. Theo and Draco are the sort of people who look like they might do that, except they wouldn't. Or at least—Theo wouldn't, anyway.

"I'd rather drown," Theo mutters.

Draco squints up, eyeing the lifeguard sitting above them. "You hear that?" he calls up obnoxiously. "My friend has a death wish. If you let him drown, I'd be happy to tip."

Theo doesn't expect the lifeguard to answer—assuming, as one does, that the lifeguard is a normal human being who takes no interest in what two drunk idiots are doing at his feet—but surprisingly, he does. He nudges a pair of sunglasses further up his nose and slumps down, warily regarding Theo and Draco before speaking.

"I died once," the lifeguard remarks idly. His hair is messy and wild beneath a stark white visor, his skin bronzed and slick beneath institutionally pristine shorts. He looks like he probably smells like suntan lotion; the coconut kind, if Theo were to guess. "I was without oxygen for five minutes. Can't say I'd try it again. Can't say I wouldn't."

"Jesus Christ," mutters Draco, about to walk away, but Theo stays behind.

"Tell me more," he commands. The lifeguard lifts his sunglasses, squinting at him.

"You thinking of trying?" the lifeguard says. His name tag says HARRY, LAS VEGAS, just like that. All caps. As if it's something to be proud of. "Overdose would be more pleasant, I think, given the option. Pretty sure you could afford it."
"That's presumptuous," Theo notes testily. Draco grabs his arm, trying to leave, but Theo nudges him away, flashing him a polarized glare from beneath thousand-dollar lenses before turning back to the lifeguard. "Any recommendations?"

The lifeguard, Harry, considers it for a second. "Not a stimulant," he says.

"Beg pardon?" Theo asks.

"I mean, could always overdose on caffeine," Harry muses, "given accessibility, but I have to imagine it would hurt. Like, with a normal overdose—"

Theo balks. "Normal overdose?"

"—yeah, normal, like sleeping pills or whatever," Harry continues, unfazed, "you just lose consciousness, right? Everything slows down. Sedatives would be the way to go. Want to die with stimulants, pretty sure that's a heart attack. Can't say for certain, but I'd guess it hurts more. You know how your heart races sometimes and shit? And it, like, stings? That's—that's no good. Might as well drown if you're going to go out that way."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Draco says under his breath, but Theo is enraptured.

"What time do you get off?" Theo asks Harry, ignoring Draco as he walks away, exasperated.

Harry laughs. "Fuck off," he says, and turns back towards the pool.

"I'm serious," Theo says. "Hey," he adds, when the lifeguard doesn't turn. "I'm fucking talking to you."

"I see that," Harry notes. It's irritating, and Theo fucking loves it.

"I'll be back in an hour," Theo says.

Harry nudges his sunglasses back on. "Fuck off."

Theo smiles.

Maybe Vegas isn't over yet.

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5:43 p.m.

Harry isn't sure why he decided to talk to the rich kid with the sunglasses and the death wish who has hair that screams Los Angeles (who was probably 'ironically' at the Pitbull concert last night), but he doesn't think much of it until the too-skinny asshole with the dry voice shows up again.

"One hour on the dot," he says, and Harry rolls his eyes.

"Can't prove it," Harry replies. "Wasn't counting."

"You're a fucking liar," says Asshole, flagrantly. Shamelessly.

Harry glances down at his watch.

"Fine," he permits. "One hour on the dot."

The Asshole smiles.
"My friend dragged me here," Asshole says, gesturing over his shoulder. "The blond one, looks real smug? Him. Anyway, we're here for the weekend. Drove in from L.A., for no real reason. Vegas always seems like a good fucking idea, you know? And then you get here and six hours later you're like, shit. This place is so over."

Typical, Harry thinks. It's not like hating Las Vegas is somehow avant-garde.

"I actually like Vegas in theory," Asshole continues. "I like the idea that it's just so fake and we're all in on the joke. Like, we're all here to entertain this grandiose idea that we can escape into a fantasy for forty-eight hours or whatever." He pauses. "The Venetian is my favorite hotel," he adds, "because they really fucking committed, you know? I mean yeah, sure, it's fake, but it's beautiful. The ostentatious kind of beautiful, too—like, um, what's the word—"

"Opulence," Harry says by accident.

"Yes." He can hear the satisfaction in Asshole's voice. "Exactly."

The Venetian is Harry's favorite hotel.

"I mean, you have to like the Bellagio," Asshole continues, apparently not bothered at all by Harry's lack of communication. "It's got a real sense of the absurd, you know? The giant flowers and gardens and the fountains. It's like—the Bellagio is Dada. It's all just fucking satire, man."

"Do you ever stop talking?" Harry asks.

"Tell you over dinner," Asshole says.

"I have no interest in hanging out with you," Harry says, "or your smug blond friend."


Harry says nothing.

"I've got this theory about Pitbull," Asshole remarks tangentially, and Harry rolls his eyes. Knew it, he thinks, until Asshole abruptly surprises him.

"I think he might be a god," Asshole says.

Harry blinks.

"A minor god," Asshole amends quickly. "Like Bacchus, maybe? Or some sort of revelry creature, or maybe an incubus of some kind? I mean okay, I'm not saying he's literally divine, but he had a cold last night at the start of the show and then by the end of the night he was fine and I had the fucking cold, so. You do the math."

"You think Pitbull," Harry echoes slowly, "the singer from Miami, might be Bacchus."

"Yeah, I mean." Asshole shrugs. "Yeah."

Harry turns, staring at him. "Seriously?"


Fuck this lunatic, Harry thinks for a second, but after the idea settles in, he grudgingly decides he kind of likes it. It makes Vegas less hellish and more fantastic, in the literal sense. Fantasy. That's
what Vegas promises, and what it fails to deliver, favoring $30 mai tais instead.

"Dah-le," Asshole adds, grinning, and then, evidently pleased with himself, he half-shouts, "Mujeeeeeres!"

"Stop," Harry says.

"I'll stop over dinner," Asshole replies.

"Please stop," Harry says, though he checks his watch.

Asshole clearly notices. "You know I have a death wish," he remarks, gesturing blithely to the pool. "Could just try to repeatedly drown until your shift is over."

Harry grimaces. His shift is over.

"What's your name?" Harry says.

"Theodore Videlio Nott the third," replies Asshole.

"Seriously?" Harry says.

"No." Asshole barks out a laugh. "I'm only the second."

"Theodore?" Harry echoes, and frowns. "Go by Ted?"

"Theo," Asshole corrects him, and shudders dramatically. "If you ever fucking call me Ted I'll bury your dick in the ground."


"Pharmaceuticals are the new cocaine," Theo says.

Harry wants to kiss him on the mouth.

"Fine," he says, and climbs down from the lifeguard stand, wondering if he might die tonight.

6:15 p.m.

Theo tells Harry, Las Vegas, to meet him out front, though when he says it, he's still not entirely sure that the lifeguard is going to come. Theo doesn't know what he's doing, exactly. He doesn't know why he's so very insistent on spending time with a lifeguard, particularly one who works at a hotel he doesn't even like. What does that say about him, exactly? Or his choices? Also, it's something of an unreasonable trap, because if Harry, Las Vegas, wants to go clubbing, then Theo hates him. If Harry, Las Vegas, is a gambler, Theo hates him for that, too. There are so many ways that Theo could hate him, and Harry, Las Vegas, doesn't even know.

But then Harry shows up outside, and Theo decides he doesn't hate him.

Theo doesn't hate him at all.

"I was gone fifteen minutes," Harry sighs, looking as if he's biting back a groan, "and somehow you managed to put on a full suit."

Theo glances down. "Well, as I understand it, shirts are required for service. Though if you'd like
to cause a stir, I can always go without."

Theo thinks briefly that he'll do it, actually, if Harry asks. He suspects he'll do anything Harry asks. Probably because Harry doesn't seem like the type to ask for anything.

"Take the jacket off," Harry says.

Ah, so Harry doesn't ask. Harry tells.

Theo smiles.

"Have to put it back in my room, then," he says. "You coming?"

Harry looks startled, but only for a moment. He either pretends at being fearless, or has no fears. "Fine."

Theo beckons in the opposite direction and they wind through the casino, heading back towards the lifts. On their way, a variety of women pause to look at them. It's always a bit carnivorous, these glances, because again, most of these women are looking for someone to buy them drinks all night. Maybe someone to fuck them, if they're lucky enough to get their room to themselves for an hour or so. Mostly, though, Theo is a wallet that almost certainly contains a Black Card (status: affirmative), and that's all they need to know. Harry, on the other hand, they look at like a piece of meat.

"You don't seem to mind the smoke," Theo notes, and Harry shrugs.

"Grew up here," he says, and fixes Theo with an unnervingly direct gaze, daring Theo to mock him. "Where are you from?"

"Guess," Theo says, half-smiling.

"Los Angeles," Harry replies.

Right on the first try, which Theo hates a little bit. Technically, he's from Rancho Palos Verdes, which is less a beach town than a gated neighborhood nestled in the cliffs, overlooking the ocean. He usually tells people he's from Manhattan Beach, though it isn't actually much of an improvement. It indicates very clearly an innumerable amount of things about him, most primarily that he went to a private high school. His parents (his father, specifically, seeing as his mother is deceased) were Republicans, though specifically the kind who worshipped Reagan, not McCain, and certainly not Palin. Theo, who worships nothing, does not bring any of this up.

"That obvious?" he asks.

"You're tan, and it's only May, so you live somewhere warm. You're rich, clearly, but not old enough to live somewhere suburban. Ergo, you're either some kind of foreign prince, or you're from L.A.," Harry summarizes disinterestedly, in a way that indicates he's seen it often enough to know. "I generally avoid the L.A. weekenders," he remarks, as if he can't really prevent himself from adding it.

"Generally," Theo notes. "But not today?"

"You didn't give me a choice," Harry reminds him dully.

"You seem like the kind of person who always has a choice," Theo replies, and for some reason, Harry stops, suddenly falling to a halt and turning towards Theo.
"If you're going to play some sort of game where you force me into explaining why I'm here," Harry says, not particularly bothered as the crowd swerves around them, "I don't want to play it. I'm not interested in having to answer for anything."

At this angle, straight on, Theo can see that Harry's eyes are extremely green. He's wearing a pair of glasses that look sturdy and light. Theo can picture them sitting on his nightstand, just like he can picture Harry's clothes on his floor.

"Noted," Theo says, and gestures to the elevators. "Shall we?"

Harry lifts his chin, which is like a nod, only more stubborn.

"This one," Theo says, beckoning to the lifts that are marked A-E. He can see on Harry's face for a moment that he knows that means Theo has a suite, but the brief degree of calculation is smoothed over relatively quickly.

"Got it," Harry says, and follows him into the elevator.

It opens onto floor A with a ding.

"I hate the aesthetic of this hotel," Theo comments, gesturing to the carpeting and the doors, which look Eastern-influenced in a way that screams *oriental*, or some other shameless cultural misappropriation. "In what way is any of this a mirage? There should be, I don't know. Phantasms. Hallucinogens. I should feel distinctly misplaced in time and space."

"How exactly would that be a hotel theme?" Harry asks, following him down the corridor. Theo places his key in the lock and waits for the beep, then shoves the door open, permitting them entry.

"Ghosts," Theo says in answer, and watches as Harry almost laughs.

The suite is ridiculous and Theo knows this. The view is nice, but almost any view is nice at this height. The sofa is angular and stupid. The bar is reflective and gaudy. There's a television at the foot of the massive bed in the closest bedroom, which can almost be seen from the front door, but not quite. It says a lot that there's a television there, Theo thinks. That's not what Theo does in the bedroom, though the television above the jacuzzi is, of course, another story.

"Put the jacket down and let's go," Harry says, his gaze flicking to the totally unnecessary dining table. "I only agreed to dinner."

Theo looks over what Harry is wearing. Jeans and a henley, two of the three buttons undone, plus a pair of scuffed up Chuck Taylors. Theo, meanwhile, is wearing a bespoke suit. Three of his own top buttons are undone, and part of him wants to button one more, wondering if he's saying too much, but it's too late for that. Instead he removes his jacket and lets it slide to the floor, making a statement. The statement is, of course, this: *I don't put things where they belong, and therefore, I am trouble.*

Harry watches Theo roll his sleeves up.

Harry looks like exactly the kind of trouble Theo came here for, even if he'd never admit it.

"What do you want to eat?" Theo asks him, and does not say anything crude, although it does occur to him to wonder what else Harry feels like putting in his mouth.

"You're the guest here," Harry says, shrugging. "You pick."
Theo wonders if Harry isn't setting a trap for him now, as equally and as shamelessly as he set one for Harry. You're the guest here, so use me as you wish, but if you use me, I will hate you.

"I want a burger," Theo says. He's suddenly starving, he thinks, and Harry's mouth quirks.

"Burger it is," Harry replies, and perhaps it's Theo's imagination, but he sounds a bit hungry, too.

6:45 p.m.

Harry notices right away that Theo isn't a compulsive phone-checker, which surprises him. He realizes that he actually did notice Theo at the pool earlier that day, though he hadn't committed it to memory (well, he had, but only in retrospect, which doesn't count) and recalls that when he first noticed the two rich assholes (the other of which Theo informs Harry is outrageously called Draco, which practically screams obscure left-coast intellectualism) Theo was on his phone, staring mindlessly at his screen in a way that usually indicates disinterest rather than communication.

Harry notices now, though, that Theo doesn't remove his phone from his pocket, not even to look at a map of the Strip, until it rings. Then Theo sighs, glances at the name on the screen, and raises it to his ear.

"What?" he says, which Harry thinks is fantastic. One day, Harry reminds himself, he'll be the sort of person who can answer the phone that way. No greeting, no salutation. Simply a what, what is it, you're wasting my time, which will be a welcome relief from years of hello, this is he, thank you for calling, may I help you?

"No," Theo says, and pauses. "Fine. No, I haven't seen your texts. You text me too much, I told you, I don't need to know where you are at every moment. No, I'm—fine." He rolls his eyes, dodging a woman wearing nothing but nipple pasties and feathers, and beckons for Harry to keep up. "No, come on, I don't want to go there. I don't want sushi again, it's not that good here. We're landlocked for fuck's sake, Malfoy, and I just s- fine. Gordon Ramsay?" He makes a face, then glances at Harry. "Yeah. No, I'm not alone. I told you, I'm with- no, that wasn't a joke. I agree, it isn't funny. Amazing, isn't it, that something that's very much happening is not a joke? Fine." A groan, and another glance at Harry. "Well, he doesn't like you. No, not ironically. He doesn't like you, Malfoy, because you're an asshole. Me? I'm charming. Tell him."

Harry blinks, realizing that Theo is holding the phone out to him.

"Sorry," he says. "What?"

"Tell him," Theo repeats, "that I'm charming."

For whatever reason (to end this, perhaps) Harry agrees to take the phone.

"Hello?" he says, warily.

"Ah. So he's not joking, then." It's the smug blond prince on the other end, sighing. "Well, I assume he's told you that some of our friends have joined us for dinner."

"No, he hasn't," Harry says.

Silence.

"You know, if you're after him for his money," smug blond prince warns quietly, the sound on the other end changing slightly as if he's gone outside from somewhere loud, "I recommend walking away. Hand him back his phone and turn around."
"What's he saying?" Theo asks impatiently, but Harry holds up a hand.

"I think I can decide for myself what I do with my time," Harry says into the phone, "but thank you endlessly for your concern."

A pause, and then a loud scoff. "Fine." He can practically hear the teeth gritting on the other end. "He's a big boy. I'm sure he'll sort it out for himself soon enough."

Harry says nothing.

"Just tell Nott to meet us at Planet Hollywood," the smug blond says, rejoining whatever crowd he was just in. "I presume you're tagging along?"

Harry glances at Theo and for a moment he's angry, or irritated, but he realizes almost immediately that Theo has genuinely no idea what his smug blond friend is saying to him. Harry also realizes that perhaps the smug blond is something of a gatekeeper, which says much more about Theo than he thinks it does.

"If Theo is going," Harry says, "then I'm going."

Theo blinks, surprised and pleased.

"God, this is so fucked." The smug blond prince hangs up, and Harry hands the phone back to Theo.

"We're meeting your friends at Planet Hollywood," Harry says.

"I hate that place," Theo groans, tucking his phone back into his pocket, "but at least we're getting a burger. What's your stance on truffle fries?"

"I don't have one," Harry says.

"You should," Theo advises.

If you like them, Harry thinks, I bet I like them.

"Dying of high cholesterol wouldn't be the way to go," Harry says instead.

"You know, I've thought about it," Theo tells him, "and I think you're right about an overdose. I'd like to be killed by excess, you know what I mean? I think it says a lot. I think it says something terrible, and I'd want that, I think. I'd want people at my funeral talking about how I deserved it. Like, 'oh, good thing there's champagne here, because I hated that asshole. Overdose? Please.' Honestly, I think if people cried I'd just be insulted."

"Yeah?" Harry asks.

"Yeah," Theo confirms. "Because it means they didn't know me at all."

Harry permits three steps in silence before glancing at Theo.

"You should have cake at your funeral," he says. "And a guillotine."

"Oh, like a French Revolution theme?" Theo asks, and Harry nods. "I like it, actually." He tilts his head. "Wow, yeah, I like that a lot. I think it says exactly what I want it to say."

He turns his head, glancing at Harry.
"How did you do that?" he asks.

Harry shrugs. "Just a guess."

"Huh," Theo says, and smiles down at his feet. "Huh," he repeats, quieter, and Harry glances at the knuckles of Theo's hands.

Theo has smooth hands, slender fingers. The bone of his wrist is prominent in a way that makes him look like an artist. The knuckles, however, are bruised, just faintly. He has a thin scar running between the webbing of his pointer and middle fingers. He wears a single ring, a signet ring, on his pinky. It looks like it could cause some damage, but the face of it is blank. No crest, no monogram, no initial. Harry blinks, picturing that hand sliding down his own stomach, the ring catching briefly on the button of his jeans just before it dips under.

But then he realizes that's not it. That's not the hand.

"You're left-handed," Harry observes, noticing that Theo wears his watch on his right wrist. It's a worn leather band, nondescript, save for the small Rolex logo on the face.

"Yeah," Theo says, and slides his left hand through his hair for emphasis, turning to smile briefly at Harry.

His left hand is unadorned, and Harry smiles back.

Convenient.

8:15 p.m.

Dinner goes on for way too long. Blaise tells too many stories about traveling, and asks Harry too many questions about where he's been, which isn't too many places. Theo shifts uncomfortably, wishing he would stop. Harry doesn't seem terribly bothered, but his hand seems tight around his beer.

Harry is, of course, extremely underdressed compared to Draco and Blaise, and even compared to Greg and Vince, who are very much Draco's friends. They're the stupidest investment bankers Theo has ever met, but he's glad, at least, every time they talk, because he catches Harry laughing at them, not with them, and Theo finds that rewarding. He finds it apt. Draco forgives their stupidity because he likes a posse, an entourage. He's willing to surround himself with idiocy if finery comes with it. Theo, on the other hand, is itching to be alone with Harry. He wants Harry to notice things about him, to tell him things. Sometimes (most of the time) Theo doesn't know himself very well, but somehow, Harry picks through his unspoken thoughts and unasked questions and sorts him out within minutes, within seconds, and does him the kindness of not ultimately putting him in a box.

Just before they leave, Theo boldly sets a hand down beside him, on the spot in the booth between him and Harry. He waits for a second, lifting his glass with his free hand, and then lets his pinky drift slightly, permitting it to brush against the hem of Harry's jeans. He waits, wondering if Harry will notice. Theo read somewhere once that touch is the most acute of human senses. He read, more specifically, that if someone is touching you, it's not an accident. They are aware. He silently begs Harry to notice that this is not an accident. He hopes that Harry is aware.

"Ready?" Draco prompts, and the group begins to vacate the booth.

Harry shifts, preparing to rise to his feet, and Theo's pinky retracts, shameful.
Aim too high and you hit the sun, he reminds himself, hiding his disappointment as he slides out after Harry.

Naturally, after eating, Draco wants to gamble. He really is unnaturally good at blackjack, considering he's twice as clever as he looks, and he certainly doesn't look like a fool. He's wary-eyed and sharp, and much too smart for Vince and Greg, who mostly enjoy things like craps. Theo, on the other hand, is excellent at Texas Hold'em. Draco isn't bad either. Blaise mostly gambles wildly, erratically, and exclusively while drinking, but he's preternaturally lucky. Any given weekend in Vegas, the three of them will usually come out on top, with their suites comped—the irony of wealth, really. They showed up here already fucking loaded, and they leave having gotten everything for free.

The moment they find a table with the 'right vibe' in the casino (at the Paris hotel, which is always lucky at this time of night), Draco throws two hundred dollars down on the table, and Theo sees Harry swallow hard. He supposes it is kind of sickening to watch. At one point, Theo was able to feel some sort of revulsion at the idea of having so much money it's worth spending on adrenaline alone. Now he feels very little, except for the motion of Harry pulling away from him.

Harry watches Draco make a hundred dollars in less than five minutes and turns his head away.

"You playing?" Draco calls over his shoulder, beckoning for Theo, but Theo knows if he sits down now, it's over. Harry will walk away, and no amount of money could make him chance that. He will never know how to find Harry again.

"I gotta go," Harry says, turning over his shoulder and proving Theo right, and though Theo is rarely wrong, he still hates it.


"Right," Draco says, knowing perfectly well Theo doesn't answer his phone. He glances sharply at Harry, who's already taken another step in retreat. "You sure about that?" Draco says under his breath, but Theo glares at him. "Fine." He waves a hand at Harry. "Bye," he says, with his particular gift for making a single syllable sound like a threat.

Harry turns to walk away and Theo chases after him.

"What now?" Theo asks, a little breathless, and Harry shrugs, not slowing down.

"I only agreed to dinner," he says.

"But that's not fair," Theo counters. "We didn't talk about death at all over dinner. Draco's friends are blissfully unaware of their mortality," he adds. "It's a damn shame, really. It's what all the kids are missing these days, I say."

Harry pivots so quickly Theo almost collides with a stranger, only just managing to steady himself as Harry stares at him. It's not a mean look, but it's certainly accusatory.

"What do you want from me?" Harry asks.

Theo blinks.

Having dinner with his friends was almost certainly a mistake.

"I'm not like them," he says, and he can hear a little bit of pleading in his voice, which he hates.
"Seriously. I'm not."

"I fucking know that," Harry says, and then grimaces. "I'm sorry," he adds in an undertone. "I didn't mean to—" He swallows. "I'm just sorry."

"It's fine." Theo is relieved, or possibly jittery. He inhales Harry's apology until it fizzes in his veins, an inexplicable high. "Let's get a drink. You and me. Anywhere you want."

Harry considers it. "You ever been to the Chateau?"

Yes, Theo has been there, many times. It's the rooftop lounge in the hotel they're currently standing in, and not exactly a hidden wonder.

"Have you?" Theo asks.

"No," Harry says.

"Oh, Theo thinks.

"I really hope you're using me for my money, then," Theo says, half-laughing. He'd rather spend it on Harry than on the blackjack tables, anyway. Somehow he thinks the investment will be met with better results.

"Maybe," Harry says. "Or maybe I just don't want to be inside."

Theo thinks Harry probably looks good under tea lights and stars.

"Think they have guillotines?" Theo asks.

"I think they'd be idiots not to," Harry replies.

Jesus Christ, Theo wants to touch him. Wants to drown in possibility, in mights and maybes and coulds. Wants to luxuriate in the promise of touching him; wants to paint a portrait with the probable softness of his mouth; wants to wear the finery of imagined bruises Harry might leave along the slopes of his thighs.

"Let's go, then," Theo says, and the Harry who stands before him unfortunately doesn't drop to his knees and pull at Theo's belt, but he nods.

"Let's go," Harry agrees and turns towards the elevator, dragging Theo back to the spectacularity of now.

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9:45 p.m.

Theo clearly paid for bottle service and Harry wants to be annoyed, only he did do it very discreetly, and also did something of a dance of feigned surprise when they got seated somewhere intensely private. It's so wildly endearing that Harry can't really be angry, even if he does feel like he's being distinctly Pretty Woman-ed. He considers making a joke about how Theo's renting him by the hour, only Theo's gone to such lengths not to make it seem that way that he would hate to ruin the effort.

Instead, Harry thinks back to Theo's pinky lingering near his thigh—and the ghost of a shudder it sent up his spine—and decides maybe this is just Theo's version of sharing. If he had money, Harry thinks, he'd probably do the same thing. If he had money, he'd probably be alone with Theo right now (pouring Dom Perignon into the hollow of his throat from the back of an Escalade, if the rap
songs were to be believed) so maybe Theo was actually a saint, and deserved the money.

"Drink," Theo says, thrusting a champagne flute into Harry's hand, and Harry amends the last part of his suspicions.

"Trying to take advantage of me?" Harry asks.

"Can you be bought?" Theo counters.

Yes. "No." Maybe. "But I'd be insulted if you didn't try."

"Ah." Theo laughs, then gestures up. "So. Everything you hoped it would be?"

Yes, actually.

"It's pretty nice," Harry says, and then adds, "I miss the gold standard."

"What?" Theo asks, startled.

"The gold standard," Harry repeats. "You know, where a country's monetary system was linked directly to gold—"

"I fucking know what the gold standard is," Theo cuts in, rolling his eyes. "I've read Capitalism and Freedom. Why the fuck do you miss the gold standard?"

"Well, maybe what I miss is gold," Harry corrects himself. "I mean, in some weird, sentimental, pirate sort of way. Like, I'd love to throw down some gold coins, you know what I mean? Bills are fine. They're fine." He barks out a laugh, and okay, maybe he's a little bit drunk. "But I want to fucking shower someone in gold coins before I die."

"Dude," Theo says. "That is a wild dream."

"What's yours?" Harry asks casually, leaning back against the loveseat.

"My dream?" Theo cocks his head, considering it. "Besides my French Revolution funeral, you mean."

"Obviously," Harry says.

"Obviously," Theo echoes with amusement, running his thumb over his lip with a laugh. "Right, well, aside from that, and my preeminent death, I guess I'd say..." He tilts his head. "I want to be late to something," he said, which is surprising, mostly in that it makes no sense.

"That's it?" Harry says. "You're so punctual you aspire to tardiness?"

"Well, no," Theo admits, grimacing into his champagne flute. "It's hard to explain."

"I just told you I wanted to throw down in gold coins," Harry said. "I think you can explain yourself."

Theo rolls his eyes. "It's dumb."

"Of course it's dumb," Harry says. "That's the point. If you'd said something sophisticated, I'd punch you."

"Well, I do deserve it," Theo says. "I mean, just generally."
"Right," Harry confirms. "Yes. I'm aware."

Theo's gaze slides to his, brows arched.

"You're uniquely punchable," Harry assures him, "and you know that. But answer the question."

Theo groans, but relents.

"I want to be the kind of late that means you were distracted," he says eventually, eyeing his glass. "You know. Like, I want to be with someone who makes me not care what time it is. I want to be on my way to something, a meeting or something, and then have that person show up naked at my door, and then I want to just go, I don't know—fuck it. Fuck whatever else I was doing, this is more important." He pauses, running a thumb along the condensation of his glass. "Oh, dinner with a client in ten minutes?" he poses facetiously to himself, half-smiling. "Well, fuck it, it can wait. It can wait, because I need to fuck this person right now—here, now, because I have to. Because—I don't know. Them, me, this particular transgression, we are irreplaceable. Because I will never be this young or this in love or this terribly, unbearably wanting again, and I can't fucking waste it. Because this fucking second, this very moment is fleeting, it's rare and won't come around again, and client dinners can wait fifteen minutes or however long it takes. I want to have that person in my doorway and then decide, well, fuck, I guess this is what I'm doing now, and have that be that."

He tips his head back, draining his glass, and Harry realizes he might be in love with him.

Either that, or he's unforgivably drunk.

"Theo," he says, and Theo shakes his head.

"Don't," Theo says. "Don't kiss me right now, I won't believe it. I won't believe you if you do it now." He turns his head. "Do it later. When I'm not ready. When I can't breathe."

Harry blinks, and then nods slowly.

"Okay," Harry says.

A busty waitress pours more into Theo's glass, and then into Harry's. For several minutes they sit in silence—or something like silence, anyway, which doesn't actually exist in Las Vegas. In Vegas, on a Saturday night, Flo Rida is as good as silence, even as it transitions to some other too-loud beat. Britney's Work Bitch comes on next and fuck, this would be a terrible time to have a first kiss. A truly awful time.

Harry turns his head and grabs Theo's jaw, pulling it towards him, but at the last second something compels him to pause, and he stops just shy of touching his lips to Theo's.

Theo's chest rises and falls aggressively, but he doesn't move. Harry releases him and exhales, letting his head fall forward. Still, Theo doesn't move. Harry's nose slides along one side of Theo's and still, he doesn't move. Theo's breath is on Harry's lips; his eyes close, and his lashes flutter against Harry's temple; but he doesn't move. Harry's hand, which hovers in the air from where he let it fall from Theo's cheek, float slowly and unsteadily until it lands on Theo's hip, precisely where his shirt is tucked into his trousers.

Harry lets his head fall, his forehead resting on the bridge of Theo's shoulder, and only then does Theo's hand rise, his fingers toying with the hair at the nape of Harry's neck as Harry closes his
eyes, breathing hard.

"I'm drunk," Harry says, and presses his lips to Theo's chest, just below his clavicle. He bites down briefly, obscenely wishing he could saturate the fabric with his tongue, if nothing else. He feels Theo manage a swallow; shivers as Theo's fingers tighten on his hair.

"Maybe we should go somewhere," Theo says. "Walk a bit. Get some air."

Harry's hand is toying with Theo's shirt, untucking it slightly. The pads of his fingers brush Theo's abdomen and he thinks, faintly, that he might scream if he can't get any closer, if he can't feel any more.

"My friend," Harry attempts, and falters, forcing another swallow. "My friend's a club promoter. He's going to be at Oak tonight." It's the nightclub in the Mirage. "Could get us in if you wanted to walk back that way."

Theo nods, turns his head to speak in Harry's ear. "Sounds good," he says, and slips his tongue briefly along the lobe, as Harry feels his entire body suffer an avalanche of tremors.

Harry forces himself to his feet, knowing perfectly well he can't stand another moment of whatever Theo is doing to him. Waiting, he supposes, which has never been Harry's strong suit. He glances over the edge of the wall before they leave, eyeing the Strip below.

"Don't jump," Theo says, standing behind him. "Can't be the best way to go."

Not true, Harry thinks to argue. It'd be more merciful than this, at least.

"I'd rather skydive than bungee jump," Harry offers instead, as a nearly unrelated sidebar. "At least with skydiving, if you're going to die, you die from a heart attack in the air. You know it's coming, and your heart fucks off. Bungee jumping you die on impact." He shudders pointedly. "No thanks."

"I'm not here for a crash," Theo agrees, with a faint smile. "So yeah, cross that one off the list."

Harry thinks it's distinctly possible he might die tonight, and he thinks maybe he won't mind it.

"Harry," Theo says, and Harry shakes his head.

"Don't kiss me," Harry says. "Not here. Not like this."


Then he gestures ahead and Harry nods, leading them back to the elevators.

11:44 p.m.

It's not a great nightclub, and Harry's friend Seamus is one of those dodgy characters Theo suspects has a juvenile record. Probably arson or some shit. Still, they're playing some of those early 2000s hyphy movement songs with the heavy beats. It's less sexual than it is purely nostalgic, and they can't talk in here, so they drink instead. They drink, and they dance. Not really with each other, though Theo considers how badly he wants Harry to grind on his lap—not dissimilar from what the girls in the next booth over are offering the best man of an extremely Southern bachelor party. Theo wants filthy, dastardly, ignoble things from Harry, but not here. Not where the floor is sticky with Smirnoff and cheap tequila. He wants Harry naked on a cold marble floor; wants to leave marks somewhere porcelain.
Harry makes Theo want sumptuousness. Opulence. Not this, the worst track from the post-One Direction singles, which is an abrupt end to Tell Me When to Go. Harry's hair is falling into his eyes and Theo stops dancing to brush it away, slicking it back from his face.

"Don't kiss me now unless you have a death wish," Harry warns, laughing, and pulls Theo towards him, one hand wrapped tight around his arm.

"And what if I do?" Theo shouts. Some girl gives him a come-hither look from over Harry's shoulder and he ignores it, though he might not have done so on another night. For now, his attention is occupied. His curiosity is piqued. His hands drop to Harry's hips, and the girl frowns. She'll tell her friends later that every man is scum or gay or both and kick her shoes off with a whine, and maybe by the time she does, Theo will have sucked a bruise in the shape of his teeth into the side of Harry's neck. Or maybe not. Maybe he'll still be here dancing with Harry, the tips of his fingers still damp with Harry's sweat.

"Not here," Harry laughs into Theo's ear, the heel of his palm pressed into Theo's chest. "Not now."

Then when? Theo wants to beg, only he laughs instead.

Harry's free hand is somewhere on Theo's thigh and it stops, freezing in place.

"Your phone," Harry says.

"What?" Theo yells.

Harry slides his own hand into Theo's pocket and Theo nearly convulses.

"Your phone," Harry says, smacking it into Theo's palm.

Theo looks down, groaning at the lit-up screen. Missed text messages are somewhere in the double digits, and now the phone is vibrating with further evidence of Draco's displeasure.

"Fuck," he says.

"Might as well answer," Harry tells him with a shrug. "We've got nothing else going on."


"WHAT?" he shouts into the phone.

"What?" Draco yells back.

Theo sighs, grabbing the collar of Harry's shirt and pulling him towards the exit.

"What is it, Malfoy?"

"Where are you? You can't possibly still be with what's-his-face."

"Harry," Theo says, rolling his eyes. "You know his name, Draco."

"Seriously? Still? Come on. Let's, I don't know. Karaoke. You know, that one place? With the—the ramen. Yes, Blaise, bottle service, this isn't my fucking first day. Blaise, would you very kindly shut the fuck up, I'm trying to talk to Nott—"

"Where?" Theo sighs, exasperated.
"We'll meet you in the lobby of the hotel, I just stopped to—BLAISE. PUT THAT DOWN- Theo, ten minutes. FOR FUCK'S SAKE—"

Draco hangs up and Theo sighs, glancing at Harry.

"Karaoke?" he asks.

"Sure," Harry says.

"Great," Theo says, turning away. "We're meeting Draco in ten min-"

He breaks off as Harry yanks him back and forces him against the wall, holding his wrists steady. Theo blinks, uncertain, and then Harry releases his hands, shifting instead to take hold of Theo's face.

The kiss comes out of nowhere. Harry's hips press against Theo's with his hands firmly wrapped around either side of Theo's jaw, and Theo can't breathe, can't speak, can barely manage to kiss back as his hands come around to rest somewhere beneath the muscle of Harry's back, curved around his shoulder blades. It lasts somewhere between eternity and half a second, Harry's glasses jabbing slightly into Theo's cheek, and then Harry yanks Theo's head back, placing a single kiss on the arch of Theo's throat as Theo lets out a loud gasp, surfacing from an unholy depth.

"What the fuck," Theo manages, as Harry steps back and then away, turning towards the exit. "Hold on," Theo growls after him, grabbing his arm. "What do you think you're d-"

"We're meeting Draco in ten minutes," Harry says, and then grabs Theo's arm, checking his watch. "Nine, even."

"We could be late," Theo suggests dizzily, but Harry grins.

"Not yet," he says, and keeps walking.

Theo stares after him, dismayed and disbelieving and utterly distraught.

"You fucker," he sighs, and chases after Harry, bursting through the doors and back into the lobby of the Mirage.

1:07 a.m.

"Carry on my wayward son," Harry sings deliriously, "there'll be peace when you are done, lay your weary head to rest, don't you cry no more—"

Draco, who is considerably more bearable when he's drunk, sings loudly with his arm thrown around Harry's shoulder, apparently in approval of the song choice (if not also of Harry himself, though he seems to have at least abandoned his insistence on contempt). Blaise, who has somehow befriended what looks like a birthday party for some girls named after flowers and Greek myths, toasts him from the lounge sofas that are probably going to need a solid scrub before the night is over. Vince and Greg, the two idiots that Theo obviously hates, are playing twin air guitars and trying very badly to get two of the birthday party girls to watch.

Theo, meanwhile, is staring up at Harry from where he's sitting alone, a bottle of Sapporo clutched tightly in his hand. It occurs to Harry in flashbacks from pieces throughout the night that Theo is often sitting alone, even when he's with other people. It isn't as if he doesn't care, or as if people don't care about him. It's more like he's a piece that doesn't know where he fits, or that maybe
doesn't mind that he doesn't.

Harry thrusts the microphone into Draco's hands and leaves him to the rest of the song, opting to fall into the seat beside Theo's.

"Tired?" he asks Theo.

"No," Theo says, and grins. "You're a fucking terrible singer."

"I know." Harry reaches out, touching his pinky to the side of Theo's thigh. "I want to kiss you again," he says, probably too quietly for Theo to hear, but Theo shifts his leg over, seeming to grasp the message.

"Pick out a song for me," Theo says, which seems to mean we're not leaving yet, asshole, because you did this to yourself, and now you're going to suffer for it, and Harry's secretly kind of glad about it. The wait is doing things to his internal organs.

Something to his chest, too.

He sits up and grabs the booklet from the girl with the flower name and the too-smug nose, ignoring her when she lets out a squawk of opposition.

"Here," Harry says, pointing to the song title and offering it to Theo.

"Done," Theo declares, draining his beer, and then he rises to his feet, taking the mic from Draco and pivoting with far too much panache for any single person to possess (much less a drunk person with no obvious coordination).

"Surprise, bitches," Theo adds, winking at Harry, "I'm actually fucking fantastic."

Draco lets out an approving howl, and Harry watches, entranced, as the song begins.

"You are my fiiiiiiire, my one desiiiiiiire," Theo sings, and even though the sound of it is almost immediately lost in a swarm of chorusing voices, Harry decides Theo's actually a pretty good singer.

Either that, Harry thinks, or maybe—just maybe—he's just a little bit in over his head.

2:15 a.m.

The girls lure Draco and the others off to their suite at the Venetian and Theo hangs back, pausing Harry as he climbs out of the back of the cab. He says nothing; only gestures across the street at the Mirage, and Harry nods.

"Want to tell Draco?" Harry asks, but Draco's far ahead already, swept up in being the center of attention. That's Draco's happy place, but Theo suspects he's already in his.

"Nah," Theo says. "Wouldn't be the first time I disappeared."

Harry arches a brow. "And if he decides to text you relentlessly?"

Theo pulls his phone out of his pocket. "Whoops," he says, powering it off with a swipe, "slipped and fell."

Harry smiles.
The walk back to the Mirage is, of course, needlessly long, considering it's directly across the street. Reaching the limited access points is something of a drawn out process, particularly since the streets are still flooded with people who are surely only going to make mistakes. Theo wonders for a second if he is, too, but determines that unimportant. If this is a mistake, then so be it. What else is Vegas for, anyway?

The walk back through the casino is stranger now, considering how far they've come. Theo knows what Harry tastes like now, has felt Harry pressed up against him, and that makes all of the difference. Some of the difference. The world is different, for whatever reason, even though it looks and smells the same, hazy with that distant sensation of smoke.

Every step Theo takes is something of a choice. Should he stop here, kiss Harry here? The elevator door closes. How about now? Pressed up against the reflective surfaces? If he shoved hard enough Harry might growl his opposition, hiss in pain, and maybe it would make Theo smile a little, give him a reason to make it up to Harry later. The elevator lands at his floor, dings, and Theo realizes he missed it. Missed his chance. Here, then? Up against the wall? He could slide his hand down Harry's jeans and coax him into something; something he hasn't decided yet, but something. No, not here, he misses it again, dips his keycard into the lock and waits for another beep to tell him that time is passing, time is slipping away from him, soon the door will be open and he'll be alone with Harry, and then what? What does he want, what does he want? Has he decided? He walks into the room and Harry's next to him and he stares at the brass reflective surfaces at the bar, the lights from the skyline outside. He could kiss Harry now, surely. It's private, isn't it? Here, in this horrible suite, he could take Harry's clothes off, could drag him down onto the retro floors and—and—

Harry takes one of Theo's shaking hands and brushes his lips against his palm, closing his fingers around it.

"Tell me something stupid," Harry says quietly, and Theo lets out a breath.

"I'm afraid," he says.

Harry steps closer. "Of?"

"You know how they say you die twice?" Theo exhales, and Harry nods. "Once when you stop breathing, and again when someone says your name for the last time. I'm afraid of the second death." He smiles half-heartedly. "I'm afraid I'll live a life so ordinary that once I die the first time, nobody ever says my name again."

"No," Harry counters, shaking his head, and Theo frowns, not having expected to be disagreed with on such an intimate point. "That's not what you're afraid of—you're afraid of living," he says, as Theo blinks. "Really living, I mean. A full life, you know, with love and shit. You're afraid you'll live an empty life, or that nobody would love you enough to miss you when you're gone. But if you ask me," Harry continues mildly, taking another step forward, "I don't think you really have to worry about that."

Theo's throat is dry. "No?"

"No." Harry's very close now, his chest rising almost to where it could meet Theo's, if he inhaled sharply enough. "For one thing, you just have to die before Draco. He seems like he'll probably want to discuss you at length."

Theo wants to laugh, but can't.

"Is that it?" he asks, swallowing, and Harry reaches out, brushing his thumb across the exposed line
of Theo's chest; just beneath the button he's really rather glad now he didn't fasten.

"I'll never forget you," Harry says softly, "as long as I live. If you walk out of here right now and I go to work tomorrow and everything is exactly as it was, I promise, Theo, I will never stop saying your name. I'll repeat it to myself before I fall asleep," he murmurs, his lips brushing the side of Theo's mouth. "I'll say it in the mornings, the moment my eyes open." His fingers toy with the buckle of Theo's belt. "I'll say it when you're long gone from here, and I'm still thinking about what it felt like to kiss you." He presses his lips softly, once, to the bone of Theo's cheek. "I'll say it to myself every time I suspect this place is a hell'scape I'll never escape. I'll say your name, and remember how much I loved being tossed to the flames."

"Corny," Theo chokes out, his hands coiled in Harry's shirt. He can feel the lines that make up the sides of Harry's abdomen, can feel them shifting under his hands. "Was it even your turn to say something stupid?"

"Yes," Harry confirms, "and I'm not done, either."

Theo closes his eyes, aching. "What other stupid shit you got?"

"I think maybe I've been waiting my whole life just to touch you," Harry says, and it is stupid, and shitty, and Theo wants to die. To fucking freeze time and just die—here, now, in Harry's arms, burnt to ash by Harry's warmth, reduced to a puddle of nothing at Harry's feet.

"Touch me, then," Theo says, because he definitely has a death wish.

He wonders if he won't spontaneously collapse.

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3:04 a.m.

Theo's face is a fucking masterpiece, a collection of secrets. Along his cheekbone are three freckles, like Orion's belt, all in a line. Harry runs his fingers over them, careful, steady, and lets the pads of his fingers press against the shadows beneath Theo's eyes. There's a wild cacophony of color there, faint bits of purple and green, indicators of sleeplessness, swollen little bruises that mean something keeps Theo up at night, and Harry wants badly to know what it is. To know what he thinks about, to read him like a line in a book, like many lines, like the hidden messages between them. There's a faint scar on Theo's lip, evidence of stitches, and Harry's thumb brushes over it, presses down. At some point in Theo's life he bled there, sliced it open. Something hurt him and so Harry leans forward, kissing him with softness, with kindness, with reverential wonder. He kisses the scar on Theo's lip and pulls away when Theo tries to kiss back, leaving him to stagger forward and brace himself against Harry's hips.

Harry glances down, eyeing where Theo's hands have tightened on him, and nods his approval, turning his attention wordlessly to Theo's shirt. He slides a hand under the lapel, undoes one button at a time. One button, pauses, kisses Theo's chest, just where he can feel a pulse. Another button, another pause, a kiss to the center of Theo's sternum. A third button, brushes his tongue across what he knows, professionally speaking, is the xiphoid process, and slides his hands around Theo's ribs. He looks up, mouth still pressed to Theo's skin, and sees Theo's head falling back, his eyes closing. Another button. Another. He pulls the shirt out from Theo's trousers and lowers himself to his knees, kissing the flat of Theo's stomach. Theo is lean and muscular, slender but strong. Harry buries his thumbs in the lines of Theo's abs and smiles slightly as they flex under his touch, frozen along with Theo's breath.

Theo says nothing as Harry tugs at his belt, loosening it and letting it gape before sliding a thumb
over the obvious outline of Theo's cock, which is hard and sort of laughably pressing into Harry's chin. He kisses it through the fabric, licks it, lets his mouth rub against it until Theo is panting, his fingers shifting to tighten in Harry's hair.

Harry looks up, half-smiling, and Theo reaches down, running his thumb over Harry's mouth. Harry bites down lightly, kisses him, pushes his hand away. Not now, he communicates silently, his hand on Theo's zipper. Not now. I'm busy.

Theo is of course wearing impossibly soft boxer-briefs, the fabric such a silken cotton it feels almost a crime to stretch out the elastic, drawing it halfway over Theo's backside. Theo widens his stance, still half-holding his breath, and Harry wants to take his time, but wonders if he'll be able to. Doubts it, actually.

The moment Harry closes his lips around Theo, he can feel the earth beneath him shift. He can feel the world in motion, and he discovers it is quiet now, so quiet he only just hears the sound that leaves Theo's lips—"Harry," Theo whispers, in a way Harry is sure means his own name, at least, will never die.

He welcomes it, whatever comes next. He shifts his hand and rests it on the small of Theo's back, pulling him closer.

When Theo comes, Harry's hand remains in place, holding him steady.

Holding him.
Holding on.

4:15 a.m.

They're on the floor when Theo lifts Harry's shirt, slowly kissing the span of his torso. He's athletic, more so than Theo, and he's littered with old scars, like a museum of trauma. Theo firmly believes among his very few convictions that it is only possible to understand a work of art when it's been looked at, intensely, for thirty entire seconds, and so he takes his time, absorbing each little or not-so-little marking; as if he might have sat on some velvet bench in front of each one, having paid a gratuitous sum just for a ticket to view them.

Harry is art, and a specific kind of art. The kind for which imitation has no value. Some works are better in person, and this is something Theo has the privilege of knowing. Klimt is one of those. Harry is like a Klimt; like The Kiss, which is itself like witnessing splendor. Harry flashes gold in the light, and like the painting, touching him is somehow both religious and pornographic. Theo's touch, aptly, is reverential and primal all at once.

"You're a pretender, aren't you," Harry murmurs, his fingers toying with Theo's hair. "You're a mystery I'd like to solve."

"What am I pretending to be?" Theo asks neutrally, shifting to one side and sliding his hand under Harry's waistband. "Not straight, clearly," he says with a breathy laugh, curling his hand around Harry's cock and delighting in Harry's immediate stuttered inhale.

"Just—something," Harry says, exhaling, as Theo strokes him under his jeans. "I don't—I don't know. You just—" His hips shift under Theo's hand and he leans forward, pulling Theo's mouth to his. "You're not what they think you are," he exhales rapidly into Theo's mouth, and then kisses him until he gasps again, responding to Theo's touch.
"And what do you think I am?" Theo asks, not pulling away. He kisses Harry roughly, enjoying the way Harry's breath falls short. He increases the speed of his hand, too, part of him wanting to laugh at the way this is so juvenile, so hurry up before someone sees, but pushes Harry backwards when he tries to move. He's going to make Harry come like this, flat on his back and powerless, so that Theo can be sure he's capable of bringing Harry to literal, undeniable ecstasy with nothing but his touch.

Harry pants into his mouth, writhing underneath him. "I don't know," he says, digging his nails into the back of Theo's neck, "but I think—I think it, would take a—" He chokes slightly, mouth falling open. "Alifetimetofindout," he finishes rapidly, and then finishes, coming on Theo's hand as Theo leans forward, catching the words on his tongue.

Harry didn't ask what he was, but Theo tells him anyway.

"You're a new moon," Theo says. "You're day one, the first step. You're the toe in the water."

"Just a toe?" Harry asks, his breath slowing gradually as Theo slides his hand out from under his jeans.

"Take off your clothes," Theo advises, and then he adds, because it cannot be avoided, "and you're a fucking cannonball."

5:34 a.m.

The sky starts to go a little pale sometime between moving to Theo's bedroom and hearing Draco enter the suite. Time, it seemed, had flown; it wouldn't have occurred to Harry that it was late (or early, as the case may be) if he hadn't seen the sky changing and proceeded to squint at the clock, trying to make out the shapes of the numbers.

"What time is it?" he asks, reaching for his glasses on Theo's nightstand, but Theo grabs his hand, rolling over him instead.

"Does it matter?" Theo asks, and in answer, Harry shrugs, permits Theo's kiss, and points to the window.

"Seems like maybe we've been up all night," Harry remarks, and Theo frowns.

"Huh," he says, glancing at the clock. "Yeah. I guess so."

"Weird," Harry says. "I've never actually done that before."

"Neither have I," Theo remarks, and falls onto his back. "Huh," he says again, "and I guess I have to drive four hours through the desert today, don't I?"

That information slams into Harry's chest like an anvil.

"Guess so," he says, and strongly wishes he had his glasses on. He wants to know for sure whether there is any hesitation on Theo's face at the thought, or whether that's only his imagination. He wants to count the three freckles by Theo's eye, which he can't see like this. He can see barely anything, though he can count all the places he and Theo are touching, and it isn't nearly enough.

Harry rolls over Theo this time, pulling the duvet with him.

"You should sleep," he says. "And hydrate."
"Or—and hear me out—I could just die in the desert," Theo suggests as an alternative, holding Harry closer, "which would save me the cost of pills."

Suddenly, despite the obvious (i.e., that Harry met Theo less than twenty-four hours ago, and knows nothing else about him other than the fact that he's a too-rich not-an-asshole with a death wish), Harry finds that he can no longer bear the joke.

"How about water instead," Harry advises.

"What if I promise to leave all my earthly possessions to you?" Theo asks, and Harry buries his face in Theo's chest, shaking his head.

"Go to sleep," he says in answer. "Please."

Beneath his lips, Harry can feel Theo's heart beating, steady and comforting and sure.

"Okay," Theo says, and adds, "but only because you said to, and not because I want to."

Harry closes his eyes gratefully as Theo taps an unidentifiable rhythm into his shoulder, beating out something of a melody until it slows, and then gradually stills.

"This hotel isn't so bad," Theo says, just as the sun rises fully in the sky. "Nice pillows."

Harry doesn't answer.

Harry falls asleep in Theo's arms.

11:48 a.m.

There's a loud banging on the door that jolts Theo awake. He blinks, unable to place himself for a moment until Harry groggily raises his head, squinting questioningly at Theo.

"Theo, I've been calling you for almost an hour," Draco growls through the door. "Check-out is in less than fifteen minutes. We have to go."

"Oh, shit," Theo says, glancing at the clock, and Harry reaches over, clumsily placing his glasses on his face. "Yeah, I'll, um—just a minute," he shouts back to Draco. "I'll be right there."

"You'd better," Draco says grumpily, and then Theo catches the sound of him walking away.

"I have work in an hour," Harry sighs, shaking his head and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Though, in fairness, baking in the sun sounds like precisely what I deserve for my misdeeds."

Harry rises to his feet, looking around for his boxers, and Theo sits upright to watch him as he sorts through the pillows on the floor, pausing every now and then to press a steadying hand to his temple. "Jesus," Harry exhales, muttering to himself as he pauses, his entire body centered in the doorway, "I'm getting old."

But Harry isn't old, of course. Not in the slightest. Theo, watching him, feels positively ancient. He feels as if he dragged his own body up from a tomb and is waiting to climb back into it. He watches Harry move,catalogues the muscles of his arms and legs and all the places Theo has kissed all night (all morning). He thinks about the drive back home, the inevitable stop for hangover gyros, the likelihood that Draco will fall asleep having put on some shimmering alternative band with a monosyllabic name, and finds all of it suddenly so oppressively mundane it would be as good as dying, or would at least be like a burial of some kind. The burying of
something in himself he's only just awoken.

"Harry," Theo says, and Harry looks over his shoulder, waiting.

Theo holds up a finger for pause and then leans over, picking up the phone.

"Hi. Yeah, I need a late checkout." He listens as the front desk tells him about the extra charge.
"Yeah, that's fine, it's just—I'm going to be late." He glances at Harry, whose mouth twitches up with surprise. "Fuck it," Theo says, covering the phone's mouthpiece and shrugging, "I'm going to be late."

Harry, who has only just found his boxers, crawls across the bed and kisses him, and around the effort of kissing back Theo mumbles his assent into the phone.

"Yes. Yeah. Okay." He struggles to replace the phone in the receiver, letting Harry shove him back on the bed just before he turns his cell phone on. "Hope you can spare an hour," Theo says, and Harry holds on tighter for a moment; holds on, and doesn't let go.

"Yeah," Harry says, and it's more than enough.

Theo knows he will never be this young, or this in love, or this terribly, unbearably wanting again, and he knows he can't fucking waste it. Because this fucking second, this very moment is fleeting.

It's rare, and it won't come around again.

"NOTT," Draco bellows. "Did you just text me that we're staying another hour?"

"You must have a death wish," Harry remarks, glancing over his shoulder at the door, but Theo merely kisses him again.

"Yeah," Theo says, ignoring Draco's voice and pulling Harry close. "Yeah. I definitely do."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Full disclosure, I wrote the first part of this one shot while I was still a little drunk from a poolside piña colada. Anyway, future things: How to Win Friends and Influence People is ending with a final chapter + epilogue this week, which means a new Dramione WIP is starting! The expansion of Paradox (chapter 66, though no need to re-read, as the WIP will include material from the oneshot) will begin next week. In this fic, I have three new stories coming shortly-ish: a supernatural Tomione, a space Dramione, and a Highlander Jily, most likely in that order. Thank you for reading!
The Commoner's Guide to Bedding a Royal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Commoner's Guide to Bedding a Royal

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Muggle AU

Rating: M

Summary: Objectively speaking, Hermione Granger knows that Britain has a monarchy, and that Prince Draco (the grandson of the current King of England) is probably floating around somewhere living his royal life in total unrelation to hers. Contrary to popular belief, she doesn't actually pay much attention to celebrities; least of all foreign princes. So, when she happens to be placed in his dorm at Hogwarts University during her semester abroad, she doesn't really expect to be Prince Draco's friend—which is probably best, as 'friend' isn't really what either of them have in mind.

May 19, 2018

Draco and Hermione: A Royal Love Story
By Rita Skeeter

While many of us here in Britain have been captivated by the blossoming romance between His Royal Highness Prince Draco of Wales and his American sweetheart, Miss Hermione Jean Granger, very few are privileged to know the true story about how the young couple met. A fairy tale from the very beginning, it was love at first sight when Draco took notice of Hermione, the daughter of hardworking American parents eager to give their only child the education they had both been denied by curses of circumstance. At the time, Hermione had risen to the top of her class at Stanford University in sun-kissed, tropical California, and was granted acceptance as a foreign exchange student to Hogwarts University. Needless to say, the effervescently pretty Hermione, along with several would-be hopefuls who'd learned of Prince Draco's enrollment, was lucky enough to come across the dashing young royal in her classes — though her academics were, of course, her primary concern.

Both fastidious, intensely dedicated students, Draco first caught sight of Hermione's luxurious silken curls in their English Literature class at Hogwarts, and from there, a whirlwind courtship between two intellectual equals began. It is said by their peers that Draco was enamored with Hermione from the start, and as anyone close to him would be quick to confess, the prince has known with absolute certainty from the moment he laid eyes upon Hermione that she was meant to be his wife, his confidante, and ultimately, his Queen.

Stop. Stop reading. This is absolute rubbish. Yes, I said rubbish, even though I'm an American and apparently a peasant, too (my parents are dentists, and certainly not 'cursed by circumstance,' but sure). Two months ago Rita Skeeter was openly calling me 'the frizzy colonial upstart,' and now this ABOMINABLE TROSS has been released? Let me tell you, it was hardly the fairy tale she claims. It was only a fairy tale in that I did occasionally want to saw off my own effervescent toes.

In reality, the British press has been absolutely ruthless. Even Draco, despite his signature capacity
for appearing collected, has been known to have a cold sweat or two over what his father (yes, that would be HRH Lucius, Prince of Wales, Earl of Chester, Duke of Cornwall, Duke of Rothesay, Earl of Carrick, Baron of Renfrew, Lord of the Isles and Prince and Great Steward of Scotland, in case you were wondering) calls a 'truly abysmal union.' Absolute certainty? What a joke. What an absolute forking joke. What utter motherboarding nonsense. I don't think Draco was ever really certain; not even when he was down on one knee, struggling beneath a diamond the size of New Zealand while I shouted the last of my once-beloved profanities. Was he certain he loved me, at least? Oh yes, definitely, I trust that. I trust that absolutely, or else I would have gone positively flanking insane by now. But was he ever certain that his country would accept me? That's another matter altogether, which is what makes this whole Rita Skeeter book bollocks to the highest degree of bollockery.

Do you want the real story? Maybe you don't, as it's a bit of a mess, despite what Rita so feverishly insists. I'm a bit of a mess, actually, and frankly so is Draco (no matter what the newspapers would have you believe), but considering I'm sitting here in a haute couture wedding dress staring down the barrel of a truly earth-shattering scandal, I'm sort of in the mood for truth; so maybe you, like me, have no choice in the matter. The thing is, once upon a time, I fell deeply, inescapably (tragically) in love with a man and subsequently had to learn how to be the consort of a prince, which mostly meant learning that truth may only out on occasions less frequent than bank holidays. But for once in my gourd-drammed life, I want to say something real—so here's what really happened, in all its terrible, awkward, humiliating glory.

Here's how I, the Colonial Upstart, accidentally bagged myself the most eligible man in Britain.

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August 30, 2010
Hogwarts University

Well, there was no escaping it. Hogwarts was a castle. A castle with many stairs, and Hermione, a girl with many suitcases, was encountering the first of her very many problems. She eyed the staircase, frowning, before glancing down at her bags, wondering if it would be possible to carry one of them on her back. Apparently there wasn't anyone around to help; hazards of arriving before term officially started, she lamented internally.

"Excuse me," came a voice behind her. "Are you by chance trying to grow an extra arm?"

She turned, startled, to find a tall young man standing there, his lips curled up in something of an arrogant (albeit playful) smirk. He was dressed somewhat formally (more formally than anyone at Stanford had ever dressed, aside from the tech fanboys who lived in Sperry boat shoes and those slightly-too-short coral-colored shorts) and looking at her with amusement. His pale blond hair was swept off to the side, a hint of strands falling across his forehead as if he'd just popped in from some sort of high-class sport on horses, and he was cute. Very cute.

Hermione, on the other hand, was very not, given that the messy bun piled atop her head was much more a show of convenience than fashion. Luckily, she was also very distracted, and therefore unable to focus on how cute or not-cute either of them happened to be.

"Is that an option?" Hermione asked, frowning slightly at her bags. "I'm beginning to think I miscalculated. I sort of just got out of the cab," she explained, gesturing vacantly over her shoulder, "and didn't really think to bribe the driver into helping."

"Well, for future reference, extortion always works," remarked the blond, his accent as airy and crisp as the unseasonable breeze outside. "Though we do consider ourselves a country of gentlemen. Perhaps you might have heard?"
"You're the first I've met," Hermione replied. "Countrymen, I mean," she amended, waving a hand around the empty courtyard, "not gentlemen."

His smirk curved up slightly. "Is that an accusation?"

"Gentlemen do carry bags, don't they?" she prompted, and he chuckled, sparing her a genial shrug.

"Well, I suppose I have something to prove, then," he determined, hoisting her duffel bag over his shoulder and taking the larger of her suitcases, "on behalf of my country, that is. I'm Draco, by the way," he added, shoving the bag over to extend his right hand. "And you must be some sort of foreign succubus, seeing how you've talked me into manual labor. You're the exchange student, I take it?"

"Hermione," she confirmed, giving his hand a quick pulse of pressure before picking up the last of her suitcases, "and yes. I just got off a plane, actually—though I can't imagine what could be giving me away," she remarked drily, wondering if she shouldn't have checked for sweat stains. The Stanford t-shirt she'd opted to wear on the plane wasn't exactly flattering so much as it was… old. And vaguely ill-fitted. She gave herself a testing sniff as discreetly as possible before turning her attention back to him.

"Hold on, isn't Draco the prince's name?" she asked, abruptly registering a hazy sense of recognition. She fuzzily considered she might have seen the name plastered on a tabloid or two while standing in line for groceries, though she was fairly confident the British prince was older. He certainly looked solemnly regal in all the pictures she'd seen. "Coincidence or namesake?"

"I believe it was a very popular choice the year I was born," Draco remarked, gesturing ahead as a series of stairs branched off in several different directions. "So, which dorm?"

"Um—" She glanced down at the informational packet in her hand. "Slytherin?"

"Ah, excellent," Draco said, beckoning her ahead. "The dorms are down under the lake. I take it you're filling Tracey Davis' spot, then?"

"Yes," Hermione confirmed with a frown, "I think."

"Well, you'll like your roommate," Draco assured her. "Daph's great. The good kind of posh," he added as an afterthought.

"The good kind?" Hermione echoed uncertainly.

"Yes. Pansy is, of course, the bad kind. She's a very dear friend," he informed her, "and Blaise is much, much worse. He's also disastrously charming, so do be careful."

"Ah," Hermione said, momentarily dizzied. "Who else should I know about?"

"Well, there's Theo," Draco supplied thoughtfully, guiding her through the winding old corridors of the castle. "He's one of those old-money-nobility types. We all have a bit of a wager going as to whether he and Daphne will kill each other or get married."

"Sometimes they're not mutually exclusive options," Hermione remarked, following as he made his way to a set of enormous iron doors.

"Well, I'll put you down for both, then," Draco said with a cheeky grin, pausing to pull a set of keys out of his pocket. "Sorry," he said, shuffling through a set of them, "security's a bit tight down here."
"I see that," Hermione commented, as he finally seemed to jimmy the old door open, gesturing her inside. "Any particular reason?"

"Oh, none, I'm sure," Draco replied casually, pointing up a set of winding stairs. "Yours and Daph's room is up there. People sometimes study here," he explained, gesturing to the still-empty seating, which was about what Hermione had expected. The other students would be arriving en masse in approximately two days, according to the administrative guide at Hogwarts; Hermione, however, had wanted to acclimate in advance. "More often the library, but this can be nice on occasion. Convenient, at least."

"I take it you're in this dorm too?" Hermione asked, following him as he briskly took to the stairs. The common room, as it appeared to be, was lit by a large, warm fire, and provided a strange, almost eerie view of the lake. "I suppose I should have asked—"

"Yes," Draco said. "It's the only one successfully bulletproof, I think."

"Bulletproof?" Hermione echoed. "Are you some sort of secret agent, then?"

He laughed. "Only a little," he assured her, and paused beside a door, knocking twice. "Daphne," he called, sparing Hermione another small grin, "I have a parcel for you."

The door swung open, revealing a breathless girl dressed in perfectly-fitted jeans and a worn Hogwarts t-shirt, her long auburn hair pulled back in a high ponytail that swung down over her shoulders.

"Is she here? Is she—oh good," the girl apparently called Daphne exhaled, looking over Hermione with glowing approval. "Look at you, you're real! And already putting the crown to work," she joked to Draco as Hermione paused, startled. "And to think, we're considered the imperialists—"

"Wait a minute," Hermione said, blinking with confusion at the reference. It seemed jet lag had vastly limited her cognitive skills. "You're actually… the Draco?"

"Oh balls, she doesn't even know," Daphne sighed happily to no one in particular, ostensibly delighted. "You're a real live person, aren't you?" she asked Hermione again, tugging her inside before glancing over her shoulder. "Draco, set those down, you look positively ridiculous. Was there no one else to help with the bags?"

"I haven't a clue, Lady Daphne," Draco replied grandly, letting Hermione's duffel bag slide gracefully from his shoulder to the floor before setting the suitcase down beside it, "but it's certainly been an honor serving as ambassador on behalf of my country, Miss…?"

It took a moment before Hermione realized he (him, actual Prince Draco, whom she probably should have recognized but didn't, because who ever expects the actual prince to be wandering around?) was waiting for an answer.

"Oh, um. Granger," she supplied, wondering now if she was supposed to have curtsied. "And you, uh. Prince, um—"

"Draco will be fine," he assured her, looking mischievously pleased. "And don't bother about gratuity. Just be sure to leave a little extra on your taxes," he suggested, "or I'll have to charge you with treason, and frankly, who has the time?"

"He's joking," Daphne assured Hermione, rolling her eyes at Draco. "Still coming out for drinks with us this evening, Your Royal Highness?"
"Have an engagement with the Prince of Darkness, actually," Draco replied coolly, as Daphne made a sympathetic face, "along with your sister, who's been ringing me nonstop about, I don't know. Dresses, I suppose, or possibly hats—"

"Ah, I'd forgotten about that dinner," Daphne said, deflating slightly. "I suppose that means Theo and Harry are out too, aren't they? I'd hoped they'd come meet Hermione tonight," she lamented, flashing Hermione a look of apology, "but I suppose duty calls—"

"Unfortunately duty not only calls, but veritably drags," Draco lamented, before suggesting hopefully, "Tomorrow night? Before term starts?"

"Oh, of course," Daphne confirmed, warm again. "And I can ring my sister for you, if you want," she offered, as Draco made a face of obvious relief, "but do tell Theo to wear a better jacket this time, would you?"

To that, Draco scoffed. "You tell Theo to wear a jacket—"

"He doesn't listen to me!"

"He only listens to you—"

"Actually, you know who he'll listen to is—"

"—Pansy," they said in unison, and then gave gloriously dazzling peals of laughter, both clearly in on a joke Hermione had yet to understand.

"She'd scare the knickers off anyone," Daphne explained to Hermione, who abruptly realized she'd been staring between them with something equal parts curiosity and bemusement. "You'll meet her later. Though, try not to look her in the eyes when you do."

"Yes, you'll almost certainly turn to stone," Draco said, and then offered her a nod. "Until next time, Miss Granger—"

"Oh right, um, bye…" Hermione trailed off, uncertain what to call him, and he laughed again, consummately tickled.

"Draco," he reminded her. "Just Draco, unless we're at a ribbon cerem- ah, hold on, seems it's too late for you to handle this for me, Daph," he mused to her, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket and holding it to his ear. "Yes, hello, you've reached Draco Wales," he said into it, sparing Hermione a wink and Daphne a wave before ducking out of their door frame. "Astoria, I'm joking. Half the job is elaborate theatrics, you know this—"

"Well," Daphne said, letting the door fall shut in Draco's absence and turning to Hermione with a smile. "I see you've met the future King of England, then?"

"Does he really just—wander around like that?" Hermione asked, slightly dazed, and Daphne shook her head.

"No, almost never, actually, but term hasn't officially started, so…" She trailed off with a shrug before permitting a long exhale, offering Hermione a brilliant, lovely smile. "I have to say, it's such a pleasure to meet you."

"Oh, and you," Hermione said, recalling with a start just how apprehensive she'd been about her roommate up until minutes before she'd walked in. The benefit of having accidentally bullied the nation's heir into carrying her bags was that she'd temporarily abandoned her nerves, but now she
was here, finally, tucked into an old dorm room with a girl she'd just met and hoped to live harmoniously with for at least the next four months. "It was so nice of you to send me a letter before term started—"

"Ah, I was worried you'd find it dreadfully formal, but it's my breeding, I'm afraid," Daphne told her, ushering her further inside the room and gesturing to the fixtures. "Desk, bed, vacant floorspace for aerobics and interpretive dance," she joked, giving Hermione the grand tour. "My grandfather would absolutely have a heart attack if he knew the positively shameful plebeianism I'm living in," she added with a light-hearted shrug, "but I suppose that's the benefit of him being dead."

"Are you—" Hermione hesitated. "Um. Nobility also?"

"Only barely," Daphne said with a laugh, "though it's enough for my sister to formally date Draco with Prince Lucifer's approval, it seems. Of course, who knows how long that'll last—"

"Lucifer?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, sorry, bit of a slip on my part," Daphne sighed, scolding herself. "Prince Lucius, though Draco and Harry both call him—well, you heard, I hardly have to repeat it—"

"Harry?" Hermione echoed. "As in—"

"Henry, Duke of… whatever he's duke of these days," Daphne said, frowning. "Grimmauld now? I think? Everyone calls him Prince Harry, which is of course not remotely accurate, but it helps Draco to not have all the focus from the press, so—ah, I'm rambling," she lamented, cutting herself off with a shake of her head. "Apologies, you must be tired. Are you tired? I can show you around the school," she offered, and then frowned. "Unless you'd prefer to rest, in which case I could rustle up some tea? Unless you don't drink tea—"

"Daphne," Hermione exhaled, half-laughing. "I'm fine. A tour would be great," she added, as Daphne's expression lit up with pleasure. "It's really nice of you to offer."

"Tracey and I weren't particularly friends," Daphne explained tentatively. "But I suppose I'm quite used to having a girlfriend around, given my growing up with a sister, so…" She trailed off. "I'm rather hoping to have another go at it. If you're up for it, that is."

Hermione wished she could express the degree of relief she felt at this, a highly vulnerable offering from a pretty rich girl who could have so easily snubbed her. Daphne would have made the most popular girls at Carondelet look like absolute trolls, and yet she was far kinder than any of the girls Hermione had gone to high school with.

"I'm an only child, personally, and I always thought it would be fun to have a sister," Hermione assured her. "Besides, my last roommate wasn't much to compete with. Actually, she stole my underwear, so—"

"You're joking," Daphne said, looking horrified. "She thieved your knickers?"

"She thieved my knickers," Hermione confirmed solemnly. "In fairness, it was for a Take Back the Night rally, but still—"

"Well, I don't know why I'm trying so hard, then," Daphne noted, looking smugly pleased. "At the very least, I can confirm I possess my own knickers and have no particular desperation for yours."

"So it's settled, then," Hermione said, holding out a hand and forgetting all about the prince who'd
carried her luggage. "Friends?"

Daphne accepted with a luminous smile. "Friends."

The Hog's Head wasn't quite as nice as the Three Broomsticks, Daphne explained, but it was at least quiet enough that nobody was going to have a fuss about all of them being there. Draco wouldn't be there, she'd reminded Hermione, but photographers would still try. It was apparently not a particularly well-kept secret who the prince's inner circle was.

"He grew up with Pansy," Daphne clarified as they each ordered a pint of richly brown beer Hermione was sure would be much too thick to go down easy, "and Harry, obviously, and Theo, but—ah, rats," she sighed, the beer slopping over the glass and onto her wrist. "Honestly, one of these days my coordination will improve—anyway, what was I blathering on about?"

"Theo," Hermione supplied, and a voice behind her chuckled.

"Well, I do love to know you're talking about me, Greengrass," remarked a lanky dark-haired man, his mouth quirking up in something of a half-smile. He offered Daphne a wink in greeting, and Hermione abruptly remembered the wager Draco had so carelessly mentioned to her. "Discussing my unconventional attractiveness, I take it? Perhaps my ebullient charm?"

"More like your incestuous family tree," Daphne replied, turning to roll her eyes. "Hermione, this is Theodore Nott. Theodore, Hermione Granger."

"Ah, the new Tracey Davis," Theo said as Hermione gave his proffered hand a perfunctory shake. "And also, never call me Theodore. That's my father's name, as Greengrass here knows perfectly well. She lives to torment me," he remarked, flashing Hermione a conspiratorial grin.

"It's not my primary vocation," Daphne assured Hermione, "but really, everyone should have a hobby. Even though using your given name is hardly a torment," she informed Theo, with a particularly challenging glare.

Theo, meanwhile, took Daphne's beer out of her hand, permitting himself a long, obnoxious sip before replacing it. "I meant that dress you're wearing," he remarked quietly, and though Hermione caught a momentary degree of widening from Daphne's eyes, it was quickly obscured by the entrance of another, much noisier body to their right.

"Ah, is this the new Tracey Davis?" asked a spectacularly attractive dark-skinned young man, whose overall appearance was hindered slightly by a v-neck cut nearly below his pectorals. "I thought you were coming from California," he remarked with a bemused frown, as Daphne cleared her throat, shoving her beer into Theo's chest and nudging him away.

"Just have that, Nott, it's got your germs on it now—and Blaise, you mustn't be such a glorious idiot," she scolded him firmly. "Why wouldn't she be from California?"

"Well, shouldn't she be, I don't know—more tan? Or more blonde?" Blaise asked irreverently, before turning back to Hermione. "I don't suppose you had class on the beach, did you?"

"I go to Stanford," Hermione said, stifling a laugh. "It's not exactly beachy."

"So does that mean you don't surf to school?" Blaise asked, looking disappointed, and Hermione was about to open her mouth to inform him that first of all, surfing wasn't a mode of transportation, and second of all, what did she just say, when yet another person joined them—or was about to join them, though Daphne pulled her aside in warning first.
"That's Pansy," Daphne explained, gesturing to a slender young women with one of those elegant long bobs Hermione would never be able to pull off, the sharp raven tips of her hair slicing against the defined line of her clavicle. "She's got about six names and none of them are worth hearing all in a row, but suffice it to say—"

"She's about one or two major flu epidemics away from the throne," Theo supplied, "and if you ask me, she's in desperate need of coitus."

"I—sorry, what?" Hermione asked, as Daphne gave Theo an alarmingly ferocious glare of disapproval.

"She's really not so bad when you get to know her," Daphne clarified hurriedly. "The problem is just that she, um—"

"Detests when people are talking about me behind my back," Pansy inserted coolly, joining them with something of a disinterested scowl. "You're new, then," she noted with a sniff, acknowledging the air around Hermione before glancing away at nothing.

"The word Daphne was looking for was 'bitch,'" Theo whispered-declared to Hermione, and Pansy rounded on him, obviously less than amused.

"Theodore," she said, and he instantly blanched. "Did you wear the jacket?"

From Blaise: "Yes. Didn't you see the pictures?"

From Theo: "For the record, I only wore it because it complimented my singular muscularity."

From Daphne: a wordless scoff, though Hermione caught her looking.

From Pansy again, impatiently: "You're going to have to learn to follow instructions, Nott."

From an indignant Theo: "Why? I'm not the one trying to bed a prince—"

Pansy, irritably: "Good thing, too, because at this rate, you certainly wouldn't succeed."

Blaise, delighted: "Another crushing blow from Lady Parkinson! What is that, twenty points?"

Theo, pouting: "I thought this was about my jacket, not my flaws as a human."

Pansy: "It's about both. And anyway, you're not the Daily Prophet, Theodore, don't make this about Astoria—"

"They're talking about my sister now, unfortunately," Daphne whispered to Hermione, who was very much amusing herself watching Pansy and Theo have something of a highly British standoff, neither quite challenging the other. "Tonight was Astoria's second public event as Draco's, um. Female friend," she murmured, and this time, it was Theo who scoffed.

"Ridiculous, the whole thing," Theo informed Hermione. "The whole 'relationship' is a sham. I mean we all know Prince Lucif—"

"Don't," warned Pansy, tartly.

"His Royal Highness, the Prince of Darkness," Theo amended irreverently, "is practically falling over himself with approval. He tried to force you on Draco when he first started here," he reminded Daphne, pointedly taking a sip of his beer as her gaze cut guiltily to Hermione's.
"And here you made it sound like you were hardly aristocratic at all," Hermione commented playfully, sipping at her own beer. It wasn't quite as bad as she expected, but more importantly, she was perfectly able to drink it despite not being twenty-one for the next three weeks. That, at least, tasted satisfying.

"Well, I certainly have no interest in being with a prince," Daphne said firmly. "Besides, Draco and I didn't even meet until university, so it's hardly like I'm in with the rest of you," she pointed out, gesturing to the others as they exchanged clannish grins (except for Pansy, who made more of a pursed and-don't-I-know-it face).

"How about being with someone prince-adjacent, then, Daph?" Blaise asked her, nudging Theo with a wink.

"Theo's not remotely prince-adjacent," Pansy scoffed, coming to Daphne's rescue. "At least four dozen people would have to die before he came anywhere near the crown—"

"Well, I'm not a coward, if that's what you're saying," Theo assured her.


Theo shrugged. "People have really gone soft on treason these days," he remarked, taking another sip of his (her) beer. "If I can't pluck the crown up from a battlefield, what's even the point of having it?"

"My opinion exactly," came another voice. "Of course, I suppose that's due to being the spare."

"You're hardly the spare," Pansy said, rolling her eyes, though even she managed to look a little affectionate as the latest member of their little circle joined in, giving his ruffled black hair a shove from his face. "And what are you doing back so early? One of these days you'll have to put the incessant knavery to bed—"

"Along with the rest of Britain," Theo remarked, grinning.

"Ah, that's ten for Nott," Blaise said, scribbling it an imaginary notepad as the person Hermione suddenly realized from her minimal tabloid exposure was Prince Harry (in reality only a duke, as Daphne had mentioned, though in general Hermione was finding herself a bit swamped with ambiguous British succession lines) shifted to throw an arm around Pansy's shoulder, smacking a loud kiss against her forehead.

"Hello, Lady MacBeth," he told her, sparing her a roguish grin. "Besmirching my good name already?"

"Much as I love that extremely flattering comparison," Pansy said drily, "never call me that again. As for your good name, I'm besmirching nothing you haven't irreversibly blackened," she corrected, sliding out from under his arm and giving him a nudge in the ribs. "I'm merely commenting you're supposed to be at a state dinner."

"They don't need me," Harry said. "Besides, I don't see you asking Theo why he's here—"

"You both left Draco alone with that dreadful bore?" Pansy realized, appalled.

From Daphne: "That 'dreadful bore' is my sister, Pans."

From Theo and Blaise: "She knows."
"Draco's fine," Harry assured Pansy. "He and the Prince of Darkness were getting along swimmingly when I left. I believe they successfully exchanged one or two words? One of which may have even been a pleasantry."

"But was he doing the thing?" Pansy prompted apprehensively. "You know. The smile thing?"

From Theo: "The thing where his smile doesn't reach his eyes?"

From Blaise: "Where it looks like his soul has evacuated his body?"

Theo again: "A bit like he's died somewhere on the inside?"

"Yes, that," Pansy said.

"Oh, definitely," Harry confirmed, nodding. "Very much so to all of the above."

"Right, yes, he's miserable," Theo contributed, "but it's not as if the press is going to know that, which is what I assumed your main concern was."

From Pansy, at a growl: "You're all impossible."

From Blaise, Theo, and Harry, in spirited unison: "We know."

"Oh," Harry said, his gaze suddenly landing on Hermione's with a jolt. "Well, hello—didn't see you there."

"She's not a topiary, Harry," Daphne said.

"Well, maybe if she were, he might have noticed her sooner," Theo suggested, giving Daphne another nudge. "Harry loves a good topiary."

"Shut up," Daphne sighed.

"I'm Hermione," supplied Hermione, as Harry slipped from Pansy's side to stand next to her at the bar. "I'm the new Tracey Davis."

"Who?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Oh, Harry's not in Slytherin," Daphne explained to Hermione, reaching over to give Harry's cheek an affectionate pat in greeting. "He just pops by to visit when he feels like antagonizing Draco."

"Which I often do," Harry added with a grin. "Though I suppose now I can pop by to antagonize you as well," he commented, slipping almost effortlessly into a low tone of flirtation as he spared her a slow, sidelong glance. "Lucky me."

All at once, Hermione realized why it was Harry's face she recognized from the tabloids. _He_ was the one always romancing some actress or model or another, and while she might have otherwise been flattered by the attention of an obviously handsome man, part of her withered a little at the idea that he might have selected her, the naive little American girl, as yet another notch on his bedpost.

Luckily, to Hermione's immense relief, Daphne smacked him in the arm with her clutch.

"Ouch," Harry said, with a radiantly childish scowl. "What's that for?"
"Leave the poor girl alone," Pansy cut in, her expression souring. "The last thing she needs is to be forcefully ushered out of your disease-ridden bedchambers."

Hermione, who wanted to point out that was hardly the trajectory of the evening, determined it not worth the effort as Pansy's gaze collided with hers, the sharpened arch of a single brow enough to caution her to silence. Something that was either disapproval or Chanel No. Five seemed to seep from every single one of Pansy's perfectly-sized and blemishless pores, leaving Hermione feeling more than a little bit inadequate.

"Ignore her," Daphne advised in Hermione's ear, pulling her towards the bar. "She's just outrageously protective of Draco and Harry—not that you can tell. She's sometimes very lovely, but—" She paused, considering it. "I'd say her personality is about a fifty-fifty split between natural venom and a very, very strange form of showing affection."

"Is she interested in…" Hermione paused. "Either of them?"

"Hm? No, no," Daphne said, half-laughing. "No, I don't think she relishes the idea of being thrown in the spotlight. Nor do I, truth be told," she admitted with a grimace. "My sister is another story, of course. Like Theo said, I don't think it'll last with Draco, but I suppose she's having fun for the time being."

"Where does Harry go to school, if not here?" Hermione asked, regretfully hazarding a glance at where he'd joined Blaise and Theo near the impromptu dance floor. To her dismay, he was watching her with a rather fox-like look of amusement, his messy hair giving him an unruly halo from the light refracting around his face.

"He doesn't," Daphne said. "He's in the army, actually, which is where Draco wanted to be as well, only…" She trailed off hesitantly. "Well, you can't really be too careful with the heir to the throne, can you? Whereas Harry's a cousin, who can really do whatever he likes."

"Seems he often does," Hermione remarked, and then struggled to hide an enormous yawn, covering her mouth with sudden, jolting exhaustion. "Yikes," she managed, feeling her eyes water. "I'm so sorry—"

"Nonsense, you must be tired," Daphne said at once, looking feverishly concerned in a way that nearly delivered Hermione to delirious laughter. "We can go immediately, of course. I suppose I forgot all about the jet lag—"

"Greengrass!" Theo called, toasting her from afar as he and Blaise made their way onto the dance floor. "Are you coming or what?"

"No, I'm—" Daphne gestured apologetically to Hermione. "We're just leaving—"

"NOOOOOOO," Blaise howled, as Theo flashed a set of mopey puppy-eyes at her. "MINUS TWENTY POINTS—"

"So sorry," Daphne sighed, angling Hermione towards the door despite being unable to resist a glance over her shoulder, unsuccessfully feigning disinterest. "It's just that we haven't seen each other all summer—but we'll see them tomorrow anyway," she reminded Hermione, forcing a casual reassurance, "so it's fine, really—"

"You stay," Hermione told her, struggling to withhold another vastly cavernous yawn. "Seriously, I'll be fine. I'll get some sleep tonight and try again tomorrow," she offered, as Daphne frowned hesitantly.
"Are you sure?" Daphne asked, concerned. "It's not a problem, really, I'll just tell them that—"

"No, stay," Hermione insisted, giving her hand a squeeze. "I'll be fine! The walk will do me some good, honestly. Have fun," she said, dodging both the curious glance from Harry and the unnerving stare from Pansy as she turned towards the door. "Seriously," she added with a laugh as Daphne's expression turned pained with conflict. "Breakfast tomorrow?"

At once, Daphne's face brightened. "Oh yes, defi-"

She broke off with a shriek as Blaise picked her up with an arm around her waist, gracelessly hauling her backwards. Satisfied, Hermione gave an exaggerated wave, shaking her head before turning to the door and hiding yet another oppressive yawn.

Hermione had only just finished fussing with the keys when she realized the yelling she thought she'd imagined in some sort of exhaustion-haze was both very real and very much coming from inside the Slytherin common room.

"—don't know what you want from me. You told me to bring her, so I brought her. That doesn't mean I'm interested in this going any further—"

"You need to be serious about your reputation, Draco," came a harsh male voice in reply. "With you holed up here at Hogwarts the press has nothing to do but speculate about what sort of wildly irresponsible decisions you're making—"

"And how is that my fault?" Draco's voice countered. "You're the one who told me I had to come here. Harry's already been in the military for almost three years! He's already an officer, and I'm—"

"You have a responsibility as my heir," returned what could only have been Prince Lucius' voice. "You cannot simply flit around turning your life into a spectacle for public consumption. The people want to see you in a committed relationship, with someone appropriate—"

"I'm twenty years old!" Draco shouted back. "What exactly does it prove about my capacity to rule by flashing Astoria Greengrass around like some sort of... of fancy cufflink—"

"She comes from a good family," Lucius cut in impatiently. "You're friends with the elder sister, are you not? How hard can this be?" When there was no answer, he pressed, "I had no idea being asked to stand beside a beautiful girl was such a dreadfully unpleasant chore for you, Draco—"

"I just want one thing in my life to be real," Draco begged his father, "and I certainly have no interest in getting married anytime soon! Look what happened to M—"

"Do not," Lucius said sharply, "bring her up right now."

Silence.

Hermione crept forward slowly, trying to ease her way into the room. Unfortunately, this did not work even remotely, as she stubbed her toe on one of the spindly table legs and abruptly doubled over, muttering a string of quiet obscenities under her breath.

Immediately, the two men snapped into place. In a matter of seconds, both had adopted identical expressions of neutral impassivity that could only have been the result of decades of practice. Hermione, however, having had no such lifetime of rehearsals, tried and failed to bite back a pained grimace, awkwardly attempting to straighten.
"So sorry," she offered, cheeks almost certainly flushed with equal parts ouch-throbbing-toe and yikes-this-is-awkward. "I, um—I'm so sorry, I was just heading to my room, and—"

"No need to apologize," said Lucius, in the sort of tone that suggested exactly the opposite. "Draco, you and I will discuss this later. I presume I don't need to ask you to keep this to yourself?"

It took a moment before Hermione realized he was talking to her. "What?"

"I'll need you to sign a non-disclosure agreement," Lucius began loftily when Draco stepped forward, shaking his head.

"Father, it's fine," he muttered, tone gruff with displeasure. "She's going to bed, not to run off and speak to the press."

At that, Lucius turned to his son, obviously irritated. "Draco. How many times must I tell you—"

"I won't say anything," Hermione cut in quickly. By the look on Lucius' face, she could see he was not often interrupted, and certainly wasn't pleased about it now. "Your son is my friend," she said, giving Draco what she hoped was a supportive glance, "and I have no interest in sharing the details of his personal life."

Rather than help the situation, however, she seemed to have conspicuously hindered it. Lucius' eyes narrowed, falling on hers with rigid opposition.

"Who are you?" he demanded accusingly.

She opened her mouth, but Draco spoke for her.

"This is her dorm, Father," Draco pointed out, "and we're the ones intruding. And seeing as Hermione's just arrived today, I imagine she's rather in a hurry to go to bed. We won't keep you any longer," he assured her, giving her an apologetic look as he added, in a tone of princely finality, "My father was just leaving."

At that, Lucius' eyes narrowed again, trapped by the necessity of anything resembling manners. He spared a final glower at his son before turning to exit, pausing briefly beside Hermione.

"If you breathe a word of this," he said, and didn't finish. She supposed he wasn't in the business of needing to complete his threats.

"I wouldn't do that to him," she replied simply, and then managed to collect herself enough to bow her head, realizing she was probably required to show some courtesy, even if she felt none.

Lucius made something of a noncommittal noise and strode out of the room, letting the door shut behind him.

The moment he was gone, Draco finally let out a breath, shaking his head.

"Well," Draco said. "I don't suppose I need to tell you that you just met Prince Lucius, do I?"

Hermione winced, and Draco fell into the sofa behind him with a sigh, leaning his head against the cushions. For a moment, she hesitated, wondering if there was something she should say, but when he didn't move, she opted to take a step toward the stairs, quietly making her way back to her room.

Draco's voice paused her. "You faced him rather gloriously, you know." She froze, and he gave a little hum of something like amusement to himself. "I expect he'll hold it against you for some
"I—" She hesitated. "I'm not sure whether an apology note would help the situation."

At that, Draco chuckled, though there wasn't much energy to speak of in the sound. Hermione waited, her hand still on the banister; suddenly, she couldn't quite remember how tired she was and simply stood frozen in place, uncertain what to do next.

He solved it for her. "Did you really not know who I was?"

She turned slowly, making her way to the sofa as Draco's eyes fluttered open, regarding her with something that looked to be equal parts frustration and jagged, cut-open misery.

"I promise," she said, "I really did not know who you were."

He nodded. She had a feeling there was more coming, so she settled herself on the coffee table opposite where he sat, figuring it wouldn't cost her too much to listen.

"You know, it's funny," Draco said, proving her right. "The last spontaneous thing I did was carry your luggage. Before that, it was the time I climbed up a trellis outside my mother's childhood home and broke my arm." He swallowed. "I was five."

Hermione bit her lip, waiting.

"I suppose it's incredibly selfish to complain," Draco continued, "as there are so very many lives harder than mine. And so many who envy my life, I'm sure. It seems a very stupid thing to feel so much resentment when I have so many privileges, and it makes it worse, really, that it's such a selfish problem to have," he admitted softly, glancing up at her. "It makes it hard to breathe sometimes, knowing that nothing I do comes without strings, or without responsibilities, or even with the benefit of my choice. In the end, everything I do is measured and premeditated and preapproved by my father or my advisors or my grandfather—and my god, I want to kiss you," he suddenly said, and she blinked, startled. "I want so badly to kiss you, I wanted to kiss you when I saw you this morning, only I can't, because even now I'm thinking to myself that I won't want to stop at a kiss, but I certainly can't go any further, because would that really be fair to you? Would it be fair to subject you to constant scrutiny and horrible invasions of privacy and can I even—could I even do it? My father would disapprove; my grandfather would certainly never allow it. You're an American, and you've only just arrived, and that's to say nothing of your feelings, which could be—"

He swallowed hard, coming to an abrupt, screeching halt. "Which could be," he exhaled slowly, "that I'm a conceited prick who just said all of that without even wondering whether you might have any inclination to kiss me, too."

Despite her captive breath, Hermione astoundingly managed to exhale.

Eventually.

After perhaps a minute.

Maybe less, if she were flattering herself.

Either way, she managed it.

"It would be a pretty bad time for a kiss," she eventually said, clinging to whatever bits of her sanity had not been swallowed up by transcontinental travel, or by what was unquestionably the
single strangest day of her life. "Considering you have some sort of girlfriend-type situation, don't you?"

He grimaced, baring his hands in his lap. "So it would seem."

"That, and you're upset with your father," Hermione noted slowly. "So, probably looking for a rebellion, I imagine?"

"A reasonable conclusion," Draco replied, shrugging.

"And," she finished, drawing her thumb carefully over her bottom lip, "we've only just met. We could hardly be friends if we kissed now," she told him. "Dreadfully awkward, don't you think?"

"That's true," he agreed, and this, unlike his other commentary, he seemed to genuinely mean. "And I do want to be your friend."

"As do I," Hermione returned. "So probably no kissing, for all the reasons listed above."

"Right," Draco exhaled, nodding. "Right. We should probably never kiss, in fact," he determined, looking briskly certain. "It would make things so difficult, really. And I do need friends," he lamented, faltering slightly. "I think many people speculate about my relationship with my father, but—" He waved a hand to where Lucius had been. "Nobody's actually seen it."

"Understandable," Hermione confirmed. "So, we're agreed, then."

"Yes, definitely," Draco said, propping himself upright with a nod. "No kissing."

"No kissing," she confirmed. "But we can definitely be friends. I don't have to treat you like a prince, you know," she hurried to assure him, hoping the offering sounded slightly less stupid than she suspected. "I mean, to be honest, I'm not totally sure how I would even go about treating you like a prince. I have no idea how to curtsy," she admitted. "I don't even know your proper title."

"True," Draco said, looking pleased. "You know nothing about me or my family, do you?"

"Everything I know about the British monarchy stops at 1776," Hermione promised firmly, as his mouth twitched up in a smile. "Believe me, I have absolutely no clue who your third cousins are. Even if Daphne did try all evening to educate me."

"Well, that's a relief," Draco remarked, chuckling. "So I suppose I can really be whatever I want with you, can't I?"

"You can," Hermione promised again. "Largely because I won't know the difference either way."

"Well, that's marvelous," Draco declared, smacking his palms on his thighs and rising sharply to his feet. He was wearing a tuxedo, Hermione realized, with all the trimmings; the cummerbund, the cufflinks, the whole nine yards. He was unforgivably handsome in it—in all of it—and the firelight danced with a glow around his face, making him a painting come to life; like a portrait, like a fantasy, like a daydream.

"So. Friends, then?" he prompted, holding out a hand for hers.

She rose to her feet, accepting his grip. "Friends," she assured him, giving his hand a squeeze.

He didn't let go.

Neither did she.
"What do friends do in California?" he asked, a bit breathless.

She blinked.

"Hug, I suppose," she said, dismayed to find her voice a horribly distracting rasp. "I, um. Here," she offered, reaching her arms up and giving him a perfunctory hug.

He leaned in, holding her for a moment. He bent his head, his chin pressing into the line of her shoulder, and she felt his cheek against hers, warm and comforting. He had a masculine smell, all sage and cedar. The tux material was stiff, but not scratchy. His arms around her waist were both anchored and weightless; perfectly complementary shapes. Part of her hoped he wouldn't lean away, but after a moment he released her, sparing her a nod.

"Right," he said, gaze fixing on hers. His eyes were a blue so pale they were grey, sharp and strange, and wholly signs of warning; the sky before the rain. "So, friends, then."

"Friends," Hermione said again. "Definitely friends."

He didn't step away.

Neither did she.

"Please don't tell the press I'm such a dreadful liar," were the last words she remembered him saying before her entire brain was swallowed up by delirium, his lips falling to hers with a sense of lawlessness that came from desperation; from the knowledge on both sides that if it could have possibly been avoided, it would have been, if not for a paralyzing impossibility to deny. His hands fell to her waist with the perfect synchronicity they'd had before, but now with urgency, with pressure, with direction, until she was stumbling with the backs of her knees against the table, snaking her arms around his neck to keep herself aloft.

There was no reason for him to be a good kisser. She imagined no girl on earth would have told him if he were doing it wrong, and therefore there was no plausible reason he should have any talent for it whatsoever, and yet the reality was that he—him, an actual prince, with his actual royal tongue in her hopeless colonial mouth—was criminally skilled, and she—a commoner who would be spending no more than four months in his country—had never been kissed so breathless in her entire god-almighty life. He fit against her perfectly, and she molded faultlessly into him, and what sort of joke was this, that he would be here and be him and she would be there and he would be her friend and really, truly, could they honestly be friends? Could anyone be friends who kissed like this? Could anyone exist apart from someone else after knowing this, all of this and everything, was what they were together?

His hands slid under her shirt and crept up to her ribs and she very nearly moaned in his mouth yes, yes, do it, definitely do it, don't stop, but they heard the fumbling of an old key in an ancient lock and sprang apart, Draco turning away sharply as Hermione pressed a hand to her too-warm cheeks, almost collapsing again on the table.

"Draco," came Pansy's voice, and Hermione didn't have to look at her to know the look on her face was admonishing at best. She did anyway, and immediately regretted it, feeling her face heat as Pansy's gaze slid past her to land disapprovingly on Draco. "You're back early."

"Pans," Draco said in greeting, nodding vaguely. He was looking furiously away, awkwardly adjusting his stance like a child avoiding a scolding. "Dinner didn't go particularly long."

"Mm," was all Pansy said.
"I should, um. I should go," Hermione said hurriedly, launching herself for the stairs. She didn't even bother saying goodnight to Draco, which was probably rude, and it occurred to her that maybe she shouldn't have turned her back on him (was that an archaic rule? Was it even a rule?) but she was too busy making her way to her dorm room, fumbling once again with the unfamiliar keys.

She paused as a set of footsteps sounded behind her, followed by the sound of a throat clearing.

"He's a job," Pansy said, and Hermione froze, turning slowly over her shoulder. "He's a job," Pansy repeated, folding her arms over her chest, "and you're unqualified to hold it."

"He's—" Hermione hesitated. "It's not like that. We're friends."

"You'd better hope that's all you are," Pansy said simply. "He's one of the most scrutinized people in the entire world, you know. It bothers him, and that's even knowing he was born into it. But you," she mused, flicking her disdainful gaze over Hermione's face, "I'm not sure you could handle it. I'd advise you to keep your distance."

"I didn't ask for your advice," Hermione said, stiffening slightly, and Pansy let out something of a tiny, disinterested scoff.

"He'll never marry an American," Pansy said. "His wife will be some insipid, well-born idiot like Astoria Greengrass, and I absolutely do not encourage you to let him pretend differently."

Hermione bristled. "I'm not trying to marry him—"

"No, certainly not. But do you think he can have a casual girlfriend?" Pansy asked pointedly. "Do you really think the Prince of Wales gets to have flings? No. Stay away," she warned again. "I'm not interested in watching him get hurt, and certainly not by someone like you."

The last bit was said with considerable derision, and Hermione, who suddenly remembered how thoroughly exhausted she was, only permitted her mouth to tighten as Pansy took a step back, sparing her a tiny shrug.

"By the way," Pansy said casually, "I suppose I didn't mention it earlier: Welcome to Hogwarts."

Then she turned down the corridor, disappearing into her room.

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*He's a job, and you're unqualified to hold it.*

I never forgot those words, which was strange to me at the time, particularly because I was (back then) in the habit of discarding nearly everything Lady Pansy Parkinson-Six Names said to me. Not to mention that I was tired, exhausted, mentally adrift and, unfortunately, still fairly exhilarated from being transcendently kissed by the man I would later fall madly, stupidly, desperately in love with—and still, despite all those things, I never forgot those words.

In retrospect, it's probably because somewhere, somehow, I always knew they were true.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: [Edited July 3:] Due to overwhelming (thank you!) interest, this story will be continued as a standalone WIP with the same title. You may now find it in my profile.
if you are interested in following the story.

In personal news, my latest collection of fairytales, *Midsummer Night Dreams*, is out! You can find it on my website or tumblr. Thanks to Aurora for amazing cover photography and to Little Chmura for some of my absolute favorite illustrations!
Reverie

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Reverie

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-War, Hogwarts Year 8

Rating: M

Summary: Little Chmura, my artsy pierogi princess, asked for a Dramione one-shot based on one of her gorgeous pieces (available on Tumblr) in which Draco and Hermione are snuggled up against a tree on the Hogwarts grounds. Naturally, I took 'Hogwarts comfort + angst' and turned it into something thoroughly mad, which is this. (Also, if you're musically inclined, I wrote this while listening to Rêverie, L. 68 as written by my fave, Debussy, and performed by AVA.)

After opening a questionable book in the restricted section of the library, Hermione Granger has somehow become Draco Malfoy's responsibility.

The Problem

"She's dead."

"She's what?"

"She's dead," Harry repeated slowly, as if his cadence had been the problem, "and apparently, only you can wake her."

That wasn't exactly true.

But it wasn't exactly false, either.

"What is she?"

"She's not dead," had been Draco's tentative reply.

"I didn't ask what she wasn't," had been Ron's less-than-flattering retort.

Draco rubbed his temple.

"It's complicated," he grumbled under his breath.

"Complicated I can do," Ron said, fiddling with his new Auror badge. "Cyclically dead girlfriend? Not so much."

"It's like narcolepsy," Draco lied, shrugging. "She'll wake."

"Yeah, but apparently only if you bloody wake her," Ron muttered. "Where exactly is she, anyway?"
Draco grimaced, not particularly wanting to answer.

Largely because any answer he gave was almost certainly going to sound like a lie.

"Hi," she said, looking up as he entered. She looked happy to see him, which wasn't particularly helpful.

"Hi."

He was happy to see her, too, which was worse.

"You have to come back," he said, not bothering with pleasantries. She knew why he was there, anyway.

"I will," she promised, "eventually. I did last time, didn't I? And the time before that. Though your diligence is noted," she added, half-smiling.

"You've stayed longer this time," he said, the dull pounding in his head rather impolitely refusing to ease. "I'm worried you're going to forget this isn't reality."

She arched a brow. "Worried for me, Malfoy?"

He looked away. "I'm just afraid you're going to get carried away, that's all."

"Are you now," she murmured, her lips twisting up slightly. "How interesting."

"They think you're dead," Draco reminded her. "It's not that interesting. It's fairly straightforward, actually. You have to come back so as to prove you are not, in fact, dead. Basic stuff, Granger."

"Well, to hear you tell it, I essentially am dead," she said.

"Yes," he sighed, exasperated, "but you're not. Not really."

She looked around, nudging the plaited flower crown back on her head, and shrugged.

"Close enough," she said before rising to her feet, stepping alarmingly close to place her fingers firmly against his temples. "Hold still," she warned when he tried to pull away, and he sighed again, but relented.

After a moment, the pressure in his head soothed slightly, then evaporated. She stepped back with a smile, the curve of it uneven and pleasantly asymmetrical; torn, as she was, between two completely impossible states. Amusement and sympathy, in this case. The real world and this one, in a larger sense.

"Better?" she asked, and he swallowed tightly, nodding. "Can you sleep yet?" she added, softer.

He could not.

"Doesn't matter," he reminded her, shifting his stance. "And anyway, if you're actually concerned, you should know I definitely won't be able to sleep if you don't come back. Potter and Weasley seem to be taking turns calling me every hour."

"Tell them they're misusing your Floo privileges," Hermione advised.
"Tell them yourself," Draco countered, and she sighed, the garland of flowers in her hair wilting slightly.

"Fine," she said. "But only because you asked nicely. And because I do miss them," she added thoughtfully. "How long has it been?"

He swallowed. "Too long," he said, and she nodded, letting him take her hand to pull them both out.

The Explanation

She'd been gone for about two days that time. The first time had only been a matter of hours. It had also been an accident, or something like an accident. Either way, it hadn't been Draco's fault.

This whole situation was precisely the trouble with having eighth year curriculum, really. Nobody quite knew what to teach them anymore. After all, what can you possibly tell a bunch of teenagers who are too old, not just for the school, but for their own skins? They'd seen death. Seen war. Seen each other make terrible choices. They'd seen the ugly in the world and couldn't look away, so what was left to *teach*?

The solution, ostensibly, was 'independent study,' as McGonagall had hesitantly called it, glancing between the five of them who'd returned: Draco, Hermione, Theo, Neville, and Padma. They all had specialties, for the most part. Neville, for example, was primarily there to pass the N.E.W.T. he needed in herbology, so that was his major focus. He was constantly with Sprout in the as-yet unrepaired sham of a greenhouse. Padma was usually in the Astronomy tower—which was a place Draco in particular no longer cared to go.

There was no room for them in the seventh year classes. *Physically* there was, of course, but any time any one of them sat down in lectures the rest of the class was immediately distracted. The five eighth-years were individually loathed or beloved for one reason or another, but collectively they no longer fit within the fabric of the castle, figuratively *and* metaphysically. The castle had only provided enough beds for the students enrolled in years one through seven, so the five of them had been lumped together and thrown into a slightly cramped flat in Hogsmeade. They came to the castle each day to study in a corner of the library near the restricted section, each following a suggested curriculum written out for them by the various professors to help them pass their N.E.W.T.s on their own.

It was on one of those days when Hermione beckoned to Draco and Theo from her usual table in the corner. (Neville had been in the greenhouse; Padma was sleeping, in advance of her studies that evening.)

"This book," Hermione said, pointing to her pile of assigned reading, "wasn't with my things yesterday."

They were friends by then, sort of. Hard not to be, considering they all had to occupy the same flat—which was even smaller when Harry and Ron were visiting her, so they were friends, too. Sort of. Flitwick had charmed the space to give them something of an expansion, but they could practically feel the walls groaning and swelling when the wonder twins came up to visit from Auror training.

"Those are runes," Theo pointed out, gesturing to the cover.

"I know," Hermione said.
"It says," Theo began, and squinted. "Worlds and reveries,' I think.

"Yes," Hermione said again, "I know. I didn't call you over for a translation."

"Well, that's all I have," Theo said, and turned to leave, determining any further input unnecessary or uninteresting. Draco, however, stayed behind, watching Hermione stare curiously down at the cover.

"You said it just appeared?" he asked quietly, and she nodded, frowning.

"I want to open it," she said, fingers twitching towards it, "but also, I don't."

Fair, he thought.

"How about," she began, and turned tentatively to him, "I open it, and you stay here. Just to see if something happens."

He nodded. He could do that. He'd already been reading about debunked magical theories for two hours and he wasn't hungry yet.

"And," she added thoughtfully, "maybe you should touch me, too."

He balked. "What?"

"Well, just in case," she said simply. "Keep a hand on my shoulder or something," she clarified, gesturing. "Just in case," she repeated, and he frowned. "Books can be tricky."

"Well—" He considered advising against it, but his head was hurting. It often was these days. He wasn't sleeping well. "Okay. Fine."

Because we don't have all day: He places his hand on her shoulder. She opens the book. It tumbles to the ground with a clatter, falls open, and she drops along with it, unmoving. He looks around, confused, his hand now simply resting on empty air. He's about to shout for help when something pauses him. The pages of the book fill with a line or two of type. They provide the following message spelled out in runes, seemingly for him: 'What is a world without a creator? What is a life without a meaning?' He bends over her and holds a hand under her nose. She's not breathing. She's dead. No, he thinks, she's not dead. There's no proof of it, but he thinks it's true. He calls for Theo, beckons for him to come quietly. Theo says she's dead. Draco says she isn't. Theo says there's no proof of that whatsoever. Draco says look, I know death, she isn't. Theo says nothing, because Draco has a point. Then he asks Draco what he wants to do about it and Draco says he doesn't know. Should he go get her? Theo says if you can go get here, what are you doing talking to me? Draco says I don't know, can you give me some fucking space to breathe please, Christ, there's a dead girl on the floor, and Theo says she isn't dead and Draco says how do you know and Theo says because you just told me she isn't. So Draco goes to get her. He just knows, somehow. He touches the book and he shows up inside it, and there's nothing, but Hermione's there. She says look and shows him she can make something: light. She cups it in her hands. She says: Aren't you tired of the dark? He swallows hard and says you can't stay here. She sighs, fine, how do we get out? And he says I'll take you back, and he does. He doesn't know how he does any of it. He has no explanation. Two weeks later, Ron and Harry find him in a panic. We came to see her but she's dead, Ron says hysterically, but Harry says she's not, that she left them a note and it says 'if I'm not awake by Saturday noon tell Draco to wake me.'

It changes everything.
The Book

There was a world inside the book of worlds. It didn't exist when she got there, Hermione explains, but now that she's there, she can make things. She made light the first time, and it would have been enough, except once you can make light out of nothing you don't particularly want to stop making things. That, and she didn't have especially good impulse control. She went back and made a landscape: to Draco, it looked like a forest. Then she got stuck, she said.

He suspected she was lying, but she, like most people, didn't seem like she would be receptive to being called a liar. So, after a while, he simply made a habit of coming to get her whenever she'd been gone too long.

The fifth time it happened, she'd added animals. By the time he arrived, she was riding some sort of winged unicorn.

"Pegacorn," she said. "Pegasus and unicorn."

He sighed. "You can't stay here," he warned. "It's not real."

"How do you know what's real?" she asked, as the pegacorn (no, he told himself, he wasn't calling it that) knelt down, permitting her to land deftly on her feet. "Thanks, Draco," she said to it, and it nodded brusquely before taking flight, bounding away.

"Draco?" echoed human Draco, making a face.

"Reminds me of you," she said, shrugging. "Finicky. Prone to sulking. Hates leafy greens."

"Ha," he said glumly, and she smiled.

"Lighten up," she suggested, gesturing around. "It's nice, right?"

"I guess," he said, "if you like nature."

"Everyone likes nature," she said.

"Not true. And anyway, you know why I'm here."

"Yes, I do," she agreed, "but I'm not ready yet." She fell to the ground, patting the space beside her. "Come sit."

He sat, but he wasn't happy about it. He'd simply learned by then it was easier not to argue.

"You can't stay here," he reminded her. "You asked for an extra day and I let you have it, but you have to come back now. It's not real."

"How do you know what's real?" she asked again. Next to her, a plant bloomed from nothing, and she reached over, plucking something from its leaves. "Hungry?" she asked, offering it to him, and he frowned at it.

"What is it?"

"Thing I made," she said. "Tastes like strawberry ice cream, I think. Try it," she said, holding it out to him. It was a softly pink plum.

He took a bite, unsure what to expect. It was soft and sort of cold, giving him a strange sensation in his teeth.
"Strawberry ice cream," he agreed, and she nodded.

"Real enough, isn't it?" she said, gesturing to it.

"Maybe so, but still. Potter and Weasley are more real," Draco reminded her, "and they're worried about you."

She leaned back, falling against the high, sweet-smelling grass.

"I don't like that world anymore," she said. "It disappointed me."

"I disappointed you, too," Draco pointed out, "and you still talk to me."

She turned her head, smiling at him. The sun shone a little brighter through the canopy.

"True," she said, and he looked away.

"Your boyfriend," he said, "is looking for you."

She sighed heavily, as if Draco was the one being tiresome.

"You could at least tell him where you are," he insisted.

"No," Hermione said. "No way. Better he thinks I've got some weird death disease. Otherwise he'll want to come, or he'll tell Harry, and then Harry will want to use the book, and I don't want to—"

She paused, thinking. "It's just that every time I make something, it stays that way," she explained slowly, gesturing around, "just as I like it. This place I'm making, it's—"

"Yours," Draco said, though he may as well have said perfect, and she nodded slowly.

"I'm just not ready to share yet," she said.

He doubted she ever would be, but that was mostly understandable.

"Do you want me to make you something?" she asked him, possibly trying to butter him up.

"Not unless you can make a version of me who isn't a fuck-up," Draco muttered. "And not a pegacorn, either," he warned, before kicking himself. He said he wasn't going to call it that. He couldn't entertain all her whims.

She sat up, taking his hand without a word to lead him through the forest. They walked for a few minutes in silence, a baby deer leaping by with a flash of golden antlers, before arriving at a narrow stream. She leapt over it, releasing his hand to jump, and then beckoned for him to follow. He did.

Then she said, "Close your eyes."

He really needed to stop enabling her. She was getting to be thoroughly impossible.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, she had created a shining, faultless version of the castle. The real one was still undergoing construction of sorts, with all the professors and the older students lending their spare time to rebuilding it. This one was pristine, shining in the sun.

He shaded his eyes, staring at it.
"Oh, sorry," Hermione said, and swept out a hand. Behind them, she'd grown a tree beside the lake, shading them both from the sun. "There. Better?"

More than better.

Breathtaking, he wanted to say, but didn't.

"It's not a new you, technically," she said, "but it's still sort of new, isn't it? And anyway, I think the current you is fine. When you're not leaving the toothpaste out."

Her fingertips brushed his. On purpose?

Probably not.

"I never leave the toothpaste out," he forced out, clearing his throat. "That's Longbottom."

"Oh," she said, shrugging. "Well, your dishwashing charms could still use some improvement."

"I know," he said.

He wanted to take her hand. Instead, he told her, "Your boyfriend is waiting for you."

She turned, eyes wide, to give him an unreadable look.

"Fine," she said. "Take me back, then."

He still didn't know if she was capable of removing herself, magically-speaking. But he did know that in other, truer respects, the answer was definitely no.

"Granger," he said tentatively, and she shook her head.

"Don't," she said.

Behind them, the sun dimmed.

The Friends

Harry and Ron were, not unpredictably, a touch concerned.

"What's going on?" Harry asked Draco. "This seems like it's been going on for a while."

"Yes, and I think I deserve to know," Ron contributed.

Draco, Theo, Padma, and Neville exchanged glances.

"The thing is," Draco said slowly, "she doesn't want me to tell you. Yet," he added optimistically, though that was a concept mostly of his own invention.

"What?" Ron barked.

"It's not just Draco," Padma added quickly. She and Hermione shared a room, so Draco assumed she had been the first person Hermione told outside of him. Padma was also not home very often, given that her work was done at night, and when she was in the flat, she slept during the day. All in all, she was very high on the list of Hermione Granger's enablers. "I mean—" Padma glanced at Neville, who gave a guilty-looking shrug. "She asked all of us not to, right?"
"Not me," Theo said. "I can tell you."

Harry looked expectantly at him.

"I said I can," Theo said, shrugging. "Didn't say I would."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"You can't just keep this a secret," Ron said, obviously frustrated as he rounded on Draco. "It's one thing for them not to tell me, but you—why is it you're the only one who can wake her?" he demanded. "Why not Padma?"

Draco didn't want to answer the question being asked (why are you the one she's always asking for?) because his more pressing question (why is she yours?) was something he didn't really want to think about.

"If she wanted you to know," Draco said instead, "she would tell you herself."

"Fine," Harry said wearily, yanking Ron back by the collar of his shirt. "Tell her we came to see her then, would you?"

But Ron wasn't so easily satisfied. "Why can't you just wake her now?" he asked Draco, shoving Harry away. "I haven't seen her in a month, and this is the third time”—that you know of, Draco thought—"she's been like this."

"It takes a while," Draco said, which was adjacent to the truth. The actual extraction was simple enough, but the process of persuading her to wake was something of a drawn-out dance. "If you want to wait, you can."

"Then I'll wait," Ron said, falling onto the cramped sofa between Padma and Neville.

Draco rose to his feet, rubbing his temple. "Fine," he said.

"Oh, hi," Hermione said, turning to find him walking towards her. "Guess what I did today?"

She pointedly flapped her set of shimmering, gossamer wings.

"Got a haircut?" Draco guessed drily, and she laughed.

"Let's go," she said, holding a hand out for his. "Want your own, or can you just hold on?"

"Granger," Draco warned.

"I think I could probably grip you around the waist," she said, turning him brusquely, "just, right here—"

She secured her arms around him and he jumped, bolting out of her reach.

"You have to come back," he said firmly. "Weasley's waiting for you. He hasn't seen you in a month."

"Yes, sure, fine," Hermione said, waving a hand. "Twenty minutes."

"No, Granger," Draco said. "Now."
"Fifteen."

"Now."

"Seventeen."

"This is not a negotiation," Draco growled, and she laughed.

"You're right," she said. "Because you don't actually have any leverage."

He grimaced.

"I thought you didn't like to fly," he said.

"I don't like brooms," she corrected, "or quidditch. But these are mine," she clarified, gesturing to her wings. "I made them. It's different."

"Granger—"

"This world is never going to turn on me," she said, "because I made it. It will never… abandon me. It won't show up dead and make me wonder if it was my fault, or if I didn't do enough. It won't do anything I can't control, and as long as I'm here—"

She took a breath and let it out, and for whatever reason, Draco noticed for the first time that the trees didn't rustle. He hadn't realized before there wasn't really weather here; it was more like a pleasant lack of it. Sun, but no particular heat. A sense of motion in the air, but no actual wind.

"When I leave here," Hermione said hoarsely, "the castle is still broken. The news is still terrible. My parents are still gone. People I loved are still dead." She looked at him, more numb than pained. "I don't want that world right now, Malfoy. I just don't."

He swallowed hard.

"I am so sorry," he said robotically. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," she told him. "Just… if you're going to be here, then be here."

He nodded slowly.

"Twenty minutes," he said.

Her smile flickered and stretched, and maybe this was her world, he thought, but he'd been the one who made that smile. He had made a little light for himself, so he understood why she couldn't bear to leave the things she'd crafted from nothing. From emptiness. From total vacancy in the pages of a questionable book.

"Okay," she said, and slid her arms up around his ribs, holding him steady.

Four hours later, when they landed back on the ground and he insisted they go home, they arrived back in the flat to find Ron was asleep on the sofa.

---

*The Trouble*

"It's been a week since I've seen her," Padma told Draco.
"Mr Malfoy, have you seen Miss Granger?" asked McGonagall. "She said she would help me with repairing some of the castle enchantments in my office, but it's been a day or so with no response."

"Look, I get you can't tell Ron," Harry said, "but can't you at least tell me?"

"Are you seriously just going to sit here and do nothing?" Theo asked. "She's falling into a delusion and leaving her there isn't helping. Why haven't you gone after her yet?"

"It's none of my business," Neville said tentatively, "but, um. It's a bit odd, isn't it? That it's been so long? My kitchen herbs are getting fidgety."

"Are you sleeping?"

Draco blinked, dragging himself back to the present.

Though not quite to reality.

"What?" he asked.

"Are you sleeping?" Hermione asked him. "You could sleep here, if you wanted. I could make sure of it."

"I can't—" He hesitated. "Granger, I can't just stay the night here."

"Why not?" she asked. "Your head hurts all the time," she pointed out, gesturing to where he'd lifted a hand to his temple again. "You need a full night of sleep. You need several nights, actually," she amended. "Do you know what a sleep deficit is? Because you certainly have one by now—"

"Granger," Draco blurted painfully, "I can't spend the night here with you. Don't you understand that?" he said. "Don't you understand that I can't—that being here, I'm just so—"

He bent his head.

"Forget it," he said. "Are you coming?"

She stared at him, and then set her jaw.

"No," she said.

"Fine," he exhaled, and left.

He came back alone and walked into the kitchen.

"What happened?" Theo asked.

"I can't wake her," Draco said.

"Like, magically, or—"

"I just can't," Draco snapped, and then he stormed into their shared bedroom, where naturally he was met by Neville and some sort of new carnivorous-looking pot of greenery.

"It needs to be sung to sleep," Neville said apologetically.

"I don't care," Draco said, and threw himself onto his bed.
He didn't sleep.

He never slept. He saw too many things too vividly whenever he closed his eyes, so he stared at the ceiling instead. There was a spot there, a mark of age or wear, and it looked a little bit like a pegacorn, only those weren't real. And if they were, he definitely wouldn't call them that.

Draco sighed.

Hermione was right.

There was something wrong with this world.

He tried again the next day.

"I do need to sleep," he told her, "but I can't stay here, either."

She tilted her head, considering him. She'd been in the middle of brushing some sort of large, fluffy kitten.

"How about a nap, then?" she suggested, and as she set down the brush, the kitten bounded away, disappearing between the trees. "Come here," she beckoned, and he grimaced, but per usual, he ceded to her wants, sitting beside her and letting her guide his head towards her lap. "Close your eyes," she said, and he obeyed, because what else was he even capable of doing these days?

"Sleep well, Draco," she murmured, brushing her thumb against his forehead, and he drifted off, finally seeing nothing behind his tired eyes.

---

**The Truth**

In this precise moment, these are the things Draco doesn't know about:

Padma is sitting alone under the stars, contemplating the constellation Draco. It's the dragon assigned as a guardian; it keeps secrets. She smiles to herself, a little. It's a name that fits, she thinks, and scribbles a few notes about the position of Mars for her research.

Neville is talking to Luna about his recent observation of young hamadryades trees where he's planted them just outside the still-in-disrepair greenhouse. The trees don't grow in groves, he says, but in small groups. One of them isn't growing like the others, though—its colors resemble a tree less developed—and the one closest to it has started to… lean. Closer. Neville thinks the smallest one is dying, that the roots aren't taking to the soil, so the closest one to it is showing signs of mourning. Luna frowns, looks into nothing, and says, "How do you know which one is really alive?"

About a week ago, Hermione received a note. It contained the following message:

*I love you. You know I love you. But I can't do this. What's going on? You're telling me nothing. You're telling me nothing, and I'm sorry, but I can't do this anymore. I used to feel like we had something nobody else in the world had. That you were the person I knew best in this entire universe. I used to know you, Hermione, and now I don't. It's like you're on another planet. I'm suffering too, you know. This wasn't just your war. I know you said you couldn't just move on, but what about me?*

Also in this precise moment, these are the things Draco *does* know about:
The softness of Hermione's touch while he sleeps.

---

The Creations

Pegacorn. A unicorn and a pegasus.

A hypoallergenic kitten the size of a labrador who answers to the name Brutus.

A set of collapsible wings.

A small and highly territorial vanilla-scented bear.

A grove of pre-decorated Christmas trees.

Gold. (Because alchemy.)

A perfect model of Hogwarts. This is where Hermione sleeps, when she sleeps. She curls up in the bed in the Gryffindor dormitory and stares up at the canopy and relives the moments she thought were hard but weren't really, like being torn between Ron and Viktor. Wasn't that a fun problem? she thinks. Comparatively, anyway. She thinks about the tests she once thought she would fail. The mean things Draco Malfoy said that he doesn't say anymore. The hard look on his face that's long gone, replaced by something different. Then she laughs to herself at the memory of slapping him and waves a hand, and because she willed it to, snow falls outside her window.

As she drifts to sleep, Hermione creates a dream for herself. In it, she falls inside of a book, builds an entire world, and from time to time, Draco visits her. One of those times, he looks at her and he says, "I don't really need an entire world, you know. Just you," he says. "Just you."

As she drifts to sleep, Hermione creates a dream for herself. In it, she falls inside of a book, builds an entire world, and from time to time, Draco visits her. One of those times, he looks at her and he says, "I don't really need an entire world, you know. Just you," he says. "Just you."

Inside the book of worlds, Hermione creates beautiful delusions.

---

The Offer

"It's summer," Draco said. "Don't you want to go home for a bit or something?"

"No," Hermione said.

"Well, I don't want to either," Draco grumbled. "So the least you could do is come back to the flat. Everyone else is staying, and Theo's planning some sort of mad birthday dinner for me." He paused. "It's going to be terrible."

"Why don't you stay here, then?" Hermione asked him.

"What?"

"Stay here," Hermione said again.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't."

"Why not?"
"Because—" Draco growled. "I can't live in a fantasy, Granger. I don't want it."

She looked down.

"But you can sleep here," she pointed out.

"Yes."

"And your head doesn't hurt when you're here."

"No," he sighed, "It doesn't. But—"

"And I'm here," she said.

He said nothing.

What could he say?

"You still don't want to," she registered, deflating.

"Because this isn't real," he told her for the thousandth time, stepping closer. He looked at her, really looked, and said, "Granger, nothing here is real."

The moment he said it, he could see he'd made everything worse.

"I know," she said, turning away, and he caught her hand.

"But," he sighed helplessly, "if you want me to stay, I will. For a while," he warned. "But then you have to come back with me. Got it?"

She tilted her chin up, smiling her uneven smile. "Fair enough."

---

**The Argument**

For two days, Hermione showed Draco the things she'd made. For him, there were three primary moments of significance. One, when she concocted a particular pastry that smelled and tasted like one he'd had as a child during his favorite holiday with his parents in their chateau outside Versailles. Two, when she took him for a swim in the lake, giving them both temporary tails and fins like merpeople. Three, when she looked at him for a long moment, and then he asked her what was wrong and she said nothing, like she meant it, and he realized nothing was wrong, too.

Still—"We have to go back," he said, "or I'll miss Theo's stupid party."

"Actually," she said, not looking at him, "I've changed my mind. I'm not going."


"Why don't you just stay?" she said, and brightened. "Have you ever been on a jet-ski?"

"Granger, this is ridiculous," Draco said. "It's been weeks now. You can't just stay here."

"I don't like—"

"The real world, yes, yes, I know." He was extremely annoyed, and he wasn't trying very hard to hide it. "You've seen some shit, Granger, but you don't get to disappear. The Hermione Granger I knew wouldn't just give up, would she?"
She stiffened, and then glared at him.

"The Draco Malfoy I knew took a world full of magic and helped it start a war that almost killed me," she said, "so I don't think that's a very fair assessment. Do you?"

He stared at her, stunned.

"Is that still what you think?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

"Fine. I'm leaving," he said.

"Good," she said.

Then he left.

---

The Party

The night of Draco's birthday Theo did, in fact, throw a truly terrible party. Mostly because other people were there. Before it started, Draco had considered trying to wake Hermione again (it had been an additional two days by then) but decided it better not to. Clearly she didn't want anything to do with him, and he certainly wasn't in the mood to have yet another argument trying to drag her back after what she'd said.

At the reminder of it, he winced.

"Cheer up," Theo said. "Made you a cake."

It was a pretty good cake, too. Very symmetrical.

"You've been having a tough time," Theo explained, shrugging. "Figured I could do something."

"Who says I've been having a tough time?" Draco said.

"Oh, only your face," Theo replied jubilantly, conspicuously turning to someone else as Harry sidled determinedly up to Draco.

"Hermione isn't dead," Harry announced without preamble.

"No," Draco confirmed again, until he realized it wasn't actually a question that time. "Wait, what?"

"She's not dead," Harry said firmly. "She goes somewhere, right? Somewhere that isn't like here."

Draco frowned. "How do you know that?"

"Well, actually, I was thinking about it," Harry said, "and I figured that had to be it. I don't really blame her for not telling us," he added. "If I could escape, I think I'd do it."

"Would you?" Draco asked doubtfully. "Seems out of character."

"I mean, maybe not forever," Harry said, shrugging. "But it's nice to have a purpose, you know? Meaning. Maybe Hermione hasn't found hers yet."

Or maybe being an omnipotent god in some sort of fairyland is it, Draco thought, and now she's
It struck him as he sat beneath the tree by the lake that Hermione had done an excellent job reconstructing the castle from memory. It made sense, he thought. She was observant. She had a remarkable eye for detail. There was something about her eye for emotions, too; for things that weren't quite tactile or quantitative. She'd drawn the whole thing up from nothing but the image in her head and yet, somehow, all the colors reflected in the sky around it were precisely right. The sensations of the air had been right. The distance; the feeling that the castle could loom but still be welcoming, was precisely right.

Her version was more visually arresting, though, of course. Everything was a little better through her eyes, him included.

"Hi," he heard behind him, and spun.

She was standing there, holding herself back, fidgeting. She looked like she'd been crying.

He blinked. "How did you—"

"I could always get myself out," she said. "I just didn't want to."

He swallowed. "Oh."

An owl flew by in the distance.

The branches of the tree above them rustled in the wind.

"I thought you weren't going to come back," Hermione eventually said, eyeing her feet. "I thought maybe you were done with me. And then I thought how terrible it would be if I'd made you upset, or if you thought I'd meant what I said, or what I didn't say, and then I just—"

"Granger." He tilted his head back against the tree, beckoning to her. "Come here."

For once, she listened, sitting beside him.

"Ron broke up with me," she said, and he blinked. "A while ago."

"Probably because you kept dying just to avoid seeing him," Draco remarked.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I think that was probably it."

He sat up slightly. "Are you okay?"
"Kind of." She turned, giving him one of those off-kilter smiles over her shoulder. "I mean, I don’t think I really wanted the relationship, but still. It’s sad when things end."

She glanced at the castle, which was still a bit ruined; unlike her version of it.

"Not all endings are bad," Draco told her carefully. "When things end, new things start."

He gestured for her to come closer, which she did, and then he pointed up at the castle.

"See the greenhouse?" he murmured, and she nodded. "Longbottom and I finally got around to fixing up the north bit of it about a month ago. I don’t know if it’s better than the original greenhouse, but I do know that the people who fixed it could never have done so together if it had never been broken to begin with. Which I realize is quite a mad thing to say," he lamented, "considering this was very much my fault, and perhaps I should have been a better person to begin with and then nothing would have broken—"

"But it looks good," Hermione interrupted. "Shiny and new."

"Yeah," Draco said. "Yeah, I guess so."

The wind rustled around them, brushing her hair back from her shoulders. He smelled something floral in her hair and breathed it in, letting it curl up in the recesses of his lungs.

"I thought you weren’t coming back for me," Hermione said quietly, and he shook his head.

"I would have come back," Draco said. "For you? Trust me, Granger. I would have come back for you."

She glanced at him. "But you wouldn’t have stayed?"

He shook his head. "No," he said, and then hesitated before admitting, "but not because I wouldn’t want to. I just owe this world too much."

She nodded in quiet recognition. "I guess I didn’t realize while I was off making my own world you’ve been trying to make this one better," she noted.

"Yeah, well, I figured you’d want to come back one day," he said. "And when you did, I wanted it to be a little better for you."

At that, her throat seemed tight for a moment, her lips parting briefly, and then she tentatively shifted towards him. He adjusted his position against the tree, making room for her, and she settled herself against his chest, leaning into him.

Slowly, he wrapped his arms around her. She slid a hand up, resting it over his heart, and curled her fingers into the fabric of his shirt, holding on.

He rested his head against the tree.

"This world is beautiful, too," Hermione murmured.

"It is now," he said, and she closed her eyes, both of them drifting off in the reverie of the present as their pulses gradually aligned, the sun fading into the background.

---

The Resolution
When they returned to the flat, everyone had already gone out. Theo left a note saying they were at the Hog's Head, but they didn't read it because Hermione was pulling Draco into her bedroom, breath catching as his hands slipped under her shirt. She stumbled back, fumbling for the bed behind her, and he was kissing her neck when she realized something was out of place.

Something was gone.


He stopped, frowning. "Could someone have taken it?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"Want to look for it?" he asked.

She looked up at him, at the mouth she'd been kissing and the way it formed something she had tried many times to recreate, but never properly managed.

"No," she said, and then added, "By the way. Are you staying to keep working on the castle?"

"Yes," he said.

"Can I help?" she asked.

He looked down at her, at the girl he'd been in love with for months, and imagined an impossible world in which he could refuse her anything.

"Later," he suggested, and she tugged him onto the bed with her, twining her legs with his.

Because we don't have all day: He takes off her shirt. Then her jeans. Then her bra. She fumbles with his clothes and deposits them on her floor. He says he wishes he had told her sooner how he felt and she says he needs to shut up, right now, she's busy. She kisses him, he kisses her, he ventures down her torso, lips and tongue and teeth. Cunnilingus. Orgasm. Not too quickly—a realistic one, where she squirms and cries out and tightens her fingers in his hair and says yes right there don't move just right there and because he can follow instructions, orgasm is achieved. Then an attempt at fellatio in exchange, which is rebuked in favor of sex. Sex, sex, sex. God, you're so good, he says, and she murmurs I'm going to come, and he whispers something both blasphemous and obscene and they have the first of their impossible moments together and come at the same time. He tells her he thinks he loves her. She tells him she probably loves him. They laugh at their mutual stupidity. He says you are the only thing that brings me peace and she says you are the only thing that's real, and everything will be different now. This is real, he thinks when he touches her, and she thinks it, too, when she touches him. They sleep soundly and dream of pegacorns. Book, what book? Nobody here needs a book. They both know what they're doing, and yet equally, they don't. The world can burn down tomorrow, and if it does, they'll start over. They are resilient. They are creators. They are living proof that something can come from nothing.

They are evidence the world can begin again.

The End

To conclude:

The Question
What is a life without meaning?

The Answer
Nothing but a dream.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Be sure to check my tumblr or Little Chmura's to see the art that inspired this story! We are so very lucky to have her. Also, you guys asked and I (hopefully) delivered: The Commoner's Guide to Bedding a Royal is now available as a standalone WIP. I posted chapter 2 earlier this week. Thanks as always for reading!
Convenient Ways to Kill a Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Convenient Ways to Kill a Man

Pairing: Something I will not list, because doing so is a spoiler for How to Win Friends and Influence People

Universe: How to Win Friends and Influence People-verse (are you sensing a theme?), post-war

Rating: M

Summary: This story begins one week after the events of the How to Win epilogue, so please, I beg you, do not read this unless you have read the whole story. Do you hear me? THE ENTIRE STORY. Do not show up in the reviews telling me you read this without reading How to Win from beginning to end. You will be very confused, I promise you. Have you read How to Win? Yes? Okay good, moving on. Two people who met in the epilogue have agreed to a dinner celebrating their mutual attraction (and, if certain divinists are to be believed, their combined destinies). Unfortunately, they both have jobs to do, which means romance is perhaps less important than some other things... like taking out a dangerous criminal, for example.

The Arsonist
Diagon Alley
November 9, 2006
8:25 p.m.

"You know, I hate to say it," she said, "but I really think this is going disastrously well."

Her lips curled up to a coy, laughing grimace of irony, and he wanted so badly to kiss her. He wanted to reach across the table, take hold of her face, and kiss her deeply. Or gently. Maybe a little bit of both. Hard at first, with a little bite of promise, but then softer. Something to remember him by.

He'd learned a lot about her over the past week; they'd been owling back and forth multiple times a day, in fact, about this and that and everything. About life. About their respective lack of lives. She was funny, he realized. The sort of funny that beautiful girls sometimes weren't. The sort of funny that was bold and brash and uncontained. She was focused, too, and honest. She was painfully honest, and she was direct and brilliant and strangely kind, and now that he was looking at her face—at the petal-pink rose of her mouth—he truly wished he hadn't done what he had.

"I'd hoped I might find something about you I didn't care for," she continued, still with that subtly endearing half-smile that was as much a weapon as it was a gift, "like maybe you had some sort of horrifying political opinions," she mused idly. "Or at least an unbearable habit I couldn't stand being around."

"I've been known to snore," he offered, and her smile broadened.

"I'd like the opportunity to find out," she returned, reaching her hand across the table for his, and he could do it, he thought. What would be the worst thing to happen? Her hazel eyes were fixed on his, and maybe he should just do it. If she pushed him away, then she pushed him away. At least he
would have tried. At least he would have had one moment of being close to her, breathing her in, even if it was the only one he got. He thought maybe it would be worth it, and by the way she wasn't dropping her gaze, he was pretty sure she'd left an opening. The figurative door was ever so slightly ajar.

He leaned forward. "Daphne," he attempted, clearing his throat, and her lips parted slowly.

"Do it," she murmured, flinging the door wide open, and at the distinctly welcome offering he determinedly reached out, brushing her hair from her cheek with a careful, exquisitely painful deliberation. He leaned in, grazing his nose deftly along hers, and in response, she tipped her chin up, closing her eyes. Emboldened, he brought her lips to his, and—

"Cadell Hawkworth," came a voice behind them, and immediately, he felt her hand slip from his, the moment abruptly snatched out from beneath them. "You're under arrest for violation of your parole. Put your hands in the air where we can see them."

Cadell grimaced, glancing lamentingly down at his unfinished dinner and falling back into his chair.

"I won't go back," he replied gruffly. Heads were starting to turn; ideal. He raised his voice. "I'm never going back to Azkaban."

He spun, aiming a stunning spell at one of the Aurors behind him that narrowly missed, and as he rose to his feet, Harry Potter's expression went grim.

"Cadell," he warned, "put your wand down and your hands in the air. We're taking you into custody."

"I'd rather die," Cadell shot back, and then he heard it. A camera. Then two more. He painted a gruesome snarl on his face and raised his wand when he heard a third, aiming a wordless spell that Harry rapidly disarmed. "If you want me, you'll have to kill me first, Potter—"

"Take him in, Auror Weasley," Harry commanded, and as Ron stepped forward, Cadell lunged, Daphne already gone from his peripheral. She'd be slipping into the crowd now, backing away. Pictures were being taken, after all, and she couldn't be in them. Her anonymity was key. For him, however, visibility was paramount.

Ron extended a hand, ostensibly to take hold of Cadell's wrist, and the moment they touched—

"Oh, hello," drawled Theo Nott as Cadell stumbled sideways, nearly colliding with the brick wall in the alley. "Here's your wand," he offered, holding it out for Cadell, "and some clothes. I take it you've been briefed on the communication protocol?"

"I'll send a patronus out as soon as I make contact." Cadell confirmed stiffly, trading his jacket for the cloak Theo had offered him. "But again, you have to make sure nobody tries to contact me. If any messages arrive at the wrong time—"

"We know the drill," Theo assured him. "We're really much more competent than we look." He paused before adding, "Thanks for doing this, by the way. I'm sure it's not exactly what you wanted."

Cadell nodded, his fingers closing deftly around the wand which was, in fact, his. The other had been a decoy, as had the Weasley product that had transported him outside, leaving a fake bloodied limb behind.
"Not a problem," he said, clearing his throat. "Harry's right. I'm the best person to do it."

Theo shrugged. "Well, certainly never hurts to be the best. Anything else?"

Cadell considered it.

"Yeah, actually," he said after a moment. "Can you tell Daphne," he began, and paused. He wasn't sure what to say to her. He rather wished he'd thought it through. "Can you just, um. Can you tell her that…"

He trailed off. Nothing seemed good enough.

"Tell her yourself," Theo suggested, giving Cadell's shoulder a remarkably comforting pat. "Shouldn't take more than what, a couple of weeks? Build a little suspense. Just don't take too long with the runaround."

Cadell smiled weakly. "Right," he confirmed. "Okay, well—" He turned over his shoulder, eyeing the darkened alley to his left. "See you, then."

"Good luck," Theo called after him, bending to speak into his tie clip as Cadell shivered in the evening air, pulling his cloak tighter around him.

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One Week Ago

The Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement

November 2, 2006

10:35 a.m.

"The suspect's name is Mordred," Harry said, placing one file in front of Cadell as he placed the other in front of Daphne. "Deathstar's already been briefed," he added to clarify, "but I wanted to review it with the two of you separately."

"Why?" Daphne asked, frowning as she opened the file. "Does this have something to do with the Avalonian Order we just shut down?"

"Yes and no," Harry said unhelpfully, falling back into his seat. "We went through their records and sorted out that Mordred was one of their primary donors, so to some extent that's a yes, but it seems they weren't his only beneficiaries. He's been known by other names," he explained, gesturing to the files, "but the records from the Avalonian Order match some open cases we have belonging to other wizarding terrorist groups from the last twelve years. Mordred is only his most recent iteration."

"Who is he?" Daphne asked, frowning at the blurry picture of a middle-aged man that had been tucked into the file, and Harry shrugged.

"That's the question," he returned. "Whoevers Mordred is, he's extremely well-hidden. Impossible to contact unless he wants to contact you." His gaze slid slowly—knowingly—to Cadell's. "Have you heard of him?"

Cadell nodded, and Daphne's heart sank.

This was why they'd been called in.

"I know of him," Cadell clarified. "Never met him, but I know his associates."
"Could you get to him?" Harry asked.

For a moment, Cadell didn't speak. He looked at the file, obviously lost in thought.

"It would save a lot of lives if you could," Harry pressed, obviously adopting a gentler tone to soften his urging. "Mordred supplies money and resources to groups with intent to harm the public and the Ministry. He also gives them the means to avoid imprisonment." He paused before adding, "He's basically the Godfather of the magical underground."

To that, Cadell's mouth twisted. "Rhys loves those films."

Harry nodded, half-smiling. "I know. Loves them even more now that he and Daisy work for MACUSA." He waited another beat, letting the camaraderie sink in before pressing on. "Anyway, I thought maybe you could help us. If, that is, you were able to reach him. Dig up his real identity and tell us who he is." Another pause. "We can't stop him if we can't find him."

Daphne glanced sharply at Cadell, who was chewing his thoughts, looking torn. He exhaled after a moment, slowly rubbing his temple.

"Yes," he said eventually, and the moment he said it, Daphne ached for him. He'd been so relieved to be back in the wizarding world, and now..."Yes, I could find him. But everyone underground knows I'm supposed to be in Azkaban," Cadell pointed out, glancing fleetingly at Daphne. "With the Avalonian Order dismantled and me suddenly out of prison, Mordred might suspect I got clemency from the Ministry. I won't be able to get close to him if he thinks I'm working with the Auror department."

"Right," Harry agreed, "but I had a thought about that—we could stage something. A highly publicized re-arrest that goes wrong. Something that ends up in the papers," he clarified, "to make the rest of the world believe you're on the run again."

"But that will destroy his reputation," Daphne argued. "Not to mention your department!"

Harry glanced at her, grimacing. "I know. Temporarily, though, we'll have to do it. And listen, I know Cadell was going to get a desk job in the Department of Mysteries, but—"

Daphne struggled to manage her disappointment.

She'd just met him.

She'd just met him.

And now he was going to be gone?

"We could really use him," Harry finished, giving Cadell a sympathetic glance. "We don't have anyone else who could go undercover like this."

"Not Draco or Hermione?" Daphne asked Harry, who shook his head.

"It already came out after Halloween that their divorce was staged. Nobody would believe them if they went undercover now. And if it were a simple assassination, that would be one thing," Harry added apologetically, "but we have reason to believe Mordred's various enterprises would continue on his orders even if he died. None of us can figure out how he transfers funds, so we can't just take him out. We have to take down his entire network, and that requires knowing who he is and who's protecting him."
"But Cadell just got his life back," Daphne began, and Cadell leaned forward, gently cutting in.

"It's fine," he told her. "Harry's right. It's a good plan." He slid his gaze briefly to Harry's. "And it won't take too long, will it? You just need me to figure out who Mordred is and report back?"

Harry nodded. "After that, no more undercover work—you have my word. You can be an Auror or an Unspeakable if you want to, up to you. But I swear, this is the last time I'll ask you to do anything like this."

"Is my department involved in the investigation, too?" Daphne asked, hoping for at least that much, but Harry shook his head slowly.

"No," he said, "and you definitely shouldn't communicate. And I'll need you to get rid of any record of his employment, Daphne, because if there's even a single shred of evidence tying Cadell to the Ministry, Mordred will find it. We think he has at least one associate on the inside, either in the Ministry or somewhere financial," Harry explained, directing that information at Cadell. "So you'll have to cut ties completely."

Gradually, Cadell managed a nod.

"Understood," he said, resigned to his fate, and beside him, Daphne suppressed a sigh, trying not to look as disappointed as she felt.

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Daphne Greengrass' Flat
Knockturn Alley
November 9, 2006
9:04 p.m.

"So," Pansy called from the fire, smiling devilishly through the flames, "how was the dinner?"

Daphne grimaced. "Pans, I just got home. Can you not wait around for me like that?"

"Daphne Elizabeth Greengrass," Pansy warned. "You promised me details."

Daphne sighed, hanging her robes up by the door and falling back against the cushions of her vintage sofa. She was really rather a fan of her cozy Knockturn flat when it wasn't being invaded by nosy newly-pregnant friends; admittedly, the neighborhood left something to be desired, but seeing as a new cafe had just been put in, Daphne suspected it'd be lousing with gentrification soon enough.

"Well?" Pansy demanded. "I've just been sitting here with my feet up for hours, so—"

There was no getting around it. Better to get it over with quickly.


At once, Pansy's expression melted. Daphne thought at first it was a result of the flames, but no. Pansy's entire countenance visibly formed itself to something surprisingly human as she let out a loud, incoherent sound of relief (or pain. Difficult to tell).

"I'm so happy for you," Pansy wailed; relief, Daphne confirmed internally. "It's been THREE YEARS, Daphne!"

"I'm aware," Daphne said drily.
"It's been three years, and all that time, what have I been saying? That you would fi-"

"I'd find someone, yes, yes, I know, but you're getting ahead of yourself—"

"You like him—oh, I'm so relieved," Pansy exhaled. "I genuinely thought I was going to have to keep setting you up on terrible first dates until one or both of us died—"

"Pans, come on—Pansy, are you crying?"

"It's the hormones," Pansy sniffed, pawing lightly at her face. "Anyway, why aren't you excited? This is huge, Daphne! He's the first person you've taken any interest in who wasn't, I don't know, a suspect in a murder investigation—"

"Well, not quite, remember?" Daphne lamented, leaning her head back against the sofa. "I told you, he's going undercover. I won't talk to him again until he finds Mordred, and who knows how long that'll take—"

"But why," Pansy whined. "Doesn't Potter know you need to get laid?"

"This Mordred guy is apparently some kind of destructive billionaire with bad intentions," Daphne reminded her. "I think stopping wizarding terrorism is probably more pressing to Harry Potter's agenda than my carnal urges."

"Eh, potato, potato. In any case, I'm hearing far too much work," Pansy complained, "and not nearly enough details. Spill, Daph."

"I—"

What was there to say, really? That for three years she'd barely slept for seeing Cadmus Peverell in her dreams? That for over a thousand nights she'd heard his voice and felt his touch and now, finally—when she could finally think of him without crying—the only man she had any sort of connection with was gone?

"He's…"

She sighed.

He has the kindest eyes, she wanted to say. Brown and discerning and quick to take in details. He was observant in ways that struck her as meaningful; he seemed to know what she was thinking before she said a word. Not like Cadmus, who was observant in something of an impish way—a playful how can I use this later? sort of way—but rather, Cadell looked at her as if he were seeing her through a totally different lens. Cadmus had known her as a girl, lost and finding her way and constantly needing to be reassured, but Cadell looked at her as a woman. A woman who'd fought for her place in the world, just as he had. He was someone now he had never been before, and no one who had known him before could conceivably see the difference. But that, Daphne thought, was something she fully understood.

Losing a love changes a person. Molds you into something unrecognizable and unfamiliar. But time changes you, too, as Daphne had learned. Eventually the pain gets easier to bear, and then even that is painful. Like maybe your body is forgetting how it felt to lay beside him, so it cruelly permits you to breathe. Sometimes the breath of relief that inevitably follows heartbreak is the very worst of the pain.

I know, Cadell had said when she told him, surprised the words even managed to leave her constitution without simply swallowing her up. I thought for a long time I wanted to drown, only to
feel guilty for continuing to swim.

And now? she'd asked him. Is it better now?

He'd looked at her like no one had ever looked at her. Like nobody could ever look at her, for not possessing the capacity to understand the volumes of what she'd become.

If I know one thing about life, he'd started to say—in a moment so similar to one she'd had nearly three years before that she thought she might have fallen through the looking glass—and she'd paused him, reaching across the table to take his hand.

It's that it goes on, she finished for him, and she'd known right then Cadell Hawkworth wasn't something that would fade.

"Never mind. You don't have to say anything," Pansy said, interrupting Daphne's thoughts with a surprisingly gentle tone. "I can see it on your face. You like him. That's all."

Daphne nodded slowly.

Yes.

She liked him.

It didn't even feel like a betrayal of her past, really, because she would never have felt this way about Cadell Hawkworth if she'd met him back then. She could only feel this way now. She could only feel this for having been what she'd become because of Cadmus. After all, Cadmus, a man who had only ever known who he was with his brothers standing beside him, had been the one to teach Daphne she could stand alone.

"So you have to wait, what, a couple of weeks, then?" Pansy guessed, biting daintily into a chocolate frog. "You can wait that long. You already waited three years."

Daphne chuckled under her breath. "True," she agreed. "Compared to three years, a few weeks is nothing."

"Easy," Pansy assured her. "You're fine."

To that, Daphne Greengrass let out a breath she felt she'd been holding a long, long time.

"Yes," Daphne confirmed. "I'm fine."

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**Eight Fucking Months Later**

*Lady Mystic's House of Reverie*

*Knockturn Alley*

*July 3, 2007*

*9:15 p.m.*

"Are you and Potter sure about this?" Parvati asked Daphne, the silver veil floating above her platinum-white hair. She wasn't always so formal, but considering the occasion, she'd leaned into looking unearthly and ethereal in her costume as Cassandra, Knockturn's resident Lady Mystic. Beside her, Blaise fidgeted with the gold circlet on his head, squinting at himself in the mirror. "Oi, Zabini," Parvati said, snapping her fingers. "Focus."

"Right," Blaise agreed, turning back to Daphne. "You look great."
"That's not what we were talking about," Parvati growled, glaring at him. Daphne sighed, suspecting she was being held hostage to a very niche brand of foreplay before the other two went off to play their respective roles as the heads of secret criminal enterprises. "She's putting her life in danger, you idiot—"

"I put my life in danger all the time," Daphne reminded Parvati. "It's what we do every day, isn't it?"

Parvati frowned. "Yes, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. This guy's trouble," she warned. "I don't trust him or his associates, and if this doesn't work—"

"Oh, relax, Lady Mystic," Blaise advised, his fingers brushing lightly over the small of Parvati's back. "If you get all riled up now, your revel won't be any fun at all."

"You know I hate these," Parvati told him gruffly, though she leaned in gratefully at his touch. "I'm not Dionisia, Blaise. I'm not a pimp."

"A madame, you mean," Blaise assured her with a furtive laugh, "and anyway, we know. You're just doing Potter and Deathstar a favor."

"You really are," Daphne assured her. "Cadell's been out of contact for too long. After his last message, Harry suggested this as the best way to get in touch with him discreetly, and I agreed. In fact, I offered," she added, though she pointedly didn't mention she had her own agenda for doing so—largely because Parvati already knew as much. Daphne suspected she'd known for quite a long time, though she did them both the favor of not bringing it up.

Love fiercely, love brightly, because someone waits for you.

"Well, fine," Parvati permitted after a moment, eyeing Daphne with approval again. "You do make an excellent harlot."

Daphne glanced down at herself, stifling a sigh. Parvati had gone with Lady Revel's previous theme of overdone French gowns (this one being at least slightly less pretentious and more luxurious, as it was one of Mel's couture designs). Daphne also wore a complex silver-powdered wig on her head that wasn't particularly comfortable, though admittedly the priestess' wimple she'd worn in the Avalonian Order had been far less flattering.

"Thanks, I guess," she sighed. "Shall we?"

"Shall we entertain a wizarding terrorist and a dozen of his most disgusting associates? If we must," Parvati sniffed distastefully, "then I suppose we shall."

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9:23 p.m.

It had been a relief to receive the scroll inviting them to Lady Mystic's for a revel. The rebuilt House of Fortune (now House of Reverie) was still widely considered a safe haven for people of their underground circle, and was simultaneously an inconspicuous place for a meeting as much as it was the only place Cadell could conceivably speak to someone representing the Ministry. A polyjuiced Theo, he assumed, as Harry was unlikely to put himself at this much risk. Maybe Draco or Hermione.

It had never occurred to Cadell they might try to hide someone in plain sight.

"This is Lady Guinevere," said Cassandra, the public persona belonging to Parvati Patil. Cadell
didn't know her well, but Harry had assured him prior to his calculated escape underground that she could be trusted. Besides, Cadell's own experience with her had certainly been… illuminating, to say the least.

The woman she beckoned stepped forward, long lashes framing unforgettable hazel eyes.

"My Lords," offered a faultlessly disguised but aptly-named Lady Guinevere, sweeping her skirts back in a flawless curtsy. "Might one of you be wanting entertainment?"

She was skirting Cadell's eye. Smart, he thought. Wouldn't want it to look planned. It was perfectly fine for him to stare at her, but certainly not the other way around.

Beside him, Mordred looked entirely too delighted. He was a notably unhandsome man, though certainly unremarkable. There was a reason his face was so difficult to identify, whether the witnesses' memories (or alternatively, their Gringotts vaults) had been modified or not. Whatever else Mordred was, he was an incredibly forgettable man—pale with watery blue eyes, slightly thick around the waist, and identifiable only by a consistently receded hairline and a tendency to wear colorless clothing—who was better known for his despicable deeds than for any notable physicalities.

"Ah," Mordred said with a laugh, "you wouldn't make it so easy for us, would you, Lady Guinevere?"

"Guinevere is my most uniquely talented offering," Cassandra cut in, loftily suggestive. "She doesn't come cheaply. Or easily."

"Hm," Mordred said, curling a hand around his mouth. "And by unique talents, you mean…?"

Lady Guinevere gave him a sweetly delicate smile. She could play the coquette like no one Cadell had ever seen, and he'd seen quite a lot. Particularly over the past eight months. His stomach churned at the knowledge, realizing again how long it had been. *I've missed you, I thought of you every day, and I won't let him hurt you, I won't let him touch you—*

But of course, he'd been foolish to worry. She could handle herself. In a sweeping motion, Lady Guinevere had plucked a narrow rapier free from its place above the hearth, tossing it into the air and catching it deftly in one hand before aiming it daringly at Mordred.

"My Lord," she said with feigned bemusement, "you didn't think I meant anything *untoward*, did you?"

Slowly, she tucked the rapier under Mordred's chin, lifting it as he smiled broadly.

"I hope you have a champion for me, My Lord," she told him, and finally permitted her gaze to rest on Cadell's. "Maybe this one?" she asked, shifting the point of the rapier to aim it against his chest.

She gave a slight flick of her wrist, prompting him to inhale sharply as the blade edged closer to his throat.

"What's your name, soldier?" beckoned Lady Guinevere.

Cadell glanced questioningly at the aptly-named Lady Mystic, who shrugged.

"This is a safe place, gentlemen," she assured him. "The only names required are the ones you wish to use."
"Well, Tal?" Mordred asked, grinning at Cadell. "You heard the lady. She wants a name and a fight, and I'm happy to give one if you'll give the other."

If only you meant that, Cadell thought grimly, I could have been home months ago.

Home.

Not that he had even one anymore.

He fixed his attention on Lady Guinevere, who held the blade steady at his throat. "Is there a name, My Lord?"

"Talon," Mordred provided on Cadell's behalf, opting for his criminal moniker before turning to him, gesturing him forward in what was most likely a test. "You wouldn't leave the lady wanting, would you, Tal?"

Cadell arched a brow at Lady Guinevere. Are you sure you know what you're doing?

The corners of her lips quirked. Always.

He reached out without a breath of warning, taking hold of her rapier's hilt and using her own grip to yank her closer, aiming the tip of the blade upright. He locked her in place against him, drawing his concealed dagger with his free hand and carefully pressing the flat of his blade to her neck.

She held her breath, careful not to move.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Sir Talon," she said. The shallow breaths she took beneath his dagger swelled against his chest. "The rapier is a weapon best suited to thrusting. Perhaps that isn't one of your skills?"

Behind them, Mordred chuckled, obviously enjoying the show.

Cadell spun Lady Guinevere out in something of a dance, leaning back on his heel to snatch the other rapier from the wall as she returned with a rapid pivot, aiming her blade directly at him.

"Lose the dagger," she commanded.

Obediently, he tucked it back into the waistband of his trousers.

"Now," she beckoned, leaning into a fighting stance, "are you sure you know how to wield something so large, My Lord?"

"You flatter me," Cadell said drily, setting himself across from her. "Aren't you worried you might be overselling?"

She smiled. "You should see me when I'm selling something," she replied, and stepped forward, taking the first shot.

He parried her blade away, stepping back and casting out for space around the room, the two of them carefully circling each other. He jabbed forward once, testing, but she was far too clever to take the bait. She swiped at his wrist instead, slicing a line into it, and he glanced down, eyeing the thin trail of blood her blade had left behind.

"I see," he said softly, tiny beads of crimson swelling up to the surface of his skin. "This isn't a game, is it?"
She shook her head, lips twisting up slyly. "Not when so many other men would die to have me, My Lord."

Behind them, Mordred chuckled again. She was playing her part perfectly.

Now, though, it was Cadell's turn.

A sharp jab forward sent her leaping back. She recovered quickly, aiming for him again, but a predictive step to the side left her unbalanced. No doubt the dress was heavy and cumbersome, and she only managed to resume her stance in time to prevent a jab near her neck. Cadell sliced quickly, a long silvery curl falling from her wig to the ground between them, and she looked down at it with surprise before glancing up at him.

"Looks better on the floor," he remarked to her, "don't you think?"

Her mouth twisted.

She lunged, and he stepped back, drawing her forward in time to duck under her blade and around to her left, materializing on her other side as she spun half a beat too late. He slid an arm around her waist, locking her against him, and shifted to hold his blade against her chest, feeling her breath rise and fall heavily under the weight of his hand.

"Drop it," he said in her ear.

She let the rapier fall from her hand.

Then, sharply, she stepped hard on his foot, prompting him to release her with a searing burst of pain, and she snatched the pommel of his rapier from his own hand, aiming the blade warningly up at his throat.

He paused, breathing hard, and looked down at her.

He could overpower her if he wanted to; the leverage required to hold the sword upright would have her at a disadvantage, given her size.

But surely this much had been believable enough.

"Whatever she costs," he said to Lady Mystic, not taking his eyes from the flawlessly camouflaged courtesan, "I'll pay it. I have to have her."

Lady Guinevere's mouth twitched, satisfied.

"Done," Cassandra said at once, and Lady Guinevere stepped backwards, falling into a curtsy. "You won't regret it, My Lord. And while you enjoy our Guinevere, we'll keep your employer busy," she added with a pointed glance at Mordred, "whatever his entertainment preferences are."

Lady Guinevere stepped forward, taking Cadell's hand, and led him up the stairs. He paused for a moment to glance over his shoulder, eyeing Mordred for evidence of suspicion; when he found none, he turned to follow his prize for the evening, her hips swaying purposefully as she led him through a hall of elaborately painted bedrooms.

"My Lord Talon," she said, beckoning him into a suite, and he strode inside without comment, waiting until the door closed behind them.

The moment it did, she let out a breath, carefully casting a silencing charm.
"Cadell," she said, and in an instant, he felt a surge of relief.

She'd bought him an hour of pretend, and it would be the realest thing he'd possessed in almost a year.

Perhaps more, even.

"Daphne," he said, and slowly, she offered him the warmth of her brilliant smile.

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10:15 p.m.

"Are you alright?" she asked, rushing towards him. She checked the thin scratch on his wrist, healing it quickly, and he chuckled a little under his breath at her concern.

"That was nothing," he assured her. "I'm a hardened criminal now," he joked, toying with her wig as she fussed over his arm. "Can't be too upset to lose a little blood from time to time."

"Well, listen, we don't have a lot of time," she said, pulling him after her to the bed and removing the wig, setting it down on the ground. "Harry said you've been having trouble?"

"Mordred's extremely secretive," Cadell confirmed with a grimace. "He's got a vast network, too. All I know for sure is that he's definitely been funding some of the smaller attacks on the Ministry. I was able to warn Harry before the last one, but—"

"Why the Ministry?" Daphne asked, frowning. "Is he just an anarchist?"

"Honestly? Hard to tell," Cadell said. "I have no idea what his real identity is. Whoever he is, it's definitely not anyone important. He's not a pureblood," he clarified, "though he seems to have inherited a fortune somehow, or stolen one. How he did it, I have no idea."

"Anything about his background? His education?"

Cadell shook his head. "It took me six months just to earn a spot in his circle," he admitted. "And to get here, I did…" Another grimace. "A lot of illegal things. The only time he even trusted me to begin with was when I started speaking out against my father, but even when I had his ear, he still wanted absolute proof I wasn't working for the Ministry." A wince. "Mordred has… extremely bloody tastes. Combined with his absurd love of treasure, he's practically a goblin."

"Oh, no," Daphne exhaled. In the months since she'd seen him, Cadell's appearance had taken on something of a hardened exterior; the streaks of silver in his hair seemed to have intensified, and his gaze had a hollowness to it he hadn't possessed before. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine. It's necessary, actually, if it means bringing him down. Like I told Harry, this guy is dangerous," Cadell said. "He's a sadist, for sure. And he's angry at someone. But I haven't come any closer to figuring him out—certainly haven't had news in a while."

"That's why Harry sent me in," Daphne said. "He hadn't heard from you in nearly a month. He also wanted me to tell you they can pull you, if you want," she added, which was not at all what Harry had said, but something she would insist on if she had to. She didn't like Cadell being this close to danger; not after seeing his face while he spoke of Mordred. "If you want to get yourself arrested, he'll pull some strings, or I will. You have plenty of friends in the Ministry, Cadell, and—"

Cadell held a finger to his lips, abruptly pausing her to train his ears on a noise from the corridor.
"Dispel the Muffliato," he whispered. "Now."

"What? But—"

"Just do it," he said, and she flicked her wand, complying. "Good, and—"

He surveyed her with a touch of uncertainty, grimacing for a moment, and sighed.

"I'm so sorry about this," he said, and slid the dagger from his waistband.

She felt her eyes widen. "Cadell, what are you—"

He sliced up the lacing of her bodice, tearing at the silk and yanking it open, and then hurried to adjust her on the bed, angling one of her legs over his hips just as the door slammed open, revealing Mordred in the frame.

"Ah," Mordred said with an approving laugh as Cadell's hands tightened on Daphne's thigh, somewhere between pretense and apology. "I didn't actually think you had it in you, Tal."

"Are you wanting to watch, Mordred?" Cadell asked gruffly, and pointedly brushed his lips against Daphne's neck. He kept his eyes on his employer's as he slid the broad side of his tongue up over her jaw, nudging her cheek to have her tip her head back. She complied, fighting a shiver.

"It'll cost you to watch," Daphne managed to warn Mordred, pointedly clawing her nails into Cadell's back. "There are rules here, you know. One at a time, and no free shows."

To that, Cadell tugged her onto his lap, sitting her firmly in his lap.

"If that's all," she said to Mordred, pulling Cadell's mouth to her décolletage, "I have a customer, My Lord."

Mordred permitted a disgusting smile. "Very well. Try to enjoy yourself, Tal," he suggested doubtfully, and laughed again as he vacated the room, leaving Daphne to let out a stifled breath in his absence.

"He is terrible," she said, and glanced down at Cadell, who had dutifully removed his hands from her waist (and his head from her breasts) except for the effort it took to hold her bodice in place, securing it with his hands for lack of lacing. "You really spend all your time with him?"

Cadell nodded morosely. "He's deeply unpleasant. And I told you, he still clearly doesn't trust me," he added, gesturing over his shoulder. "He suspects me of Ministry cooperation, which makes sense, seeing as all my brothers are either in the British Ministry or MACUSA. Still," he exhaled, shaking his head and gesturing to her ruined bodice. "I'm genuinely sorry about this, but if he thought I wasn't..." A pause. "It would set me back months of progress. And I really don't want to be doing this much longer."

He leaned away, shifting to remove her from his lap, but at the thought of releasing him, she hastily shook her head.

"Not yet," she murmured, pulling him back to her. "He might come back."

He glanced up at her, surprised. "Probably not. I mean, not now that he thinks I'm—"

"Cadell." Daphne closed her eyes, sliding her fingers through his hair and then shifting his hands, letting her bodice fall open beneath them. "He might come back."
She felt his breath catch. "Yes, I… I suppose that's possible."

His arms came around her slowly, gently wrapping around her waist.

"Do you do this often?" she asked him.

"What, visit brothels? Mordred does. I don't generally partake, which is why I thought he might find it suspicious." He swallowed, his pulse quickening next to hers as she let her fingers slip, tracing the vertebrae of his neck. "But nobody in their right mind could deny you. If it were anyone else, I'm sure he'd have more doubts, but you, you're—"

"Did you think of me?" she asked tangentially, shifting a little on his lap. He stifled a groan and she felt her body tense in response, quietly attuned to each of his sensations.

"Yes. Constantly." He drew two fingers along the sliced opening of her bodice, lightly tracing a line from her throat to her navel. "Did you think of me?"

Yes. She wasn't even assigned to this case and still, she'd asked Harry for news from the investigation at every given opportunity. She'd checked every Gringotts account of every wealthy suspected criminal for months. She'd even done extensive research on the possible meaning of Mordred, the character from Arthurian legend. She assumed for a time Mordred's identity had been chosen for its significance to the Avalonian Order, but once she'd found it being used more than once, she realized it must mean something more. Mordred, who killed King Arthur.

Cadell's lips pressed lightly to the spot between her breasts and she tightened her fingers in his hair, her breath quickening.

Yes, she'd thought of him. Of this, in fact. And yes, the whole thing was pretense, but now she knew he was alive and well (sort of), a few other things came to mind aside from the investigation about Mordred. Like the way Cadell felt when he was pressed against her, his blade held precariously to her neck. That, and the way he looked at her. Sure, she was dressed as a whore and there was certainly a lot to take in even without looking closely, but the shiver he gave her wasn't for having undressed her with his eyes. It was for how he would have touched her if she let him.

His hands slid under her dress, fingers toying with the lace of her stockings.

"You haven't answered my question," he said, glancing up at her. "Did you think of me, Daphne?"

Oh, you have no idea, she thought. If you only knew the selfish way I put you to use while you were playing sidekick to an evil man's games and betraying your name to catch a twisted murderer. If you had any clue the things I had you do to me in bed while you were here, risking your life, forced to blacken the memory of your dead father—

"Your dead father," she said, suddenly going rigid at a piece of Arthuriana she hadn't yet connected, and Cadell blinked.

"What?" he asked, leaning away. "Is that… hold on, what—"

"In the myths, Mordred is sometimes Arthur's son—and you said this Mordred only trusted you after you spoke against your father," Daphne realized. "Maybe it wasn't because you were proving you weren't working for the Ministry—maybe it's because it was your father."

He paused, letting that sink in, and then nodded slowly.

"That makes sense." Cadell fell silent for a moment, frowning to himself. "So you think Mordred
might be doing all this to act against his father? But then why attack the Ministry?"

"Arthur is a political figurehead. Maybe Mordred's father is in the Ministry, or he was," Daphne said, thoughts whirring. "Maybe they're estranged?"

"I could ask him questions about his father," Cadell agreed, thinking it over. "I've never really known what connection to make with him, but there might be something to that—"

"Yes, you'll have to," Daphne said firmly, glancing down at him. "You'll have to bond with him over it. The more details you pick up about his adolescence, the more we can figure out who he is. Do you know how old he is?"

"In his early forties?" Cadell guessed. "He projects like a man in his fifties, but he sometimes doesn't know references his older associates make. He plays it off, or tries to, but I think he's younger than he seems."


"Unlikely," Cadell said, shaking his head. "I don't think he got a formal education. He also seems to know some things that aren't taught at Hogwarts; wandless stuff."

Daphne nodded, distractedly toying with Cadell's hair. "I can pull a list of all the children born in the 1960s and cross-reference it with a list of Hogwarts attendees in the seventies; that could help. And—"

He cut her off, tugging her closer and tugging her forehead down to his.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "Daphne, thank you."

She blinked, swallowing hard. She was suddenly highly conscious of his lips and where they rested near her cheek, just a reckless breath away from her mouth.

"It's my job," she reminded him, throat dry.

"No, it isn't," he corrected. "This is an Auror investigation. The Department of Mysteries has no involvement in this, and yet here you are. Helping me. Putting your life at risk. You could have sent anyone, but—"

"But I was selfish," she cut in, running her fingers lightly over his mouth. "Because I wanted to be the one to remind you where you belong."

She felt his breath hitch beneath her touch. "You did?"

She swallowed hard, managing a nod. "I wanted you to see me, Cadell. I wanted you to walk in and find me here and feel better. I wanted to be alone with you." She paused, hesitating, and then rushed out, "And I wanted you to want me. I could have found another way to get you alone, but—"

She rested a hand on his chest, letting her fingers spread over the fabric.

"I wanted you to want me," she whispered, tightening her fingers in his shirt, and his arm slid around her waist again, securing her against him. "And now, Cadell, I want you to come home. I want you to show up at my flat, take me to dinner, and then I want you to try to take my clothes off, and I want to be able to say 'oh no, Cadell, so sorry I can't, I'm not that type of girl' and I want you to say 'of course you're not, Daphne, of course not, don't worry I'll call you tomorrow' and then
"I want to stop you from leaving at the last second because I am that type of girl," she struggled to say, "and because it's been eight fucking months and I've been waiting—"

"Daphne," Cadell exhaled, pulling her mouth to his and kissing her firmly, his hands rising to take hold of either side of her face. "I swear, if I could have been here sooner—"

"Shut up," she gasped, and with a hurried, collective push-and-pull amid antiquated skirts he had her on her back, her fingers dropping to tug at the button of his trousers. He stopped, rearing back onto his knees and frowned, his fingers looped with confusion around the belt of her stockings.

"Jesus," he said under his breath, "what is this, a trap?"

She managed a low, desperate laugh, though it caught in her throat for a moment once she watched him fumble for the dagger he'd used to cut her bodice, now pressed flat against her thigh. She held her breath, the cold metal sending a shiver up her spine.

"My sincerest apologies," he told her at a breathless murmur, and sliced the knife upwards, tearing at her underwear for good measure. "I only have an hour, you understand—"

"Yes, fine, I forgive you," she gasped, and he tossed the knife onto the nightstand beside the frame, taking her in his arms again before tugging her down on the bed, wrapping her legs around his hips.

He paused, pressing his forehead to hers, and laughed a little.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I'm a little nervous. Been a while."

She kissed the hesitation from his mouth, licking the smoky aftertaste of scotch from his lips to a little hint of spearmint, tasting it delicately on his tongue. She slid her fingers through his hair and held him steady, shifting her hips with his until the two of them were moving in perfect concert; until they were nothing but seabound tides, aligned in longing synchronicity. He slid his hand around the back of her head, cradling it, and in response, she wrapped her fingers around his wrist, locking him in place.

When he slid inside her, it was like a sigh. Like a whisper of relief. Like a breeze that came in from the shore. She tensed around him, adjusting to the feel of him, and felt him suck in a breath; like a tremor. Like an earthquake. Like a thunderclap on high.

"Come home," she whispered to him, arching her back and digging her heels into his thighs to pull him closer, closer, and please, please, closer. "Come home, Cadell Hawkworth, I've waited long enough—"

He shivered, fingers tightening in her hair as he slipped his lips over her neck and down to her chest, brushing reverently across her ruined bodice.

"Home," he echoed, voice hoarse with gratitude and longing, and in the same moment, Daphne felt herself shatter and fall, twisted and wrenched to searing perfection before floating, weightless, to wrap her arms around his neck, pressing her lips to the column of his throat.

11:15 p.m.

"How was she?" Mordred asked from a velvet fainting couch as Cadell descended the stairs, jumping at the sound of his voice.
"Jesus, fuck," Cadell exhaled, pressing the heel of his hand into his chest and then hurrying to straighten his clothes, running a hand through his hair. "Have you really just been sitting there?"

Mordred shrugged, rising to his feet to throw an arm around Cadell's shoulders. "Well, excuse my lack of faith, Tal, but I didn't think you cared much for the fairer sex," he remarked. "Never seen you delight in pleasures of the flesh before."

Cadell tried not to grimace, managing instead, "You saw her. That's not the usual offering."

"No, no, it isn't," Mordred agreed, chuckling to himself. "A remarkable find. Would've had her myself, you know, if you weren't so eager."

"Well, have to take my opportunities when they come around," Cadell said, fighting to disguise his violent opposition to the idea of Mordred touching Daphne before forcing himself to add, "Which is something my father used to say. Fucking bastard," he muttered, possibly gratuitously. "Did I ever tell you he tried to take me in himself after I killed that Snatcher?"

"Did he?" Mordred asked, mouth tightening. "Sounds like the sort of thing my father would do. Only ever put me to work, til I wasn't even good enough for that. 'Law enforcement,' what a fucking joke, and—" He blinked, catching himself. "Frankly," he amended darkly, "I wish I'd just killed him."

Cadell bit his tongue, trying not to seem too eager. "Well, happy to swap bad dad stories anytime. In the meantime, I should probably pay Lady Mystic," he said, gesturing down the corridor, and Mordred shrugged.

"Don't take too long."

"Mordred warned. "I've got some funds to deposit in the morning. I'll want you making sure I don't run into any…" He trailed off, smiling absently. "Problems."

Cadell fought a shudder and nodded quickly, aiming himself into the other room. Parvati was waiting expectantly and he shut the door carefully behind him, beckoning to her for a quill and parchment.

"Give this to Daphne," he murmured, sketching something onto the page and folding it up, handing it to her. "And tell her that her hunch is right. Mordred's father was in the Ministry—Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Will do," Parvati said, smiling slightly. "By the way," she added slyly, "I told you, didn't I? That someone was waiting for you."

Love fiercely, love brightly, because someone waits for you.

She'd said that to him three years ago. Had she known even then?

"You're terrifying," he told her, and her smile broadened.

"Yes," she agreed. "It's one of my many charms."

_Daphne Greengrass' flat
Knockturn Alley
3:13 a.m._

"Why are you still awake?" Pansy demanded, her head flickering into the flames of Daphne's fireplace approximately five minutes after she'd sent an owl with explicit instructions to cause a
"You realize I'm supposed to be sleeping, as a human child is about to come out of me at literally any moment—"

"It's Percy's, human isn't exactly a given," Daphne replied, not looking up from her books to catch Pansy's predictable scowl, "and listen, help me out with this. We know Mordred's father was in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but we don't know when. Could his father have been, I don't know. An Auror?"

"No," Pansy said without hesitation, and Daphne looked up, frowning. "No, not an Auror. The groups and causes he supports attack municipal workers, not Aurors. If he wanted revenge on his father—" Pansy paused. "You know who we need, don't you? If we're talking problematic fathers, that is."

Five minutes later, Theo apparated into Daphne's flat.

"Yes?" he said. "I heard patricide and came running."

"Mordred is doing all of this to get revenge on his father, who must have worked for the Ministry," Daphne confirmed, and Theo tilted his head, considering that information. "Who could it be?"

"Well, anyone prominent enough in the Ministry would have recognizable children, too," Theo said, frowning. "It'd be pretty fucking hard to be anonymous."

"Not if he's an illegitimate son, like you said," Pansy reminded Daphne. "He wouldn't have gone to Hogwarts. Probably would have been homeschooled."

"Okay, so we're looking for someone who cheated on his wife about forty years ago," Daphne said, sighing. "which, to be clear, could have been anyone back then. Any ideas?"

"Well, hold on, back to the dad point," Theo said, lifting a finger in thought. "Someone who was a terrible father to his illegitimate son was probably just as bad to his legitimate children. And the Ministry is filled with horrifying fathers," he added, making a face. "Draco's, for example. Or Orion Black. Hell, everyone whose son became a Death Eater, right? Look at fucking Barty Crouch—"

"God, I wonder what happened to the Crouch fortune," Pansy muttered, biting into yet another chocolate frog and pondering it as Daphne searched aimlessly through a pile of old Ministry employment records. "He and his son were the last of that pureblood line, remember?"

"Don't know," Theo said, and frowned. "Was it really a fortune?"

"Yes, absolutely it was. Their vault was near my parents'. It was filled with goblin silver, I remember that much—"

"Goblin silver? Damn, wouldn't have guessed. Did they have a relationship with goblins?"

"Of course, Theodore, don't be stupid. The family was one of the co-founders of Gringotts. I heard they even knew a bit of goblin magic, having made so many deals with them over the years—"

"Wait," Daphne said, looking up. "Gringotts?"

"Yes," Pansy said, licking chocolate from her fingers. "The bank? You may have heard of it."

"Gringotts," Daphne repeated, blinking. "That could be how money gets transferred without any records! Harry said he knew someone on the inside, and—oh my god," she said, jolting forward
and hunting through her records, levitating the relevant ones up and grabbing them. "Barty Crouch Sr checked into Saint Mungo's for exactly thirty minutes in 1964," she said, half-squealing with disbelief as she shoved the hospital records under Theo's nose. "He wasn't there for any reason, he just signed in as a visitor at the same time—yes," she yelped, smacking Theo hard in the abdomen. "He went one hour after a baby boy was born in the hospital! No name listed, fuck—give me the payment records," she commanded, rising to her feet and pacing the floor as Theo hastily rose with her, shoving them into her hands.

"Mordred's aliases must be meaningful," Daphne continued to mutter, thinking aloud. "Mordred kills his father, that's easy, but that wasn't the only name he used."

"What else was he called?" Theo asked, and Daphne scanned the list.

"Loki was his most common name," she said, frowning. "Do either of you know anything about Norse mythology?"

"Ooh, hang on," Pansy said, turning over her shoulder. "WEASLEY!"

From behind her, a muffled voice was audible. "Wh- what is i- is it time, or—?"

"No, hush, the baby's still in me. What's the significance of 'Loki' if a man who hated his father was using it as an alias?"

A rumpled Percy revealed himself in the flames beside his wife, his glasses sitting crooked on the edge of his nose.

"Loki is the Norse god of mischief," he said in the midst a broad yawn, "but—" Another yawn. "For fatherhood, specifically—"

"USE YOUR WORDS, WEASLEY," Pansy barked, and Percy hastily straightened his glasses, shoving them up his nose.

"Odin banished Loki," Percy supplied, blearily squinting at Daphne and Theo. "Why, what's this about?"

"Barty Crouch," Daphne explained grimly. "I think Mordred is his illegitimate son."

"Oh," Percy said, blinking. "Well, I worked for Crouch as his assistant. He had a… an account manager of some kind. I think. Definitely someone who had access to his money," he added, frowning. "He was also regularly in communication with goblins. And he once asked me to send an owl closing off access to his Gringotts account."

"That's the banishment! Crouch must have locked Mordred out of the Gringotts account," Daphne said, smacking Theo again. "Where's the bank records?"

He shoved them at her, pointedly holding himself at arm's length.

"Thanks… let's see… when was that, Percy?"


"Great, yes, okay—"

Daphne shuffled through the records until she abruptly stopped, blinking, and stared down at the page.
"Here it is," she said, disbelieving. "You were right, Percy. One name was cut from Barty Crouch Sr's Gringotts account in 1994."

"His other son must have done it," Theo pointed out, glancing over Daphne's shoulder. "Crouch was under the Imperius curse back then."

"Yes," Percy lamented, "I remember. I'm afraid I don't have a very good eye for other people's cursed behavior."

"You think?" Pansy trumpeted brusquely, though she conceded to lean over, kissing his cheek in the fireplace.

"Oh my god," Daphne said, and looked up so sharply she knocked into Theo, sending him reeling. "Oh my god, get Harry. Get Harry right now."

"Right," Theo agreed, fumbling for his wand and conjuring a patronus. "Yes, okay, and… what do you want me to tell him, exactly?" he asked warily, frowning at Daphne with confusion.

"Tell him... tell him we've got him," she said, looking up from the Gringotts records and permitting a slow, grim smile. "Tell Harry we've finally got Mordred."

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_Somewhere literally underground_  
_Possibly in England?_  
_10:00 p.m._

"Boss," grunted one of Mordred's men. "You got that visitor arrivin' shortly."

"Ah, excellent," Mordred said, turning to grin cruelly at Cadell. "Got a surprise for you, Tal."

"For me?" Cadell asked, abruptly discomfited. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Ah, well. More of a surprise for me, actually. That Lady Mystic put out word Lady Guinevere was looking for another fare," Mordred remarked, leaning back in his chair as Cadell felt the blood drain from his face, leaving him chilled. "I told her I'd have a bite this time, if the lady felt up for a trip."

Cadell cleared his throat. "Oh. And she said—?"

There was a timely rustle of silks and the low sound of heels clipping on the wooden floor in the darkened old tavern as Daphne materialized in another elaborate French ball gown, her fingers wrapped loosely around an antique baby rattle that she then dropped none-too-carefully on the floor.

"You asked for me, My Lord?" she said to Mordred, who spared another nasty smile in Cadell's direction, beckoning for her to come closer. "I'm afraid I'm used to slightly more amenable ambiances. Where are we, exactly?"

"Ah, well there's a reason I sent your employer a portkey, love," remarked Mordred. "This place is untraceable, and even if it weren't, I'd hardly give that information away."

"Mm, of course." Daphne took a few steps forward, sparing Cadell a lascivious glance. "Not very pleased to see me again, Sir Talon?"
She gave him a meaningful look, toying with her necklace.

An ostentatious locket.

Cadell blinked, recognizing its purpose.

"Perhaps you might feel safer with me," he suggested to her, keeping his tone even. "If Mordred isn't up for making you comfortable, that is."

"Ah, well, in my experience pain can be sweet," she said, winking at Cadell, "but you're right, My Lord. I do have a strict set of rules. And if your master isn't up for following them, then, well—"
She gave a pretty, delicate shrug before reaching out, brushing her fingers below his chin. "I suppose I could be amenable to another tas-

"You're in a tavern below the Thames," Mordred cut in sharply, as Daphne turned slowly to face him, immediately extracting her hands from Cadell. "The Arrogant Bastard," he clarified at a mutter, and Daphne smiled.

"You have a very consistent aesthetic, My Lord," she told him, shoving him back in his chair and leaning forward. "Mordred. It's all very cleverly related, isn't it? The name. The clubhouse. And," she murmured, climbing delicately into his lap and turning to whisper in his ear, "the way you've spent your father's fortune systematically dismantling everything he publicly stood for."

Mordred stiffened, and Cadell blinked.

"Oh, love, I know all of it," Daphne lamented falsely, tutting softly under her breath. "Your father never gave you anything he gave to his other son, did he? His name. A Hogwarts education. You were left to your own devices your entire life, but at least he gave you a job, right? Until he took that from you, too."

Mordred's hand shifted for his wand and Cadell turned, aiming his concealed dagger directly under Mordred's chin.

"Don't move," he advised.

In the same motion, all of Mordred's associates drew their wands, aiming them at Cadell, who aimed his own with his free hand. He took stock of the room quickly, identifying everyone in the tavern and quantifying their strengths; six of Mordred's circle of twelve were present. Though, helpfully, it was the least talented six.

Daphne, meanwhile, smiled beatifically down at Mordred.

"Oh, not to worry, My Lord, I'm sure Talon here could kill you faster than any of these gents can cast a spell, but we're not nearly done yet. We have a whole history lesson to go through, don't we? Let's start with your origin story," she determined, stroking a long fingernail across his cheek.

"You're the son of Barty Crouch," she said, and Mordred's color drained from his face, "but he never let you claim anything, did he? His name. A Hogwarts education. You were left to your own devices your entire life, but at least he gave you a job, right? Until he took that from you, too."

Mordred tightened his grip on the chair. "Don't you fucking say my—"

"Ragnuk." She smiled broadly as he lurched forward, stopping only as Cadell's blade kissed the side of his neck. "Ragnuk Fitzroy, born on the twenty-seventh of April, 1964. In the absence of

"Who, me? No, don't be silly," Daphne assured him, laughing. "I'm just a civic-minded whore you'll never have the pleasure of fucking who wants you to die in prison, Mordred. Or here," she said with a shrug. "We'll see how the rest of this goes."

"Do you realize how many people I have in my pocket?" he hissed to her. "How many fucking vaults I control?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, actually," Daphne remarked. "Which is why I brought along a few personal friends. Draco?" she asked, speaking into the locket. "Hermione, would you two join me, please? You heard Ragnuk, I presume."

"Not to worry, Daph," came Draco's voice in the room. "We arrived a couple of minutes ago."

Immediately, two of Mordred's associates dropped to the floor.

"Oh, come on," Hermione's voice sighed. "I thought we were handling this?"

"Granger, don't be ridiculous," Draco's voice remarked. "You know Potter can't help a dramatic entrance."

There was a ripple of a cloak as Harry revealed himself in the room.

"Nope," he agreed, looking immensely pleased with himself. "I certainly can't, Malfoy. Now, Ragnuk," he said to Mordred, "you can try to fight if you want. Or not." He shrugged. "With your finances already under Ministry control and your Gringotts associates apprehended, I don't think you have any favors left to call in. So, after my colleagues here arrest everyone in this room—"

He stopped, evidently waiting for something, and Mordred scowled.

"You think you're invincible, Harry Potter, but you're nothing but a—"

Harry cut him off with a finger, calling for pause.

"Hello?" Harry barked over his shoulder, and Draco and Hermione promptly flickered into view. "I had a perfect setup for you two. Didn't you hear me say to arrest everyone?"

"Sorry," Draco drawled, eyeing his fingernails. "I make a point of not listening to your maniacal speeches."

"Malfoy, honestly," Hermione sighed, throwing her hands up. "Could you not—"

"That, and also, I was getting this," Draco remarked, and leisurely tossed a narrow vial to one of Mordred's associates. The glass broke easily at his feet, releasing a hazy pink vapor into the air and delivering him to collapse as one of the other associates aimed a spell at Daphne's back, forcing Cadell to counter with the wand in his left hand.

At once, there was a flurry of activity. Draco, Hermione, and Harry dueling against the other three as Daphne yanked her skirts up to retrieve her own wand from where it had been laced to her stocking, holding it under Mordred's chin.

"Just so you know," she murmured to Mordred as he glared at her, "because of you I didn't have sex
for eight months, and I'm really not happy about the lost time. So, needless to say, I hope you don't come quietly," she told him, her painted lips twitching with promise, "because I know I certainly won't."

Her gaze flicked pointedly to Cadell, who hastily suppressed a smile.

"You don't need him alive for anything, do you?" he asked Daphne.

She turned to Mordred, scrutinizing him beneath her delicate lashes.

"You fucking bitch," Mordred hissed. "You're going to regret this."

"Somehow I doubt that," she replied, twisting her wand, and without another word, Mordred's chin dropped, head lolling to the side as Cadell grandly offered Daphne his hand, easing her down from Mordred's lap.

"Hi," he said as she lightly dusted her voluminous skirts, collecting herself.

"Oh, hey," she replied, straightening her wig. "What's up?"

"Not too much," he said, just as the green light of an Avada zinged between them.

"Oi," Draco called to them. "Some help?"

Of Mordred's remaining associates, only one was still dueling, recklessly shooting killing curses in all directions as Harry and Hermione ducked behind shield charms, leaving Draco to fumble for another vial from his pocket. As Draco gave a moody sigh (muttering something like 'criminals these days' to himself) Cadell took another look at the people on the floor, grimacing.

It wasn't a particularly pretty sight, though Cadell knew better than anyone how richly they all deserved it. In fact, his opposition was merely limited to the fact that there were still six associates remaining. He knew where at least three of them were, given that they were running an errand for Mordred. Unrelated to financial crimes, Mordred had a number of other criminal enterprises that could continue without his leadership. Any of the remaining six could carry on in his absence. Possibly even rebuild.

Cadell sighed, yet another sinking realization uncomfortably filling the hollowness in his chest.

Daphne had already turned to Draco, rolling her eyes. "Fine, we're coming—"

"Actually, wait," Cadell said, reaching out to take her arm as she turned to him with a frown, bemused. "Arrest me with the others," he said to her. "Please."

"What?" she demanded, balking. "But—"

"Just do it. Stun me and arrest me, and please, make sure nobody outside this room knows I turned on Mordred. It's just—" He hesitated, and then exhaled, letting out the toxicity of truth. "I just saw so much shit," he confessed through his teeth, feeling her lace her fingers through his at the tension in his frame. "I could take them all down, Daphne. I thought," he began, and withered. "I thought I'd spend my whole life being the son who failed my father, who destroyed my whole family for nothing, but maybe I'm not. Not if I keep being useful—if I can do this. Not everyone Mordred worked with is in this room," he repeated emphatically as she swallowed hard, forcing a nod, "but I could find them. I could go after them, I could get them all, but—"

"Cadell." She reached up, brushing her fingers against his cheek. "You're just a damn hero, aren't
He closed his eyes, heavily remorseful. "I'll come home soon," he said. "I promise."

She sighed, letting out a long, lamenting breath, and brought her lips to his.

"I just keep missing you, Tal," she murmured, and in lieu of a proper apology, he kissed her as fiercely as he could manage, determining in the process that perhaps criminal justice was a less compelling cause than resigning himself to die slowly between her legs.

"Well, on second thought," he murmured against her lips, but clever witch that she was, she'd already aimed her wand at his temple.

"Stupefy," Daphne whispered.

Cadell dropped to the floor, limp.

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Daphne Greengrass’ Flat
Knockturn Alley
July 21, 2007
5:15 p.m.

"So you finally decided on a name, then?" Daphne asked Pansy’s head, which had burst forth from the flames the moment she'd apparated into her flat. The highly-publicized conclusion of criminal investigations after an anonymous source had left six of the crime lord Mordred's associates tied up in a tavern under the Thames involved a huge, exhausting slew of media coverage (and for Daphne, the requisite skirting thereof). Unfortunately, it had also meant a lot of looking at the calendar, wondering how the days could be moving at such a detestably glacial pace.

"If 'finally' means a mere forty-eight hours after her birth, then yes, we have. Congratulations," Pansy announced grandly, "we named her after you, which I'm sure you're aware is an honor, Daphne Elizabeth, though please do try not to weep—"

"I've told you," Daphne cut in at a groan, "it doesn't count as naming her after me if it's not my name—"

"Oh, hush. Her name is Gwyn," Pansy clarified, rolling her eyes, "because I know your name, you goon. Gwyn Elizabeth Weasley, actually," she added with an undeniable look of mischief, "which is an unfortunate surname, but I'm sure I'll make it up to her via my superior genetics. Mostly I think all these Arthurian crimes have been getting to me. Plus Weasley says it's topical or something, I don't know, I stopped listening—"

"Oh, Pans," Daphne said, surprised. "That's… that's such a nice name, actually."

"Yes, I'm aware," Pansy sniffed. "Now get over here, would you? You promised to come by after work."

"Yes, I know, I'm coming, I was just getting my things, and—"

She paused, something catching her eye.

"Actually—Pans?" she said to the fireplace. "I have to call you back."

"What? Daphne Elizabeth Greengrass, you get over here or so help me—"
But Daphne wasn't listening.

She was looking at the silvery hawk that had landed on her kitchen counter. She'd seen a rough sketch of it once before; delivered to her by a certain Lady Mystic, in fact, after a revel that now seemed so long ago.

*When you see this,* Cadell's scribbled note had said, *you'll know I'm on my way.*

"Hello, Tal," Daphne murmured to the patronus, watching it tilt its head to fix her with Cadell's attentive gaze as she approached. "Got a message for me?"

"Something like that," came a voice from the other side of the door.

At the sound, Daphne smiled. She took a moment, collecting herself, and then crossed the room to fling the door open, letting it swing wide.

"You know, this is a terrible neighborhood," remarked Cadell Hawkworth the moment she filled the frame, his mouth quirking slightly as he glanced down at her from his side of the threshold. "Feels a lot like a place I recently left, actually. Though, in your defense, there do seem to be fewer lifeless bodies on the floor."

She wanted to laugh, but couldn't quite manage it.

"Are you home?" she asked him instead, suddenly quite breathless, and gradually, his smile broadened.

"I'm home," Cadell promised her.

*Love fiercely, love brightly, because someone waits for you.*

"Good," Daphne murmured, slipping her arms around his neck and pulling his lips down to hers. "It's about damn time."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Okay, you people claimed you wanted it, so I DID IT. Happy wayyyy belated birthday pansparks! Also, I swear the previously promised one-shots are still happening. I think the jily will be next? But then again I'm massively unreliable when it comes to these, so we'll see.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Primo

**Pairing:** Nottpott (Theo Nott x Harry Potter)

**Universe:** modern ballet company AU

**Rating:** M for sex

**Summary:** For Colubrina, an utter fave, a ballet! nottpott with a happy ending.

---

It's not like they were rivals. That would imply Theo considered Harry to be competition, which he decidedly did not. Harry Potter was less a rival then he was a latent threat, which wasn't an unremarkable position, but it was an important distinction.

They'd already been cast for the season's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which was well into rehearsals and rapidly approaching opening night. Theo was Romeo, otherwise known as the uncontested lead, and Fleur, the snobby blonde who embodied everything that was so stereotypically implied in the word 'ballerina,' was Juliet. Harry was merely Mercutio—which, okay, fine, it was a decent part, and 'made a beautiful fucking tragedy out of a death scene typically played with laughably tiresome dramatics' or so the early critics would not stop raving (give or take a few embellishments on Theo's part)—but whatever, he wasn't the lead. Harry wasn't the star.

So they weren't rivals. But that certainly didn't mean Theo liked him.

It seemed to be mutual, anyway. Harry always looked at Theo as if he wanted him to stop doing whatever he was doing, eyes narrowing at something or other in a way that suggested he was mentally noting all the unchecked elbows, the incorrect placements of Theo's chin, the little wobbles in moments that could, should, might possibly be better. True, Theo didn't look like the usual dancer—too tall, too thin, derisively called 'gangling' and 'weedy' for most of his training and often dismissed on sight until the moment he actually began to dance—and he certainly wasn't of the Harry Potter school of recklessly altering choreography from night to night despite countless rehearsals, which Theo supposed might have made him look stiff and uncreative by comparison.

Harry Potter somehow managed to be everything Theo wasn't, and Theo positively loathed him for it. He was pretty sure Harry hated him, too, and figured Harry probably thought the same thing everyone else did: that Theo's money had landed him this. Nobody in the company was particularly sparing with affection for Theo, which was a grand total of zero surprise to him. His father was a patron of the Royal Ballet (as everyone knew and was laboriously reminded each time a show began) so in their minds, nepotism had signed Theo's contract for him.

As if his father had ever given one single fuck what he did.

"You're doing it wrong," said Harry from the doorway, interrupting Theo's after hours rehearsal and appearing in the mirror's reflection as Theo nearly had a fucking heart attack, not aware anyone was still left in the building.

He'd been rehearsing the balcony pas de deux in front of the mirror for the last several hours with
Prokofiev's score on repeat in his headphones, the volume turned up each time his frustration grew and his shirt long since discarded for having suffered through hours of sweat. The balcony scene, specifically Theo's opening dance, was the only portion of the ballet which seemed not to impress anyone despite the considerable time he continued to spend on it. It wasn't that there was anything to critique, necessarily; it was simply that praise seemed to be more about Fleur's half of the dance than his. Theo, by comparison, was probably being his too-stiff, too-tall self, as if it were somehow his fault his limbs were so upsetting. He was stronger than he looked, and far more coordinated than he seemed. Still, the chainés were supposed to be captivating, not merely an opportunity for people to admire the set construction before Fleur's dramatic arabesque. He'd been here running it over and over late into the night, more agitated and further prone to stupid mistakes the more he watched himself move.

"Fuck off, Potter," Theo said, but when Harry didn't take that as the dismissal it obviously was—instead frowning at Theo's reflection in the mirror, contemplating something—Theo growled with irritation, removing his headphones from his ears. "Doing what wrong?"

"I don't know. The turns. Everything." Harry was frowning at him, concentrating on something unsaid, and Theo wondered if his father had donated enough money by now that he wouldn't lose his part if he simply punched Harry in the face. "This scene," Harry said, clearing his throat, "it's about love, about the… instability of it."

Theo rubbed his temple, tossing the headphones on the floor. "Great. Excellent notes, Potter. So helpful."

"I'm just saying, you're just—" Harry shrugged, letting his bag fall to the floor. "You're trying too hard. You're making each step so deliberate, but that's not the choreography."

"The choreography is perfect," Theo snapped. "My timing is fine."

"Well, sure," Harry permitted warily, "but the audience can't sympathize with perfection. They don't know how to interpret it. They don't know what it means."

A heap of bullshit, as far as Theo was concerned, but it didn't look like Harry was leaving. Actually, it looked like Harry had been in the process of leaving—warm-ups on, black hair messy and a little stiff with sweat—but he had apparently felt it worth his time to interrupt Theo instead.

"What are you doing here?" Theo asked gruffly. "It's after midnight."

"I get more done when nobody's here distracting me," Harry said, and then without pause, "I mean, do you know why the death scene works so well?"

Jesus. "I don't need a lecture from you," Theo snapped.

He really didn't. He was tired of it, tired of everything, tired of Harry Potter being so fucking good he felt he had a right to comment on Theo's performance even in Theo's private rehearsal space. Theo had heard enough about Harry long before they'd both joined the company; Harry was the precocious one, the chosen one, the golden boy. He was that rare combination of talent and dedication, and by contrast, Theo was… Theo was good. Theo was excellent, obviously, or he wouldn't be the lead. But Harry, their instructors and choreographers had whispered, Harry Potter was gifted. A natural. The best they'd seen in decades.

Theo bristled all over again, and Harry, catching it, shook his head, hastily amending the statement. "I don't mean me," he clarified. "I was going to say the opposite, actually."
That surprised him, and Theo paused. "What?"

"Well, I'm certainly not not good." Harry's mouth twitched with humor, and for whatever reason, Theo found himself curious enough to wait for the statement's probably stupid resolution. "But it's not as if it's just my scene."

It is, though, Theo would have argued if he were a more gracious person. Blaise, who played Tybalt, always managed a perfect depiction of the smuggling necessary for someone who ultimately stabs a beloved character in the back, but it was impossible to look away from Harry. Theo, who studied all his own rehearsal footage, knew grudgingly from experience that nobody but Harry Potter was visible on that stage during the scene. When Harry staggered and dropped, his face beatific with confusion and desperation and things left tragically undone, it was impossible not to feel a low ache of devastation. When Harry-as-Mercutio dies, the audience mourns him. It should be nothing but a plot point that leads to Romeo's impulsive murder, but instead, Harry always managed to make the entire room feel a palpable sense of loss.

"You know what makes it good?" Harry asked.

Theo, who loathed patronizing questions even more than he hated his rehearsal time being interrupted, did not reply. It was after hours, he thought. Maybe he could get away with a slap.

"You," Harry said, and Theo blinked.

"What?"

"You," Harry repeated, slower. "are the reason the death scene is so good."

Theo frowned. "I barely do anything."

Harry shook his head. "Not true. The audience has to feel what Romeo feels, don't they? The entire play hinges on Romeo's decision to seek revenge on Tybalt, which is ultimately his downfall—that's what leads to Romeo's banishment, and what takes him away from his true love. But first," Harry said, taking a step further into the room, "before that can happen, the audience has to believe Mercutio means enough to Romeo that he's willing to risk everything to avenge him."

Harry paused, and then, before Theo could say anything, he was off and ranting again.

"If you were to show anything less than anguish at the loss of Mercutio," Harry continued, "then Romeo's death would mean nothing. It would just be the result of a reckless choice, but because of you, I have something I can use. Because okay, so Mercutio is dying, right?" Harry tried to explain, almost laughably urgent now with his insistence. "When he's bleeding out and his life is flashing before his eyes, what makes him keep fighting? What makes him try to keep going?"

Theo said nothing.

"It's Romeo," Harry supplied firmly. "It's because Mercutio knows that if he dies, Romeo will want retribution, and he'll probably succeed. He knows Romeo will suffer, he'll be exiled, his life as he knows it will fall through his fingers and everything, Juliet included, will be lost. So Mercutio fights to stay alive to save him." Harry paused. "The way I see it," he ventured carefully, "Mercutio hangs on to every thread of life in him because if he doesn't, he can see what will happen. He knows Romeo will suffer for his death—and so, in the moments his body is fading, he tries desperately to hold on."

A not-insignificant piece of Theo wanted to tell Harry this was an extremely loose interpretation. The play called for no such anguish; Mercutio and Benvolio and Romeo were all just Italian
fuckboys, one of whom happened to die in the equivalent of a street brawl after one of the others had chased the wrong girl.

"The point is, I can only be as good as you are in that scene," Harry determined, shrugging. "You play Romeo's reaction with such perfect sensitivity, like it means something to you. It makes the whole scene different. It's why people cry when Romeo dies—not just because of the love story," Harry said, shaking his head, "but because of his entire tragedy. A young life, wasted."

Another pause.

"Everything that makes this story beautiful," Harry finished, "plays out perfectly in the way Romeo holds Mercutio in his dying moments."

It was somewhat extravagant praise, which always made Theo uncomfortable. He crossed his arms over his bare chest, suddenly aware of the cool air on his skin. It wasn't like they'd never rehearsed together shirtless—even in groups it wasn't uncommon by any means—but now, all of a sudden, it felt… bare.

Theo preferred to go back to things he understood, like criticism and his latent sense of indignation. "So what's wrong with the balcony scene, then, if I'm so very good?" he drawled, and Harry rolled his eyes.

"You're just—okay, look, hang on, I can't really explain it—"

Harry broke off to remove his warm-ups, under which he was wearing a compression shirt and a pair of unbelievably tight shorts.

Theo, who was wearing fitted joggers, made a face.

"What the fuck are those?" he demanded, flicking his attention to what might as well have been tiny spandex boxer-briefs, and Harry—who had a far more athletic frame and probably no reason to feel self-conscious about anything, ever—didn't even blink.

"Better to see the lines of my legs. Helps me check that the right muscles are doing the work, and listen, okay, here's the thing," Harry said, all one rushed out response as he wandered over to Theo and took his (Theo's, which was frustrating, to say the least) starting position. "Right, so you've got all these—"

Harry cut himself off in favor of doing the turns, abandoning spoken word altogether to focus on the arabesques and the attitudes, the details of which Theo was furious to see were, in fact, not only managing the instinctual quality of motion Theo had been aiming for himself, but were also much easier to see with nothing obstructing the view of Harry's legs. While Harry was outdancing Theo at the steps he'd been rehearsing all night, there was a definite sense of unplaceable dizziness; a surreal quality that Theo couldn't look away from. Harry's grand jetés made him look as though he'd been plucked from the air against his will and dropped; his tours en l'air seemed to very nearly stumble until the millisecond he caught himself, all of the motions somehow managing to still be fluid and uninterrupted.

"The idea, right," Harry said, panting a little by the time he finished, "is all these motions are supposed to be imperfect. Romeo's falling in love, he's throwing caution to the wind. He's quite literally reeling, and then when he touches Juliet—" He broke off. "Well, that's another thing."

Theo blinked. "What?"

Harry looked thoughtful. "You don't… you don't hold her right."
"That's fucking ridiculous," Theo snapped. "Every single one of those lifts is textbook."

"Well, right," Harry said slowly, "and that's the problem. But look, it's none of my business, seeing as you clearly don't want my help."

He wandered away, heading back towards his bag, and Theo, who couldn't quite decide if he was angry or disappointed or both, suddenly found himself calling out after him.

"Prove it, then," Theo said, and in response, Harry's shoulders stiffened. The lines of muscle in his back were prominent beneath his shirt as he tilted his head, weighing the value of biting at Theo's obvious challenge without turning around. "If there's something wrong with my lifts," Theo said, "then prove it. Tell me what I'm doing wrong."

Harry pivoted gracefully, doubtful. "I don't think you can lift me, Nott."

It took everything Theo possessed not to laugh. "I'm stronger than I look, Potter."

Harry gauged him with obvious skepticism.

"You have to lift me," Harry said slowly, "over your shoulders."

"Yes," Theo said. "I fucking know how the lift goes."

It was about thirty seconds long in total, though the lift in question was only about ten. Fleur started it with an arabesque, curling her leg around Theo's body with a sweeping grand rond de jambe; after that, the musical theme would soar, and then Theo would lift her onto his shoulders until she was lying parallel to the ground, giving herself to him completely in more ways than one.

It was supposed to show trust, they'd been told. That she trusted him, and then finally he would let her down and take her in his arms, pulling her close. It's the moment in the ballet that Juliet falls in love with Romeo, and it's both an emotional moment in the narrative and a challenging one in the choreography.

"I don't think you can do it." Harry had folded his arms over his chest.

"Why not?" Theo demanded. "Because my father bought me my lead, is that it? Because I work hard, Potter," he spat, "harder than you think, and just because you've been told you're the golden boy so many times—"

"I don't think that," Harry cut in sharply, flinching.

Ah, but Theo'd hit a nerve, somehow. He could see it.

"Then do it," Theo said, beckoning Harry again. "Show me what I'm doing wrong."

"I—" Harry grimaced. He seemed to be looking for every reason to refuse, but Theo knew perfectly well he wasn't going to. He couldn't resist it; if it were Theo in Harry's place, Theo knew instinctively he wouldn't either. "Fine," Harry said gruffly, stalking back towards Theo. "Are you ready?" he asked bluntly, and Theo gave a low scoff.

"You sound scared, Potter."

A scowl. "Shut up."

Theo couldn't help an irreverent smirk. "Don't tell me," he guessed derisively, "you're worried you can't lift your leg over your—"
But he was forced to break off mid-sentence as Harry moved towards him, beginning Juliet's turns without preamble as Theo shifted to reflexively set his hands on Harry's waist, muscle memory taking over. Fleur's waist was narrow and curved, tiny and soft and flared out at the hips, but Harry, by comparison, felt like a mass of carved muscle, each motion underneath Theo's hands identifiable to an upsetting degree of anatomical perfection.

The first lift, unfortunately, was less smooth than Theo would have liked. He got an arm around Harry's waist, but the shift in physiology was jarring; Theo was too conscious of how hard Harry's stomach was in comparison to Fleur's and how much broader Harry's shoulders felt against his bare chest, and when he lifted Harry off the ground he had to grit his teeth a little from strain, their collective timing not quite perfect. He set Harry back down too roughly, and when Harry's arabesque jerked slightly, lacking Fleur's delicate-limbed finesse, he turned away from watching their respective shapes in the mirror to give Theo an irritable look.

"You're going to hurt yourself making mistakes like that," Harry said.

"Fuck off," Theo replied, turning Harry the same way he always did with Fleur: one arm shifting to place both hands on Harry's waist.

For a moment, they stood still, looking at each other.

Then Harry nodded gruffly, prompting them both forward, and Theo leaned him back over one arm, Harry's torso stretching out to let his fingers skate gracefully towards the floor in one direction, then the other. Theo's cheek grazed Harry's stomach, softly brushing his chest, and by then the motion of pretending to covet his partner had been pounded into his brain, but for the first time Theo noticed details in their motions, all of it somehow made new. He catalogued it in parts: the weight of Harry in his arms. The smell of laundry detergent and sweat. The arch of Harry's back, the jutting bones of his hips, the elongated column of his neck. He held the suspended line of Harry's torso a breath longer than he would have with Fleur—feeling, in this case, the moment called for a slight dramatization—before returning to center and proceeding to drop, as the dance required, to one knee.

Harry paused for a moment, contemplating Theo again.

"You have to hold her like you love her," Harry said, a little winded as he looked down at Theo, still wary. "But not… not just like she's precious to you, even though she is. You have to hold her like you want her," he clarified. "She falls for you in this moment, Nott. She's literally," he clarified with an irritatingly factual tone, "head over heels for you."

This was, of course, idiotic commentary. First of all, it wasn't as if Theo didn't know how to make a woman fall in love with him—at least not when it was required in dance form. That was mostly all ballet was: love, sensuality, desperation, all of it in different parts each time. It was all Theo knew, the motions of seduction as strictly defined by his training as anything else, and he hardly needed a lecture from Harry.

Still, he found his mouth uncomfortably dry. "Yes, Potter," he drawled. "I grasp the metaphor."

"Her body," Harry pressed him, "it... forms itself to Romeo's."

His gaze flicked briefly down to Theo's, and Theo realized for the first time that Harry Potter had the greenest eyes he'd ever seen. That, and his mouth was full of vulnerability. Above the muscle of his abs and chest and the sinewy quality of his thighs, there was a sensuality to Harry that made him obviously a dancer, not just some gym-going dickhead who knew how to bench press.
"Juliet gives herself to Romeo the moment he lifts her," Harry said, and Theo paused for a moment. He tried not to focus too closely on anything else he was currently at eye level with, or to think about anything Harry might (maybe, possibly) be implying.

"Just do the damn lift," Theo eventually said, and Harry hesitated.

"Look, if—if you need to drop me—"

Theo glared up at him, resolute. "I won't drop you."

Harry grimaced, still doubtful.

"Harry." Theo paused, hoping he wouldn't have to beg despite knowing that at this point, it wasn't entirely out of the question. "Just trust me."

The grimace tightened, then slipped away.

"Fine," Harry said, and Theo held his hand up, offering it for him.

Harry's hand slid along the inside of Theo's wrist, hesitant for a moment, and then curled around it, locking in place to use Theo's forearm as an anchor. Harry leaned across Theo's shoulders, one of Theo's hands briefly brushing the back of his legs to help him—the widths of which were, of course, nothing like Fleur's. She was strong, obviously, but slender. Harry's hamstrings might as well have been made of marble, the lines of them stark and broad, and Theo locked his hand behind Harry's knee, completing the lift for half a second before he moved.

Theo, who had always known how badly his strength was underestimated, made a point to take Harry's weight with perfect balance. Within seconds, Harry was stretched across the upper line of Theo's back, the execution performed with a faultless expense of effort.

It wasn't excessively difficult to hold Harry this way. He could see Harry's version of Fleur's motions in the mirror, the graceful, outstretched lift of one leg perfectly timed with Harry's transition from a look of hesitation—lip snagged between his teeth—to relaxation, a languid elongation of every part of him from the tips of his fingers to the outstretched point of his toes. The next part of the lift was typically Theo's least favorite; the releasing of Fleur just slightly, sending his own equilibrium entirely to one side to let her slide one leg down against him, but Harry, who had mostly abandoned his reservations by then, did it with ease. It occurred to Theo only when Harry had curled fully around him that the steps, which nearly always felt halted and too-deliberate beneath Fleur, felt oddly comfortable now. He and Harry locked eyes in the mirror for a split second, but then, caught up in the pas de deux, they moved on, the motions appearing more natural and innate than Theo had ever felt them to be.

It felt like Harry's body molded perfectly to his, and by the time Theo had released Harry from the circuitous steps of the lift, lowering him carefully to the ground, Theo realized he'd forgotten to look at his own form entirely, being instead entranced by how strangely right they looked together.

How right they felt together, too.

Theo's arm slid up to Harry's shoulders; muscle memory again. The next step of the pas de deux with Fleur was to pause, to simulate an almost-kiss, arms wrapped around each other for a brief moment as she stroked his cheek and then they parted, continuing the dance.

Now, though, Harry's chest was pressed to Theo's, and both of them were breathing hard.

"So what did I do wrong?" Theo managed to croak.
"I—" Harry swallowed. "Nothing. That time was—that was different."

"Was it?"

They were nearly the same height, Harry's shoulders slightly broader, Theo's chin slightly higher and his torso narrower. It was difficult for Theo not to compare them when they stood this way, like mirror images. Both were dark-haired, both lined with similar forms of muscle, a strange exercise in symmetry. Theo wondered what it would be like to curl his tongue around the lobe of Harry's ear. He wondered how his teeth would feel sinking into Harry's bicep. He slid his hands down slightly from where they rested around Harry's scapulae to the small of Harry's back, burrowing in the indentations there.

When Harry didn't move, Theo let his hands slip to Harry's hips.

Harry took a breath, his chest expanding against Theo's.

"You sometimes look like you're thinking too hard," Harry mumbled to Theo, his fingers shifting. His hands, until then, had been hovering in the air but fell, carefully, to float gently over Theo's hair and then dropped to his shoulders, each motion its own inexplicably crafted work of beauty. "You didn't that time."

"I was hardly trying at all." Theo's throat was impossibly dry, and Harry's fingers brushed over his mouth. "You're too fucking good, you know," he said with a shake of his head. "You really are a fucking natural, Potter."

He matched the motion of Harry's forehead coming forward and the two of them paused there, skin to skin, Theo's nose sliding delicately along Harry's.

"You," Harry said softly, "are the most beautiful dancer I've ever seen. Everything about you, it's like the dance is being poured out of you, seeping out of every limb. Fleur's good, but she's not you." His voice was hushed, his hips flush against Theo's. "Your father has nothing to do with it. You're good, Nott. You don't look like a dancer and you're better for it. Because every move you make looks like reverence, like a meditation, like something you've brought to life."

"You said I was doing it wrong," Theo reminded him.

"I didn't say you were perfect," Harry growled with displeasure, shaking his head, "but can't you tell I watch you? I thought it was obvious. I can't take my eyes off you." His mouth brushed Theo's in something that wasn't a kiss; something that was just a touch, an exploration. "When you dance," Harry said softly, "I can't look away."

Theo's breath caught as Harry's mouth brushed over his again.

"I thought you hated me," Theo confessed reluctantly.

"I thought you hated me," Harry agreed.

"I do hate you," Theo said.

"I know," Harry whispered, half-smiling, "and it fucking sets me on fire."

His fingers slid up to trap themselves in Theo's hair but it was Theo who closed the distance; it was Theo who dragged Harry's breath up from his lungs and drew them closer, as close as they could be, one body molding perfectly to another. Theo's hips ground against Harry's and Harry's hands—his fucking hands, intent and searching and sure—wandered over all the spare inches of Theo,
desperate and hungry and lacking even a trace of hesitation.

Harry's palm slid under Theo's pants, tugging the waistband down, his fingers closing around Theo's cock as he laughed into Theo's mouth; a clever *I knew it* in reply to Theo's erection that made him bite down with a shudder of both fury and ceaseless want, pressing hard against Harry's lips; a clumsy little scraping of teeth. Theo yanked at Harry's compression shirt and Harry took a step back, pulling it overhead and tossing it to the floor before pausing.

Waiting.

Harry Potter had the torso of a god; perhaps a god of war, or some sort of streamlined ancient mythological hero whose job was to kill hydras and fuck nymphs. His stomach was carved and firm and each crevice was shadowed slightly, dragging Theo's gaze down lower.

"Take the shorts off," Theo rasped, and then, "Please."

Harry didn't say a word as he slid them down, the material straining to pass over the curves of his backside and then clinging to his thighs before the hard length of him sprang up, expectant. Theo swallowed, his own dick still propped up by the band of his joggers, and let his own hand fall, stroking over the tip of it.

Harry shuddered viscerally, every angle of the motion visible from where he stood with his back to the mirror. "Come here," he said, beckoning, and Theo took three long strides to have Harry's mouth on his again.

Harry kissed like he danced. It was natural, unburdened, never too much or too little. He kissed Theo with a sense of agitation, a little yearning, like restraint had been a price, and to Theo, that did not feel unfamiliar. Ballet was discipline. It was the art they made with muscle and bone, the stories they told with pain and sweat. If Harry had been wanting, if he had been keeping his distance, then that was just another dance between them; a pas de deux begun apart before they could move together. Theo licked at Harry's swollen mouth and promised him, as best he could, that he would be worth the waiting.

Theo slithered down Harry's torso, pressing kisses and licks and little bites to the carved out sections of his stomach, then dropped to his knees, to the same place he'd been before the lift. Harry inhaled sharply, watching, and Theo looked up, passing his tongue over his lips before leaning forward to slide them over the tip of Harry's cock, waiting for a telling inhale of breath.

Harry's fingers tightened in Theo's hair as he slid his mouth, his lips and his tongue, along the length of Harry, pulling his hips closer and closer and fucking *closer* until finally Harry lifted one leg, resting it atop Theo's shoulder in what Theo could see in the mirror—taking a brutally unsubtle and entirely selfish glance—was a faultless line from hip to toe. Harry held Theo's face in both hands, thumbs drawn over his cheeks, and with the same pressure and persistence Theo's nails scraped over Harry's hips, red marks visible in the low light of the rehearsal space. It was rough, inconsiderate, Theo's hands digging into Harry's arse while Harry tugged at his jaw, letting out gruff pants of colorful, relentless obscenities. Harry's hips ground inelegantly against Theo's mouth, his motions a stunning absence of deliberation until he let out a groan, every muscle in his legs gone rigid as he came.

Theo dragged himself up from his knees, swallowing the taste of Harry, and Harry's hand dropped not to Theo's cock—the head of which was stiff and throbbing and perhaps a little blatantly uncoy—but to the bones of Theo's hips, his thumb gliding along the crevices. He turned Theo gruffly, forcing him to face the mirror, and slid Theo's pants down with painstaking slowness, both their eyes locked on their respective reflections as the fabric pooled momentarily at Theo's feet,
"I like watching your neck," Harry said, brushing his lips against it. "Other people might drop their chins, but you don't. You keep your chin high, your eyes up." His hands traveled slowly down, forming his palms to Theo's thighs, his chest pressing into the blades of Theo's shoulders as he shivered. "And your legs—"

"Skinny," Theo muttered, and Harry chuckled.

"Maybe, but I can see every line when you move," he said, flicking lightly at Theo's muscle. "I knew you were strong." A kiss to the back of his neck, then to the top of his vertebrae. "At first glance it's deceiving, but I've watched you plenty."

Theo's eyes closed, relaxing into the feel of Harry's touch, and Harry dug his fingers in tight, curling them into Theo's waist. "You didn't want me to lift you," Theo noted, cracking one eye, and Harry bit down on his shoulder, half-laughing into his skin as he met Theo's glance in the mirror.

"No, I didn't," Harry agreed. "I wasn't sure I'd be able to look at you again after being that close to you, and that," he said, sliding his tongue along a few spare inches of Theo's spine, "would have been pretty fucking bleak."

Theo tried to turn, tried to kiss him, but Harry held him still, hands steady around his ribs.

"Your father didn't get you this," Harry said in Theo's ear. "You did. You're Romeo, it's in your every step. Maybe you don't look like he's supposed to," he conceded, half-smiling, "but still, you made him yours."

"Doesn't matter, you're still better," Theo muttered, his body flooded with a lazy warmth, Harry's lips falling further down the line of his back to let his hands curl delicately around Theo's hips. "You're better than I am, it comes so easily to you. You were born for this, and I—"

"Sometimes," Harry said quietly to the small of Theo's back, "we don't always love what we're born for."

Theo's heart pounded as Harry lowered himself to his knees, his hands curving around Theo's arse and then around to his cock, stroking him. Theo held his breath, watching himself being touched by Harry, hardly able to process it. "You're so good," Theo told him roughly, a reverent truth delivered with a startled whisper. "You're so good, how could you not… love it? How could it not be love, when you, you're—"

He let out a gasp, Harry's tongue sliding somewhere new and different.

"The steps, the movements, that's the easy part," Harry said with a little shrug. "You don't fall in love with something that comes easily. But I told you," he reminded Theo quietly, stroking the line of Theo's thigh, "there's a reason the death scene is so good."

It's you, Theo heard in his head, and closed his eyes as Harry's lips dragged over him again. He kicked his knees out wider, let his mind go blank; let one hand begin stroking mindlessly over his cock while the other, behind him, blindly found the roots of Harry's hair, twining his fingers tightly in the strands.

They weren't rivals, Theo decided again, more firmly this time. That would imply Theo considered Harry to be competition, which he decidedly did not. Harry was the rhapsodic swell of Prokofiev, the ardent dizziness of attraction, the progression of off-kilter leaps. Theo's breath quickened, Harry's mouth on him gradually deeper and more urgent, and the closer he came to mindless
exaltation, the more forcefully he came to realize: it was all, all of it, precisely as Harry had said.

Theo had been doing the pas de deux all wrong because he hadn't known that anything could feel like this. He hadn't known it *should* feel like this, uncontrolled and wild and tempestuous, every beat of it untamed. He thought the steps in his mind, the familiar pulse of them a new and violent rush through his veins, and understood clearly that every repetition he'd undergone until that moment had been a waste. He watched himself now, breath ragged and every muscle tensed, and saw the dance precisely as it should be performed.

He understood it now.

Theo came with a groan, spilling onto his hand, and choked out something like Harry's name, barely managing the effort of syllables. Harry, always gifted with cadence, kissed Theo slowly, indulgently—low back to scapulae, left and then right, up to the top of his spine—and leaning Theo's head back to rest limply against Harry's shoulder.

"I don't suppose you rehearse this late often, do you?" Theo asked, eyeing Harry's reflection in the mirror. "Not that I need help, obviously," he added quickly.

Harry let a slow, satisfied smile spread across his lips before he turned Theo around to face him, dragging Theo's mouth back to his. "Could be persuaded," he said wryly, and then added, with a pulse of promise, "for you."

Theo kissed him back, reveling in it.

"So, um," he said, eyes still closed, and Harry sighed.

"You want to run it again?" Harry guessed drily.

"Yes, definitely," Theo said, shoving him away and reaching for his joggers as Harry backed up with a shake of his head, tossing his shorts up from the floor with the sweeping ease of a lazy rond de jambe. "Ready?"

"Always," Harry said, rolling his eyes.

"Good," Theo said firmly, placing his feet in first and beckoning across the room, something like a leap taking off inside his chest. "I want to see you really work this time."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: For Colubrina, who lured me into this despite my (obviously very weak) insistence I probably shouldn't. Hey, did you guys know I have a vlog now? You can find it on youtube, Olivie Blake is Not Writing. Also, I'll be back with a Halloween one shot for sure, so stay tuned!
Rebel North, Part I

Pairing: Jily (James Potter x Lily Evans)

Universe: magical Outlander-esque AU (you do not need to have watched the show or read the books, it's simply time travel + Scottish Highlands)

Rating: M for sex

Summary: Happy Halloween! Psst, my new book is out today… but since you're here, have some smut!

When Lily's fiancé takes her to Hogwarts Castle on Halloween to work on his latest academic research in 1983, she accidentally gets transported back in time three hundred and fifty years via a strange door on the seventh floor. Lily nearly lands in the dangerous grips of the castle's baron, Lord Voldemort, but a mysterious Scottish laird with a secret of his own intervenes, setting them both on an unexpected path.

It wasn't as if Lily didn't find historical potions to be interesting; she did. She was an intellectual sort of girl—pretty and smart, as her mother had always dotingly told her—but still, there was a time and a place for such things. This, a week before their wedding, was neither the time nor the place for Severus to be more interested in the potions discovery that had been made at Hogwarts Castle than he was in her undergarments.

"Sev," Lily murmured, trying to lure him discreetly into bed. "Can't it wait until morning?"

"Hm? Oh, sorry," Severus said absently, dragging his gaze up from his notes, and Lily managed a smile. It was endearing, at least, how wrapped up he got in his work, even when it was largely inconvenient. "Sorry, I know, but just one more page—it's really fascinating. For example, did you know," he began, clearing his throat and lofting a page up to squint at it as she stifled a sigh, "in the seventeenth century, because there was so little advancement in magical studies in the Scottish Highlands during the middle ages, potion incantations were still mostly wandless by the early modern era, and instead—"

He stopped, blinking, as he presumably caught the evidence of her eyes glazing over. "Sorry," he said sheepishly. "I'm boring you."

"What? No, of course not, it's just… late." She tucked her knees into her chest, bunching her fingers in the duvet. The bedding was, like everything in Hogsmeade, needlessly charming and quaint, and she wished she didn't despise it so much. "You keep reading," she assured him. "We'll just talk in the morning, shall we?"

Severus heard the little off-color note of wrongness in her voice and grimaced, reluctantly leaving his chair but conceding to settle himself beside her on the bed, taking her chin lightly. "Sorry, sweetheart," he murmured, brushing his lips against hers. "I promise, tomorrow is the last of it, okay? And then we can get back to the crushing minutiae of normality," he assured her grimly, "like whether Petunia is or isn't going to throw a fuss over her dress."
Lily gave a tired chuckle. "Well, when you put it that way, perhaps we should just stay."

He smiled. She figured he would like that very much.

"Enjoy your day, won't you?" he said, stroking her cheek. "Don't just stay locked in here fretting over your mother's phone calls. Come up to Hogwarts with me, look around," he suggested. "The castle will be in prime condition for Samhain, and it's quite fascinating, you know, all the history. They say a war with a ruthless Baron nearly destroyed the place three hundred and fifty years ago when it was taken back by a gang of Highland rebels. They even say," he mused, "that every Halloween, the ghosts of the Order rebels who defeated him pay a visit to the castle, riding around the halls and reenacting their victory."

"Oh?" Lily said, impressed. "A gang of ghost rebels sounds kind of exciting."

Severus chuckled. "'Exciting' is one way to put it, yes." He leaned forward, kissing her forehead. "Sleep well, Lily," he murmured, with one final stroke of warmth to her nose. "I promise, I'll have looked over everything tomorrow, and then we can head back to London straightaway."

He'd said that the day before. And the day before, too. The weekend mini-holiday had stretched into Tuesday. After nearly five years waiting for him to propose, Lily had grown a talent for waiting, though she certainly hadn't developed a fondness for it. This was what it was to love a man devoted to his work, she reminded herself firmly, and besides—she wouldn't love him if he were not precisely what he was.

"Okay," she said, pressing her lips to the heel of his palm. "Tomorrow, then."

Hogwarts was a fascinating place, even if it wasn't at all the place Lily wanted to be. To be fair, she didn't want to be at any of her various dress fittings either, but at least at home in London she wouldn't be wandering through an empty castle alone, particularly not on Halloween. She was beginning to worry the suits of armor might wake just to ask her what she thought she was doing noisily pacing the halls. Perhaps it was merely her frustration mixing with Severus' playful teasing, but either way, she was beginning to worry she was beginning to worry she'd end up spending the day consorting with ghosts. The castle was littered with monuments to whichever battle had taken place there however many centuries prior, the main one being the mural painted in testament to the benevolent-looking English noble with an enormous beard who stood at its foreground. The painting was called Reubaltaich, Gaelic for rebel, and for whatever reason, Lily found herself looking at the painting for quite a long time, marveling a little at the odd and almost eerie dignity of the warring Scotsmen set against the castle's shadowed form at dusk.

The monument to the rebels was massive, to say the least, but it was difficult to say which room in the castle was most interesting. The Great Hall was beautiful, of course, all of it presently festive with the hallmarks of autumn. The bedchambers, now mostly portrait galleries, all featured high ceilings, vaulted and stunning, and the tapestries were rich depictions of warfare Lily could hardly imagine. She loved the towers, the view of the castle's grounds and the lake; up there, she almost forgot for a moment how lonely she was, and how little she knew of the future. It was easy to forget one was about to become a professor's wife when one was looking out into the Scottish Highlands. It was easy to forget one was a person at all, really, given the span of such unimaginable beauty.

It was the room on the seventh floor that was the strangest, though, as Lily could have sworn it had been an empty corridor when she'd first passed with Severus on their initial tour of the castle. The
door didn't look like the others; it looked older, firstly. It wasn't one of the fire doors that had been installed in the last century like most of the others were, and it looked, somehow, like it was inherently secret; as if it might have needed a key.

"What's in that room on the seventh floor?" she asked Severus when she tried to drag him away from his studies for lunch. She'd known he wouldn't leave, of course, so she'd brought some soup down to the potion labs in the dungeons, feeling a bit victorious when she caught the hints of adoration in his grateful smile.

"There's nothing up there," Severus told her absently, biting into a piece of bread. "It's just an empty corridor."

"No, there's definitely a room," Lily said with a laugh. "I saw it myself, Sev."

There was a pause, an unusual ingredient catching his eye. Evidently, modern potion work had changed quite a bit over time; Lily supposed if medical advancements were possible, magical ones certainly were as well.

"Hm?" he said, temporarily recalling her existence. "You must have been lost, sweetheart. Maybe you meant another floor."

"I—" No, Sev, I know what I saw—"I'm interrupting you," she forced out instead, managing a smile. "Shall I just come back to check on you this afternoon?"

"Maybe around dinner?" he asked. He reached out blindly, snaking an arm around her waist in a motion that was as much instinctive as it was habitual, and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

No chance they were leaving tonight.

"Sure," she sighed. "Dinner, then."

She lingered outside the door on the seventh floor for nearly ten minutes before she eventually decided she'd simply have to try it. If it was locked, then so be it. It wasn't as if she had anything better to do. The brass handle was smooth under her touch, inviting. She gave the handle a tug and it opened—just like that.

She laughed to herself. Maybe it was just a novelty toilet, or a storage room.

At first glance, she suspected it was a storage room, only it was the most disorganized of such rooms she'd ever seen. Things were stacked in piles of what could only be called 'stuff,' or possibly 'junk,' disarrayed and lacking any sort of organization. She wandered around the pillars of items, gaping at the pure scope of it. How could one room contain so many things? Who on earth had built it?

And who, she wondered with a wrinkle of her nose, had thought it wise to put so many expired ingredients in a broken cupboard like this?

She ventured from item to item, from broken portrait bust to tarnished tiara to umbrella stand full of racing brooms, shaking her head. What a waste of a perfectly lovely room. Light was streaming in from windows so large she couldn't imagine how anyone could have missed it; did it even make sense with the castle's external architecture? She supposed a sentient castle could draw light from anywhere, but still.
She paused beside a vial of monkshood, smiling faintly at it. Once upon a time, she'd been a fair hand at potions herself, though it was Severus who had the far deeper interest for it. Still, this was expensive. It was the main ingredient in wolfsbane, and was so prohibitively costly most werewolves struggled to get it. She tucked it into her pocket, resolving to tell Severus something should be done about whatever valuable items might be unknowingly left in this room.

She spent several hours wandering around, reading books left behind by nobles who must have lived here at some point in history before proceeding to temporarily doze on one of the crushed velvet chairs. Eventually she guessed it had darkened enough to reasonably pursue dinner, and she wound her way back through the labyrinth of the storage room to reach the door, wondering whether she could talk Severus into joining her for a pint.

It was Halloween, after all. Magically speaking, Samhain was something of a significant holiday. Maybe that would sway him.

She slid into the corridor, shutting the door behind her. There was the wafting smell of food, she noted, and frowned, wondering if Severus was already eating. Couldn't he have come to find her? She didn't even know the castle still served food. She was about to head for the stairs when a hand closed around her arm, yanking her back.

"And just where do ye think you're goin', lass?" a low voice asked her, and she wrenched forcefully out of his grip.

"Get your damn hands off me," she snapped, glaring at him, and his lips curled up slowly. He had a mean look to him, a toothy grin beneath a full and wiry beard, but it was hard to take him seriously when he was dressed like one of the castle guides. She'd thought it was silly, the outfits, but Severus told her authenticity was paramount to the Hogwarts board of curators.

"Sneakin' around the castle, and with a rebel tongue to boot?" the man asked, his Highland brogue strong and thick. "Lord Voldemort will be wantin' to hear from you."

It must have been some sort of play Severus had neglected to tell her about. He'd said the castle was at its prime during Halloween, hadn't he? It wouldn't be the first time he'd neglected to inform her of an irritating detail.

"I'm not in the mood for this," Lily said, turning to leave, but the man stopped her with a flick of a hand, magically binding her in place. How had he done that? He wasn't holding a wand. She stiffened a little in panic, her mind filling in the blanks about the sorts of things that happened to young women wandering alone at night; she'd certainly heard enough rumors about what happened in university stacks.

"How dare you—"

He took a step closer, yanking her flush against him, and now she was more than a little nervous. He pressed his hands into her waist, feeling over her hips. "Very interestin' clothes you have on, lass," he noted, fingering the hem of her high-waisted jeans. "Is this the latest of Dumbledore's tricks? First them cloaks, now lasses in britches?"

"Don't—" Her mouth was dry as she struggled to reach her wand, but his grip on her was ironclad. "Don't touch me."

He chuckled darkly as her pulse raced. "Lovely form for a rebel, eh? His Lordship will have a lovely time with you, I reckon. One way or another," he added with a whisper in her ear, "he'll be glad to hear you scream."
Her mouth was dry. "This isn't funny. Let me go, now, or—"

He toyed with her ponytail, sniffing at her hair. "Or else what?"

"Let her go, Greyback."

Another voice echoed from down the corridor, steps materializing on the stairs. Lily's stomach roiled as the man holding her spun, facing someone else who'd entered the corridor.

"What do you want, Potter?" her captor demanded.

"That's no way to speak to a laird, Greyback," came a drily disinterested voice. It was as heavily accented as her captive's, but without the snarl underneath. "I wouldn'a wish to tell His Lordship his dogs have gotten rather out of hand, ye ken?"

Lily swallowed hard, unsure whether this situation was better or worse. Where was Severus? She wished she hadn't gotten so far away. Unlikely he'd manage to notice this from down in the dungeons.

"Caught this rebel sneakin' around on His Lordship's private floor," her captor snarled back at the other man. "If I want to have some fun with her first, that's my choosin'."

"Hardly," said the other voice, footsteps coming nearer, and Lily held her breath as he stepped around to face her, the shadow of his form falling over her in the flickering light of the torches. Torches? she thought with alarm, certain they'd been normal track lighting earlier that day, but then she was distracted by the man's face coming into view.

He had black hair, she noted, like Severus, but outside of that, the two men could not have looked more different. While Severus was lean and almost slight, his posture somewhat imperfect from years spent over his books, this man was solidly built, broad-shouldered, his features strong and prominent and his hair long and loose, almost wild. He was wearing a kilt, like the other man, and Lily found herself wildly distracted by the shape of his calves, defined and sturdy. He had an athletic look to him, scars on his hands and his neck, and one, deeply carved, in his chin. His eyes were hazel, a subtle blend of amber-green-grey, and they weren't unkind. They regarded her slowly, searching her, but with something intensely asexual.

He was studying her for something, she realized, though she couldn't imagine what.

"Did Dumbledore send ye?" he breathed in a low voice, and she blinked. Swallowed. She hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about, but she was growing rather tired of being trapped.

"I can't move," she whispered to him, and he looked up with annoyance, presumably at her captor behind her.

"Let her go," he said. "Greyback, this is a bit much, even for you."

"Fuck off, Potter," said her captor, Greyback. "Lord Voldemort might have no choice but to invite you here, but I know better, your lairdship."

"Your suspicions are quite charming," said the other man, Potter, unfazed. "Still, there's no reason to use a body-bind on a woman, Greyback. She's harmless," he added, flicking his gaze over her briefly as if ascertaining that for himself.

Lily scoffed lightly under her breath and Potter's eyes narrowed in warning.
"Ye'll give us both away," he said, the words barely audible. He was mouthing it almost silently, eyes locked on Greyback behind her. "Just hold your tongue, ye ken?"

This, she thought mutinously, was quite a lot for a theatrical production. She'd have to tell Severus about it—though, maybe that was for the best. This would certainly be persuasive leverage for her to insist on leaving that evening.

"I suppose we'll have to see what His Lordship has to say about this," Greyback said, and Lily saw the knuckles of Potter's hands grow tense, tightening into his palms even as he kept his face stiffly pleasant.

"I expect ye will, then," he said, waving a hand. "Take her straight down to the Great Hall or there'll be hell to pay, Greyback. I'll make sure of it." He paused tartly, then added, "In the meantime, I have business to attend to."

He glanced at her, expressing nothing, and then pivoted away, disappearing down the stairs.

Lily bit the inside of her cheek, furious. The moment this was over, she was going to have them all sacked.

The man playing Lord Voldemort looked convincingly like the portrait Lily had seen in one of the other castle rooms. How they had found him, she had no idea. She also had no idea how they'd gotten the Great Hall ready for a full banquet so quickly, or how they'd filled it with so many historically accurate actors. Surely this was something that could be better advertised? Even the food looked authentic, which couldn't have come cheap.

"Let her loose, Greyback," said Lord Voldemort, waving a hand. He was inordinately handsome, she thought, blinking a little at the sight of him. Wherever they'd found him, he could certainly have a career in films, though she doubted he could play a romantic lead. He had a distinctly villainous look to him, piercing blue eyes and a cruel mouth that lent a visceral sharpness to his beauty. "Who are you?" he asked her, scanning her swiftly.

He was English, not Scottish, she noted, as the real Baron Voldemort had been. She faintly recalled from a plaque she'd read earlier that day that his forcible occupation and installment by the king was an oppressive burden on the Scottish clans.

"My name is Lily Evans," she sighed impatiently, "I'm here with a visiting professor, and listen, I really don't have time for this. I understand if you're upset I was in the storage room, but—"

"Storage room." At that, Voldemort's voice went cold. "What storage room?"

"The room, the one with all the things," she said, waving a hand ambiguously. "The room on the seventh floor, I didn't realize—"

"There is no such room." His eyes flashed with fury. "Who are you?"

Unbelievable. Severus would need to grovel for days to make up for this. "I just told you—"

"Get rid of her," he said disinterestedly, glancing at Greyback. "Now, if you like," he added, "seeing as you're so very eager."

Greyback smiled, his incisors glinting in the flickering light. "As ye wish, Your Lordship." He turned to Lily, bearing what she realized now were claws, letting them flash pointedly for her view. "Would ye like to watch?"
"Fenrir, I'm eating," Voldemort said disinterestedly. "Either an Avada or the carotid will do."

Lily waited for someone to gasp, or to say something, or at least to whisper to each other about how positively savage things used to be. Avada Kedavra was illegal, obviously, even then, as murder of any sort continued to be, and she was stunned to see that not one of the actors broke character. Instead, they were looking at her as if they were... hungry.

No, she thought with a shudder. Eager.

"Wait a minute," Lily said, blinking. "That's—that's not funny, you can't—"

"Now, please?" Voldemort said, irritable with impatience. "And tell Dumbledore I grow tired of his spies. No amount of money he funnels for the Order to infect my household is going to change my mind. Send, I don't know, a finger," he suggested disinterestedly, flicking a hand at Lily. "Or her whole head, if you're worried about authenticity."

"Okay," Lily said with a growl, finally able to remove her wand from her pocket, "that's quite enough. If you could just—"

Lord Voldemort summoned the wand from her hand without a word, smacking it with a single motion into Greyback's chest. "And take this. You should have checked her for weapons before you brought her here. I prefer not to have any splinters," he said with an arched look of displeasure.

"Well, not much can be done with a stick, can it?" Greyback said gleefully, flexing and unflexing his fingers. "As for her head, I suppose I can be convinced t—"

"Your Lordship," came another voice as the man called Potter strode quickly into the hall, another tall dark-haired man (this one, too, uncomfortably handsome, his long hair tied back in a knot away from his face) at his side. "Turns out ye canna quite murder the lass after all. My apologies," he added wryly, sweeping a bow, "but I am afraid I wasna aware Sirius' cousin had joined us for the evening."

"His cousin?" Lord Voldemort asked skeptically.

"Aye, so verra sorry," said the other man, who must have been the aforementioned Sirius. "A bhobain, you canna wander off like that," he said chidingly to Lily with a bit of incomprehensible Gaelic, gesturing for her to agree before glancing up at Voldemort. "If ye dinna mind, My Lord—"

"What was she doing on the seventh floor?" Voldemort asked suspiciously.

"Oh, ye know how the lasses are," said Sirius, looking dastardly cheerful, and Lord Voldemort's eyes narrowed.

"You really expect me to believe that?" he asked. "You can't be—"

"Sirius?" Potter cut in knowingly, tilting his head. "I am afraid, Your Lordship, this has all been a misunderstanding. We'll take her," he added, his eyes slightly more amber as they fell on hers. "Dinna worry, this willna happen again, I assure you. Come now," he beckoned to Lily, beckoning her like a dog. "We'll deal with you later."

Greyback looked somewhere between furious and disappointed as Lord Voldemort set his jaw, intent on something.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said slowly, "that she disobeyed her guardian's direct orders?"
"What?" Lily demanded, turning to glare at him. "This isn't funny anymore, I want t-"

"Oh, aye, she's headstrong, My Lord, but surely isna a threat," Potter cut in smoothly. "If ye simply let her come with us—"

"She's disrespected me twice in my own house," Lord Voldemort said firmly, "and for that, she'll have to be punished. Anyone else in her position would be. Do you disagree, Potter?" he asked curtly. "Or is there some reason you're suddenly so desperate to have her spared?"

"It's," Potter said, looking abruptly trapped. "It's not—"

Greyback stepped forward, smiling mercilessly. "I'm happy to take care of this now, Your Lordship. A few lashes would put the lass in her place."

"You're joking," Lily said, infuriated. "This has gone too far! All of this, this—" She sputtered, unable to put her outrage into words. "This pretense has to end, this is unacceptable—"

"Ah, hush, lass," Sirius said, somewhat nervously. "Er, dear, sweet cousin—"

"Lashes will be fine," Lord Voldemort said, leaning back in his chair. "Just end this, please, Fenrir. The food is getting cold."

Greyback stepped forward eagerly, smiling his chilling smile at Lily. He, she thought, was the least likely to be pretending; no man could fake his degree of bloodlust, no matter how well-trained. Was it possible this was… real?

"Wait," Lily said, scrambling away until one of Lord Voldemort's guards prodded her back in place. "Wait, wait a minute, wait—"

"I'll take them," Potter cut in brusquely, and Lily froze, as did Sirius beside him.

"James," Sirius whispered urgently. "Dinna be noble now, ye stubborn arse, ye know he'll kill ye if he gets the chance—"

"What was that, Potter?" Lord Voldemort said, leaning forward.

"I'll take her punishment," Potter said staunchly, not looking at Lily, and Voldemort's lips curled up in a slow smile.

"Does she mean something to you, James?" he murmured. "Is she someone… important to you? Or, perhaps, to Dumbledore?"

Abruptly, Lily recalled what James had said to her: You'll give us both away.

It seemed his lairdship, whoever he was—or whatever character he was playing—had something of his own to protect.

"If you're asking if I want to see her pretty skin bleed, the answer is no, I dinna wish it," Potter said stonily. "As the patron of the arts ye claim to be, Your Lordship, I expect you'll understand that something this lovely shouldn't be broken by this," he said with a glare at Greyback, "bit of filth."

Lord Voldemort chuckled. "Well, she'd be a better wife for you, James. More your style than that English heiress whose treasury I know you're chasing," he added at a murmur, and Potter flinched slightly. "I always told you money and power didn't suit you, James. Perhaps this one is more your
speed. Evans, wasn't it?" he asked Lily. "That doesn't sound like any of the clans. Certainly doesn't sound like Black," he added with a knowing glance at Sirius, who grimaced.

Lily answered with a muted glare.

"Thought so," Lord Voldemort murmured to her, turning back to Potter. "I think it's high time you were settled and sent back to your little country house, James. You've been a guest here long enough."

Potter's mouth tightened. Lily wasn't sure she understood what was going on in the narrative, but she knew whatever the logistics of this was, it was a successful trap. Lord Voldemort rose to his feet, stepping closer to Potter and leaning in, his voice nearly inaudible from where Lily was sitting.

"I know you've been corresponding with someone, and I have my suspicions who it is," Lord Voldemort said, and Potter's mouth stiffened. "I also know you're pursuing a marriage for the wealth your overtaxed clan so humbly lacks, and I know what someone like you would do with that kind of money. Or do you think I don't know what you're all planning?"

Potter's mouth stiffened, and Voldemort laughed. "I could kill you," he mused, curling a hand thoughtfully around his mouth. "Would save me a lot of trouble, only I don't need a reason to upset the other lairds by killing one of their own. This, though." Another low chuckle. "This would be quite the neat solution. Get rid of you, the Order, and Dumbledore's spy, all in one stroke."

He leaned away, and Potter said nothing.

"Your choice, James," Lord Voldemort said, shrugging. "Give the girl to me to punish or claim her as your own. Cousins notwithstanding," he added with a skeptical glance at Sirius. "Marry your little Evans girl or she dies."

Potter glanced at Lily, his mouth tight.

Surely this was a play, she thought.

Surely this wasn't happening.

"Fine," he said, gritting it out. "Come on, then," he beckoned to her, prompting her to freeze with uncertainty, but Lord Voldemort held up a hand with a laugh.

"She still defied my authority," he said. "That still calls for punishment."

Potter looked furious. "Did ye not say—"

"I know what I said. Fenrir?" he called to Greyback, and Potter scowled.

"Fine," he said. "But I'll take my beating in fists, na lashes, and put your filthy claws away," he warned Greyback, who smiled thinly.

"Oh, I've been waitin' for this," he said, and before Lily realized what was happening, Greyback had punched Potter hard below the sternum, aiming a shot that brought the other man to his knees.

He didn't make a sound. He simply collapsed, betrayed by the functions of his body, and met her eye with his. He looked angry, furious, resigned, pained, and then Greyback yanked him up by the collar of his shirt, smiling as he aimed another shot; this time to Potter's ribs, surely breaking at least one with the impact. Potter staggered backwards, looking dazed, and Lily, who could barely
stand to watch despite the delighted whispers from the audience, knew only one thing for certain.

This was not pretend.

Sirius was half-carrying Potter into his rooms, lowering him onto the bed as Lily followed in silence, eyeing her feet. Greyback had broken Potter's ribs, his nose, and probably damaged his organs, too. She had forced herself not to look away, knowing this was somehow her fault. She didn't know where she was, but she understood silence was imperative. She'd only said one thing, actually.

"My wand," she'd said to Sirius in a low voice, followed by his frown. "I need my wand."

"Wand?" he echoed, and she grimaced.

"The stick," she whispered, gesturing to it in Greyback's pocket. "I need it back."

"Oh, is it some sort of weapon? Did Dumbledore tell ye t- sorry," he said at her silencing glare, "never mind—oi, the stick," Sirius announced quickly to Greyback, who bit lightly on the edge of it, testing it for something Lily couldn't begin to imagine before conceding gruffly to hand it over.

Now that Potter was seated, barely conscious, Lily fidgeted for a moment, uncertain whether she might unintentionally make things worse before eventually resigning herself to giving it a try, shoving Sirius out of the way.

"Hold still," she told Potter, which was probably a stupid thing to say, all things considered, and then she held her wand to his ribs. "Ferula."

Potter let out an anguished roar of opposition, glaring at her, but she didn't have time to worry about his discomfort. She hurried to cast every healing spell she could think of, easing the pressure on his organs before turning her attention to his face.

"Wait," he gasped, snatching the tip of her wand. "Leave... leave it. He'll... check."

"What?" she asked, unable to understand him through his groans of pain, and Sirius leapt forward.

"James is right," Sirius said quickly. "Voldemort will be expecting to see a bruise, ye ken? He canna know you're a healer," he explained to her, "or he'll suspect he made a bad deal."

"I'm not a healer," Lily said, frowning. "These are standard spells, things we learn in our first year."

"First year of what?" Sirius asked. "Healer training? Did ye study with a shaman?" he pressed curiously. "I hear there are some who still use Merlin's healing books. What is the stick for?"

"It's—" She gaped at him. "This is a wand. Why has nobody seen one?"

"A wand?" Sirius echoed, eyeing it suspiciously. "Is it dangerous?"

"Only if I do something dangerous with it," Lily grumbled, but at Sirius' widening eyes, she hurried to reassure him. "I'm just a witch, honestly—"

"Na a normal one," Potter coughed up, wincing. He seemed to be breathing easier now, the pain of the healing spells subsiding, and after a testing inhale-exhale from his lungs, he pressed his hands to his ribs, looking up at her with awe. "How'd ye do that? Did Dumbledore teach you?"
"And what did he send you there for? That's dangerous, even for him," Sirius said, looking troubled. "Besides, isna a thing up there. We all ken that."

"There's a room there," Lily said. "It's filled with, I don't know. Things. Items. Haven't you seen it?" she asked, and Potter and Sirius exchanged a glance.

"Nobody goes there," Potter said slowly, "on pain of punishment, as I expect ye mighta sorted out."

"Well, I need to," Lily insisted, folding her arms over her chest. It seemed straightforward enough; whatever time or place she was in now, she wasn't where she was supposed to be. She'd have to go back. "I need to get into that room tonight," she said firmly, and rose to her feet, heading for the door.

"Are ye mad?" Potter gritted out, flinging out a hand to hold her back. "You canna go back there, certainly not now—he'll kill you, and me, too—"

"Well, I need to," she said, and paused. "Dumbledore said I needed to," she added, hoping that would work, and James and Sirius exchanged another glance.

Sirius relented first. "If Dumbledore said to, then—"

"Fuck Dumbledore," Potter hissed. "I'm na prepared to die today, Sirius, ye ken?"

"Take the cloak," Sirius urged. "Greyback knows about it, but still, if ye take proper care—"

"This is mad," Potter said, setting his jaw. "This is mad, and reckless, and—"

"You don't have to come with me," Lily cut in, jolting his attention back to her. "I can go by myself without your help."

"Dinna be ridiculous," Potter growled, getting to his feet and then pausing, surprised, as if he'd been expecting pain. Clearly, Lily thought, their healing spells left something to be desired. "If Greyback caught ye," he continued brusquely, "or worse, Voldemort himself—"

"I'm not your responsibility," Lily said, rolling her eyes. "I can take care of myself, and—"

"No, you canna take care of yourself, actually," Potter shot back with a glare, "or else I wouldna have to marry you, would I?"

"I—" She broke off. "That was real?"

"Of course it was—" He stopped himself, shaking his head. "Never ye mind," Potter snapped. "Just… sit down, we'll think of how we can sort this out tomorrow, and—"

"No," Lily said flatly, a little panicked now. "No, I can't marry you. I'm—I'm engaged, and—"

"So am I," Potter retorted. "But as I have to marry you or one of us dies, it seems our previous promises dinna count for much."

"No," Lily said, suddenly overwhelmed. "No, I have to—I have to get back there, I have… I have to—"

She was breathing hard, losing her grip on reality. Severus always called them 'Lily panics' in a tender sort of way, which she'd hated. She'd eventually tire herself out, but in the moment it brought her chest pain, a lurking sense of wrong, as if the pieces of her life were all out of place. She was a person who liked things a certain way, everything lined up neatly and in control. She
liked Severus because he was stable, reliable, calming, and now—and now—

"Hey. Lass." Potter's hands closed tentatively around her shoulders, smoothing down to her arms. "Breathe. Can ye hear me?" he asked, and she managed a nod. "Breathe in, then. That's a good lass." His voice was low and soft and she inhaled raggedly, half-choking. "Breathe out. Let it out." He set a rhythm for her, in and out, his fingers curled loosely around her arms as her hands shot out, clutching at his elbows. "Nighean mhath," he murmured to her, "good girl, just breathe."

She calmed slowly, his hand rising from her arm to tuck her hair behind her ear.

"Better?" he asked, and she nodded slowly. "Good," he said, and nudged her a step back. "Now I can get back to telling ye how stupid you sound."

She glared at him, and behind them, Sirius chuckled.

"Better just take her, aye, James?" he advised drily. "Seems the lass is a wee bit stubborn."

Potter shook his head, grimacing over his shoulder, and then turned back to Lily.

"Are ye ready to risk your life for this?" he asked her plainly, and she nodded, perfectly sure of that. Better to die trying to get back to where she'd been than to die of cholera in whatever place this was. If that was the real Lord Voldemort, then this was... the seventeenth century?

She'd surely die of the plague, and she'd read too much about that to chance it now.

"Yes," she said, lifting her chin. "I'll risk it. I'm going, whether you help me or not."

Potter sighed. "I reckon I owe ye a bit." He glanced down, checking his ribs. "Still, I hope you willna make me save your life again, reubaltaich."

She recalled that word from the painting in the castle earlier that day. Reubaltaich. Rebel.

Not today, she thought.

"Good," she said firmly.

After tonight she'd be gone, and then it wouldn't be a problem for either of them.

Except the door was gone.

The door was gone.

"No," Lily whispered, pressing her hand to the castle's stone, and Potter looked apprehensively over his shoulder. "It was here, I—I swear, it was right here, and—"

"We shouldna stay here," he warned her. "We can ask Dumbledore about it, I'm sure he would know, and—"

"Wait." She turned beneath the cloak—a very fine one, considering the lack of magic elsewhere—to glance imploringly at him. "You," she began, and paused. "You believe me, don't you?"

He looked down at her, bemused. "What?"
"I," she attempted again, and winced. "I'm not lying, I swear, there was a door here, there was a room, and—"

She broke off, pained, and he paused for a moment, his face momentarily unreadable.

"Ye say there was a door here, I believe ye," he said. "I dinna think you'd have any good reason to lie. Am I wrong?"

"What? No, of course not, but—" She flattened her palm against the wall. "I wouldn't blame you," she said quietly, "if you thought I was totally mad."

He swallowed, glancing at his hands for a moment before looking back at her.

"I dinna think you're mad," he said, and hesitated for a moment. "I mighta died from my injuries this evening," he told her, his voice quiet. "I'm sorry I didna say so sooner, but I know verra well I would be dying slowly in my bed if not for you."

She shook her head weakly. "Someone could have healed you."

"Not like you. Not this well. You saved my life." He paused, and then cleared his throat. "Now," he said gently, "let me save yours."

She looked up to find him slowly resigning himself to something, breathing out.

"About this marriage," he said tentatively, and she glanced at the wall.

*Please,* she begged it, *please, let me back in. Bring me back to the man I love. Put me where I belong.*

Nothing.

*Nothing.*

"I was meant to wed an English girl, the daughter of one of Dumbledore's allies," Potter said quietly. "It woulda meant supplies, weapons, magic, money—but I'll find some other way. I'll find another way." He looked at her for a long time, searching her for something. "I'm verra sorry the kindest thing I can do for you is claim ye, but if it helps, I will do it."

She shivered. "Will he really kill me if I don't?" she asked carefully, and Potter nodded solemnly.

"You dinna want to test him," he said, swallowing. "It will come down on both our heads."

She believed him. It had come down on his already, and why lie? He had nothing to gain by marrying her.

How had any of this happened?

She shut her eyes, shaking her head.

"Can you do something for me?" she asked, and he gave her a wary nod. "Can you answer three questions for me, but not ask me why I'm asking? You said you believed me," she pointed out, gesturing to the wall when he frowned with uncertainty. "Can I ask you to trust me again?"

He paused, considering her request, then nodded slowly.

She took a deep breath.
"Where am I?" she asked, and he blinked, but delicately ventured an answer.

"Hogwarts Castle," he said. "Hogsmeade, north of Edinburgh."

So it wasn't an issue of place, then. She was precisely where she'd been since the previous weekend. That was disheartening.

"What day is it?" she asked, bracing herself.

He blinked again. "Samhain." Halloween, precisely as it had been when she'd left—which meant only one impossible thing.

She held her breath. "And the year?"

The words fell with a dull thud. "1633."

No, no, no.

"Ah." Her mind spun, tipping her thoughts off balance until she suspected they might slide out from her skull. "Okay."

"Now I have a question for you, lass." He tilted her chin up, searching her face. "What's your name?"

It seemed silly he'd agreed to marry a woman whose name he didn't even know. Silly, she thought, or stupidly chivalrous. "Lily," she said, extending a hand. "Lily Elizabeth Evans."

He glanced at her hand, then offered his. His palm was callused and strong, the raised scars on the backs of his hands brushing hers as he took hold of it, though he didn't give it a shake. Instead he raised her fingers to his lips, touching them briefly to her knuckles.

"Lily," he repeated softly. "My name is James Potter."

"James," she echoed. It slid comfortably from her lips.

She didn't notice he was still holding her hand in his until he shifted his free hand, resting it lightly on her hips. She was wearing jeans, of course. She was always wearing jeans when her mother wasn't pestering her about her clothes, time-travel through a Scottish castle notwithstanding, and James was curiously running his thumb over the material, marveling at its construction.

Or so she assumed. He might have been contemplating what lay beneath the fabric, but she wasn't sure she was ready to consider that possibility yet.

"You will need a gown," he said after a moment, clearing his throat and removing his hand. "Do ye have anything?"

She shook her head silently.

"Alright, then. I'll arrange it." A pause. "Lily," he said, and she looked up, the sound of it strangely delicate, as if he'd crafted it carefully on his tongue before saying it aloud.

"Yes, James?" she asked.

"We'd better get out of here before we get killed," he said.

"Oh," she realized, feeling her cheeks flush. "Yes. Right."
It was hard not to think of the wedding dress she was supposed to have worn on Saturday, only a few days away, when she'd planned to marry a long-familiar man in a black suit, not a stranger in a red and gold kilt. James looked well enough; his hair was slicked back from his face, skin polished with cleanliness, and his jacket—which certainly looked less silly on him than she thought clothes from this period should look on a man—was fitted perfectly to his broad shoulders. Unfortunately, the bruising around his eye had set in, the shadows above his cheeks purpled and swollen. It was something he could have charmed away or eased and instead opted not to, which was a distraction throughout the ceremony.

That, of course, and the fact that he wasn't the man she'd wanted to marry.

Worse, Lord Voldemort was there, and Greyback, and a collection of dirty, stern-looking men who were ostensibly members of James' clan. One, a grumpy man who managed to have both a false eye and a false leg like some sort of Scottish pirate, had been the one to bring Lily her gown. "Here, from Jamie," he'd said, almost intelligible in his thick brogue. He'd thrust it into her hands and then turned and left, not even sticking around long enough for her to realize who he'd meant.

The dress was mostly red, deep and crimson, surprisingly form-fitting and with long, tapered sleeves, a white damask beneath the soft and supple velvet. It was a beautiful gown, though Lily thought she looked a bit odd in it. Her actual wedding dress—the one waiting for her three hundred and fifty years plus a few days away—was white, mostly tulle; a ballgown, and it certainly hadn't required this level of corset-lacing. Her face looked too pale, her auburn hair colorless against the gown.

Perhaps the worst thing about the ceremony was the contrast between Lord Voldemort's gleeful look of triumph and the somber expressions on the faces of James' collection of friends and allies, all of whom seemed to take the loss of James' alternate betrothal as a blow that Lily herself had dealt them. She understood that, in some abstract way. They didn't want her, and she didn't want them. The only thing that kept her from running out of the small stone church was the steady lock of James' gaze on hers, and the single word he said to her when he met her at the church:

"Reubaltaich."

The whole thing went by in a blur, and then the man with one eye was on his feet, heading towards them with a knife. Lily went rigid, startled, and James, seeing her distress, paused the man, taking the knife from him.

"Ye just have to repeat after me, ye ken?" he murmured to her, drawing a thin line in his wrist and then holding his hand out for hers. "Can ye do that?"

Lily's heart sank. Magic like this, with blood, was sacred. More than. There was no getting around it. They'd be bound together as long as their blood still ran in their veins. She wanted terribly to refuse, but now, like before, he was standing there bleeding for her against his will, and it was the second time in two days he had done so.

She held out her hand without an answer. He slid his thumb gently across her wrist, following with the knife so quickly and with such care she felt nothing but the fragility of his touch. Then the man with one eye gruffly tied their hands together, holding them in place as Lily held her breath, uncertain.

"Ye are Blood of my Blood," James said quietly, "and Bone of my Bone. I give ye my Body, that we Two might be One. I give ye my Spirit, 'til our Life shall be Done."
She repeated it back to him, stumbling only slightly on *til our life be done*, and he gave her a smile that was more of a grimace. She returned with something she hoped was a better attempt, and beside them, the priest beckoned for a kiss.

She tilted her chin up, waiting, but James took hold of her waist first, gently. He pulled her in close, pausing just before their lips met, and slid his nose along hers; comforting her, asking her permission, which she granted with an inhalation, drawing it sharply into her lungs.

"Lily," he said, half-smiling, and kissed her.

She hadn't expected it to feel like much of anything. She'd kissed hello, goodbye, salutation and felicitation, and none of those had ever meant anything. She expected it to be something like that; just skin-to-skin contact, good intentions, and nothing else.

Only it wasn't.

His breath tasted a little like the mead he must have drunk, scented with spices, and he smelled clean, the way a river smells as it rushes between the trees. He filled her nose and her mouth and her lungs and it was a relief, in a way, her lips meeting his. It was as if she'd been running, sprinting at top speed, and had collided with safe harbor, with safety, with the rush of a current before landing smoothly on solid ground. He felt like sun; like too much time in the sun; like the earth when it was cool beneath the shade. Her heart raced and danced and leapt, away and back and forward, cast out on a gust of wind, and his lips were sweet, honeyed, wild. Like she'd pressed her tongue to the taste of adventure itself.

They pulled apart, and she was breathless. He was holding his breath, too. And from his seat in the audience, Lord Voldemort's smile faltered, catching something: a small detail gone awry.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," said the priest, and abruptly, Lily's cheeks flamed.

She'd married another man. Somewhere Severus was alone and she was here, her hand in someone else's, her blood bound to a stranger she'd only met yesterday. She hadn't even thought of Severus when she'd kissed James Potter.

What had happened to her?

James, catching her expression, visibly faltered. There had been a stunned little smile on his lips after their kiss, a pleasant look of surprise, but it was gone now, the light of it dimmed almost to nothing.

"Well," Lord Voldemort said cheerfully, rising to his feet. "That's that, then. Shall we celebrate?"

Apt, Lily thought, as he was the only one with anything to celebrate.

She let James tuck her hand into the crook of his arm and followed, a floating sense of numbness filling her chest at the knowledge there would still be a long night ahead.

"I'm sorry, lass," James said, grimacing a little as he closed the door behind him, the raucous sounds echoing up from the Great Hall as she settled herself uncomfortably on the edge of the bed. "They're bawdy lads, Voldemort's men, and I fear they willna leave."

"This is all so primitive," Lily muttered, glancing at the finery of her dress and the bedding and scowling at it, wishing it more adequately reflected the rottenness of the situation. "It's barbaric."
"Well, this may surprise ye, lass, but it's no great pleasure for me to lie with a woman who shrinks from my touch," James said, his voice dry and reluctant again. "This wasna my choosing anymore than it was yours."

She glanced at him, more than tipsy; a little annoyed, too, and a little sorry, though she wasn't sure which feeling she wanted to indulge at the moment. "Who were you supposed to marry?" she asked bluntly, apparently opting for the former. "The rest of your friends seem to wish I'd never been born."

"I reckon they do," James said, and she glared at him. "You're just as unhappy to have me, Lily, as they are to have you. I dinna know why it's necessary to pretend."

"That man, though," she said, making a face. "With the eye, he's just so—coarse."

"Mad-Eye?" James said with a laugh. "He's soft as they come, lass. You canna let a missing leg put you off."

"He doesn't seem soft," she muttered grumpily. "He seems like he wants me to live a life of constant misery."

"Constant vigilance," James corrected, and she gave him a skeptical glance. "It's just something he says. Isna important."

She opened her mouth to say something, and then paused, suddenly remembering something she hadn't thought about yet. "He calls you Jamie," she recalled, and James gave her a slow, almost syrupy grin.

"He's known me since I was a wee scrap of a thing, Mad-Eye, and he's too old to change," he said with a laugh. "But I prefer if my wife dinna call me by a lad's name, ye ken?"

"Wife. There it was again. Her head and her morals spun and she grimaced, eyeing her hands. James had leaned closer as they spoke, but she shifted away, angling herself elsewhere.

"At least… tell me something," she urged him. "Tell me about her. Your erstwhile bride," she said with a moody laugh, and he shook his head.

"Well, I havena met her," James said, half-laughing as he leaned against the post of the bed. "It woulda been an arrangement, same as this one, to provide us some of the things we presently lack—though this one leaves us just as starving as we were before," he said grudgingly, "what with Voldemort taking as he does—and with a lady of the house who isna wee bit experienced at running one, much less an entire clan."

She glared at him. "How do you know I have no experience?"

"Just a guess, lass." He leaned forward, resting his forehead against his arm where it propped him up against the bedpost. "If I am not the husband you wanted, Lily, I am verra sorry about that. But as we are both left with no other options, I expect we shouldna spend our wedding night locked in a fight we canna win."

She grimaced. He was right, but still. It wasn't like she was thrilled with the idea of opening her legs for some medieval Scot who, while nice enough, wasn't at all the man she'd been in a relationship with for the past five years, and friends with long before that. She'd been with a few people before Severus had come to his senses and asked her out (most of them foolish regrets, ultimately, hardly even worth it) but this—while apparently tempting enough at times, if their kiss was to be believed—wasn't exactly what she'd dreamed about.
"Did you love him?"

She looked up, startled, to find James looking at her.

"Your betrothed," he clarified. "Was it... a love match, between ye?"

"Oh." Her voice was small and quiet. "Yes, yes it was." She cleared her throat. "But he, um. He's gone," she said softly, feeling her throat tighten. "He's gone now."

"Oh, Lily." James' voice carried a low hum of sadness and she looked up, surprised to find the amber in his eyes settling on hers with palpable sympathy. "I'm verra sorry to hear that. How did he die?"

"Oh no, he's—" She swallowed, half unable to think of a lie, half unable to speak. "It's... he's just, um—"

She trailed off, unsure what to say, and James cleared his throat after a moment.

"Perhaps," he said, pausing to carefully consider his words. "I willna try to fill his place, then." Another pause, a little tick of hesitation in his breath. "Perhaps," he said, "I'll simply be me, and you be you, and whatever we are together, Lily, let it be nothing like it was before. I wasna ready for you, nor you for me, but we can be something different now, can we not? No better or worse, just... us."

In the weighty pause that followed, he grimaced, shaking his head. "Perhaps it's a bit foolish."

"No, James, it's—" It wasn't foolish at all. It was, much to her surprise, precisely what she'd needed to hear. "It's nice," she said after a moment's pause. "I'd like that."

Perhaps Severus would understand. She tried to imagine telling him what had happened; instead, though, she could only picture him bent over his books, poring over his notes.

Briefly, a tiny voice in her mind echoed with something disconcerting.

What if he hadn't even noticed she was gone?

She felt James drawing her towards him before she fully realized what was happening, having been lost in the reedy hum of her darker thoughts until the moment she was colliding with his chest. She caught the hint of his scent again, that vivid sense of rivers rushing, and looked up to watch the amber shift to grey and green and back again, adjusting to the view of her face.

"Ye looked a bit lost," he said. "I thought perhaps I should find you."

"That's," she began, and felt her cheeks flush. "That's quite a line, James. Do you use that on all the girls?"

His mouth twisted upwards in a progression of animated stages, as if he'd fought his amusement for dominance and somehow, she'd won out. "I normally dinna have a problem keeping the attention of a lass, but I suppose you're na a usual one of them, are ye?"

She turned away, feeling silly. She felt doe-eyed and slight in his arms; like the heroine of a romance novel, which she resolutely was not. "You barely know me, James."

"I dinna know you at all, Lily," he agreed with a laugh, the sound of it light and airy as it brushed across her cheek. "I only know you are a dangerous woman, and a hell of a witch."
"Yes, and that's all you need to know," she assured him, a bit distracted by the shape of his mouth. It looked different when he was smiling like this, without restriction. He looked younger, freer, reckless and wild, and there was something about him now that was as familiar to her as her youth. To look at him was to remember sneaking out of her house; tiptoeing across the lawn; borrowing her mother's car without asking. It was that first sip of an amaretto sour on a *school night*, makeup smeared across her eyes, kissing a boy she'd just met. It was putting on glitter for a rock show, placing her head to the ironing board and making her hair stiff and straight, tying her shirt above her navel and pulling her jeans down low.

Being in James' arms felt like breaking the rules, more dizzying than the mead she'd drunk, and the ghost of who she might have been if she'd never suffered a single consequence crept slowly out of her bones, seizing her fingers and directing her touch until she had tightened them with undeniable longing in the fabric of his shirt.

He shifted out of his jacket, letting it fall to the floor, and paused before brushing the hem of her dress, his fingers hovering above her décolletage. "Do ye need help," he said softly. "With... with the lacing?"

Her heart pounded, ricocheting through her ribs.

"Sure," she said, turning to place her hands against the bedpost. He rested his hands carefully on her waist, steadying her—or himself, unclear—and slid his hands smoothly over the blades of her shoulder, putting himself to work.

His movements were sure and measured, almost rhythmic with their precision. She felt her ribs creak from strain as the dress loosened around them, and James' hands brushed the bit of bare skin between the nape of her neck and the top vertebrae of her spine as she permitted the gown to fall from her shoulders, leaving only her shift.

"Your hands are warm," she said, dazed, and he smiled.

"I'm a wizard myself," he told her. "Just not quite so good as you." He turned her carefully, taking her hand in his, and exhaled softly across her knuckles, warming them. "Some things," he said quietly. "Some things I can do."

She blinked. Blinked again.

"Anything else?" she asked, voice just a touch above hoarse, and his mouth curved and bent, accommodating a smile that became a look of solemnity as he reached for her, carefully cupping his palm around the shape of her cheek.

Tentative would have been the wrong word for his kiss. It was more like testing, experimental, exploratory. He was tasting her with the way he ran the tip of his tongue over her lower lip, applying it with a gentle pulse of pressure. It was a meditative give and take, a brush of his lips to be met with hers, and then a little more, with a pause to see what she offered in return.

At first his hand remained on her cheek, but as she leaned closer, pressing the full weight of her palm against his chest, his fingers slowly traveled up from where he'd set them on her waist, taking a little more distance each time. Up to the base of her ribs, down to her hips. Up slightly higher, dragging his thumb up from the first to the second, then pressure to her waist, then down again to her hips. Up, just under the swell of her breast, then down, further in, lingering at her navel before falling lower.

And then his hands paused.
"Have ye been with a man before?" he asked her, and she nodded somewhat guiltily. It was an unhelpful time to think of the way Severus made love to her, which was detailed and practiced and as meticulous as his notes, equally academic. She enjoyed it thoroughly, but Severus was a man of concentration, at times as severe as his name suggested. There was a sense, with him, of getting it right, doing things by the book.

James was curious in a different way. Each new inch of her he'd gained by virtue of his touch brought a new expression of lightness to his face; a little new awe with each new bit of distance.

"Yes," she said. "And you?"

"No," James said, joking, "havena been with a man myself," and she smiled.

"Yes, but I meant—"

"I know what you meant." He pressed his forehead to hers, half-smiling. "Will ye think less of me, Lily, if I tell you I havena been with a woman?"

She blinked, surprised. He didn't exactly scream inexperience. "You haven't?"

"I'm a laird, Lily," he said with a chuckle. "My father died when I was still verra young, and I have responsibilities to my home, to my clan. Besides, I'm a rebel, at that. I didna have time to waste on stolen pleasures." He stroked the backs of his fingers against her cheek. "And I had a responsibility to my future wife," he told her softly, "though I didna ken who she might be."

*Wife.* She was his wife.

Lily swallowed. "And are you disappointed?"

"With you? Ah, you're headstrong, Lily. You're trouble. Ye'll be the death of me, I reckon I'm quite sure of that." He drew her face up to his again. "But," he murmured to her lips, letting her savor the taste of a silver lining, "I couldna dreamt you. I coulda wished for many things in a wife," he murmured, "that she be beautiful and clever and strong, and still, I wouldna ken she'd be as beautiful or as clever or as strong as you are, Lily."

"Lily," he repeated, with a kiss this time that she returned, leaning into the taste of it. "Mo leannan. My Lily. *Mine,*" he repeated, snaking an arm around her waist and drawing her so close to him she thought she might simply shatter in his hold, letting out a gasp that tore out from her mouth into his.

He slid one of her legs up—proving they could, in fact, be closer—and she felt the hard length of him pressing against her. An inch and he could slide inside her, and she'd be ready for him, too. Already she was aching, tied up in knots that pulsed for him, throbbing with each careful motion of his hips. He angled her knee wider, the entirety of her body suffering a jolt as his thigh brushed her clit.

"For a virgin," she told him, half-panting, "you really have a handle on this."

His mouth twitched with humor. "I'm a rebel, Lily. Surely you didna think I was too pure of heart."

He did it again, this time shifting lower so his hips rubbed against her. God, she could come like this, right now, without him even inside her. She felt like a teenager all over again, discovering the simple magic of friction. She remembered once thinking dry-humping was more fun than sex—that pretending at sex was much more exciting than the act of sex itself—but now she wished she could go back and tell her younger self that she was wrong; she was so, so wrong.
This wasn't nearly enough. She dug her fingers into the back of James' neck and pulled his lips to hers, finding a way to tell him; to show him with her kiss how much she desperately wanted more.

"Do you want me to teach you?" she asked him, and he paused, his tongue darting hungrily over his lips.

"Show me," he said, taking hold of her hips and pressing her back against the bed. "Please."

She arched a brow, amused. "Have you never even seen a naked woman before?"

"Not one like you." His mouth twitched up. "And not one that's mine."

It was hard not to find his satisfaction with her somewhat compelling.

"Well, your first lesson is that a woman needs more than a man does," she told him, folding her arms over her chest. "So I want to see you first."

His mouth twitched up at one corner, then the other. "Verra well," he agreed, kicking off his boots, one and then the other, before lowering his fingers to the belt wrapped around his kilt. He let the belt fall, then the fabric; then eyed her for a moment before he reached over his shoulder, bunching the back of his shirt with one hand and tugging it over his head.

He let the shirt fall from his hand, kicking the kilt aside, and stood bare in front of her, permitting her to look. "Terrible view, I take it?" he asked, smiling somewhat roguishly at her. "What are your thoughts, lass?"

"My thoughts?" she echoed, unsure how to put them in words. Primarily: that it might have been a mistake to make him go first.

He was, in a word, physical perfection. Which was not to say he was unblemished, as his body had as many scars as his hands and face, flecked all over his skin in crevices and marks—but the construction of him was faultless. He had crevices of muscle that bore evidence of use, of craftsmanship, all structured arms and broad shoulders and shapely chest. His stomach was a broad ripple of curves and angles leading to the defined slope of his hips, and perhaps at another moment she might have noticed the toned lines of his legs, long and firm, had something else not directed her attention to the unmistakable hardness that sat between them.

"Oh," she said faintly, taking a step around him, peering from a new and reprehensibly faultless angle to find that his arse, as she might have suspected, was positively carved from marble. "I take it you've, um." A pause, a sharp inhale caught between her hesitant teeth. "You seem to lift heavy things from time to time."

She watched him bite back a laugh, politely smothering it between his lips.

"Only when required," he assured her carefully, letting her continue her scrutinizing circle around him before reaching out, taking hold of her elbow gently with one hand. "Lass," he said softly. "Fair is fair."

She blinked, pausing in place, and nodded. There was really no point putting it off. She slid the shift from her shoulders, stumbling a little as she let it pool on the floor, and turned to face him, holding her breath.

He did her the kindness of not making her wait for judgment. "Mo leannen," he said, taking a step towards her, "you are." A pause, and then a kiss to the left side of her neck, the warmth of his sigh
skating across her shoulder. Then a stroke to her clavicle, his finger sliding slowly between her breasts. "Perfect," he murmured, looking as if he were watching the motion of her breath, and she swallowed hard.

Perfect she most certainly wasn't. She was still betraying one man and lying to the other, and she would need more than several drinks and a few bleary-eyed glances for her to cross that line—but at this point, drawing it out would only make it worse.

"I'm going to… lie back," she said, clearing her throat as she fumbled for the bed behind her, sitting down and sliding herself back across the duvet. "And, um, then you'll just—"

"What do you like?" James asked, turning to face her, and she blinked.

"What?"

"How do ye like to be touched?" he asked, clarifying himself with a distinct lack of chagrin, and she stared at him, breathing hard.

"Oh," she said. "Well, um—"

He leaned forward, resting his palms on the bed, and in her surprise at his proximity, she instinctively clamped her thighs in place; the motion was such a nervous jolt of agitation her knees knocked together, and she let out a growling hiss of 'fuck' before turning her head away, embarrassed. He gave a low chuckle, climbing further on top of the bed and lightly kissing the bone of her patella, gently drawing her ankles apart.

"Show me," he beckoned quietly, and after settling himself near her, he drew her legs on either side of his hips, sitting patiently between them.

The ache inside her after seeing him—after touching him, after breathing his air and feeling his pulse and politely asking her mind not to run wild with thoughts of his hands, his lips, his tongue—was adamant now, and she was grateful, despite her initial surprise, for the chance to relieve some of her festering need for pressure. She slid a hand down, circling the swollen lips of her cunt and dipping lower, inside her. His brows rose, surprised, as she let out a little hiss of need, trying unsuccessfully to trap it in her mouth as she drew her fingers out, sliding them on either side of her clit.

"This," she said with difficulty, "is, um. It's—"

"Let me try," he said, tugging her hips towards him with a look of determination, the white imprints of his teeth momentarily lingering on the swell of his lower lip. His hands fit comfortably around the circumference of her thighs and then dropped, cupping her bum. He brushed his knuckles over her clit and she moaned, clapping her hand over her mouth. "Did I hurt ye?" he asked, looking concerned, and she shook her head.

"No, it's—it's good, I just—"

"Do ye like," he began, and paused. "Other things?"

She blinked. "Like what?"

"Like—" A pause. "Stop me," he said, "if it's… if you dinna like it."

He leaned forward, one hand sliding up to press her hips flat against the mattress, and brushed his lips against her. He kissed her there like he'd kissed her on the mouth, with a slow, careful pulse of
his lips, and then tentatively drew his tongue over her. She gasped, and he looked up.

"Bad?"

She shook her head wordlessly and he nodded, grasping the point, and dropped to lay flat on his stomach, her legs pushed up over his shoulders. The muscle of them shifted as she watched, his arms coming up around her thighs to pull her close as he lowered his mouth to the heat of her again. He made a slow motion with his lips, the warmth of his breath tingling against the sensitive flesh of her cunt, and as he slid his tongue inside her, she tightened her fingers in his hair, tugging at the roots.

"James," she whispered.

He responded with another kiss, gentle, and then a motion of his tongue. Up, down, around, swirling around her in a deep, fluid motion. Her hips jerked beneath his touch and he did it again. Again. He learned fast, too fast. He slowed down, sliding his thumb over the place his lips had just been. She shuddered and groaned. He did it again. Trial and error, pause for evaluation, repeat. He scraped his knuckles against her clit and she yanked at his head. "Too much," she growled, and he grinned, directing a kiss of apology to the mound of her pussy. Then he licked, south to north, and sucked lightly.

"Again," she said faintly.

He obliged.

She was twisting and writhing beneath him, hips held unsuccessfully in place with his left hand as he slid the thumb of his right one against her, and—once, twice, a third, a shift of his palm to cup around her as she ground against him—she was shaking, hands fisted in this sheets as her body went rigid and then flooded with release, tingling down to her toes as James lifted his head, curiously watching her face.

"Is that," he said, and paused. "Does that mean—"

She reached down, taking hold of his chin and dragging his face up to hers to press her lips against his without finesse, with urgency, with a barely stifled moan until he had fumbled to fit between her legs, the leaking head of his cock angled at the slit of her cunt. He glanced at her, blinking with momentary hesitation, and she slid her fingers through the thick strands of his black hair.

"James," she said softly, "you're my husband now." *Husband*. The impact of it struck her square in the chest, and he nodded slowly, understanding.

"Still," he said. "I would prefer if ye… wanted me. Like I—" He broke off, resting his forehead against her. "Like I want to have you," he said, his voice a heated barely-whisper, and she drew his lips down to hers.

"I want to," she told him, tightening her fingers in his hair. "You can—"

A swallow. A pause. A kiss of desperation as she gave in, discarding the last of her reservations; the lost face that lingered at the back of her mind. She would find her way back to Severus somehow, and when she did… She couldn't think about that now. Right now, her survival depended on James Potter, and he needed three words from her.

"I want you," she whispered, and with that, James pushed himself into her, prompting them both to a collective, visceral gasp.
His hips thrusted against hers with patience, slowly, carefully, gradually gaining speed as he went deeper, pouring himself into her as she disentangled herself from any sense of control. It was like a panic attack, just as uncontained and frantic, but this time, as she lost herself, she wasn't spinning out; she wasn't cast out into oblivion alone. James was there, the broad presence of him grounding her in place as they both came, sweat from his brow glinting across her clavicle.

He let his weight drop against her, shifting from his arms to lay against her chest, and while he was solid as a rock, she felt oddly comforted by his body pressing into hers. She ran her fingers over his spine, toying with his skin, and gradually he rolled onto his side, looking at her.

This was it, she thought. His wife. Her husband.

The reality of it flung itself onto her, heavier even than he had been. She was promised to someone else, and she'd betrayed him. Necessity or not, she'd enjoyed the feel of another man; she'd promised her life and her body to someone who wasn't the man she'd said I love you to just the day before.

Did that make her a liar, or just a fool?

"Perhaps we should sleep," James said. He was watching her face, the light of the candles flickering over them both to swath them in uneven glimpses of color, and she turned away, reaching for her shift.

"Perhaps we should," she agreed, slipping it back on and getting into bed beside him, facing her back to him.

She waited, but she never heard the sound of rhythmic breathing. Both of them, it seemed, could do nothing but lie awake, separately caught in a web of their respective sacrifices.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: So, this was YET AGAIN a one-shot that got carried away, so the next two parts will post over the next two days. Happy Halloween! If you have any interest in my original work, Lovely Tangled Vices (my latest book, featuring rival witch sisters, a coven masquerading as a sorority, and my staple: inadvisable romance) is now available. You can find it (and a wild cocktail recipe, be careful) on my website or tumblr. See you back here tomorrow for more rebel lairds!
Rebel North, Part II

**Pairing:** Jily (James Potter x Lily Evans)

**Universe:** magical Outlander-esque AU (time travel + Scottish Highlands)

**Rating:** M for sex

**Summary:** Part II of Rebel North, continued. Having unwillingly married a Scottish laird who's been all but exiled, Lily has no choice but to join him and his men on their progress back home. Along the way, though, she learns there's far more to her new husband than meets the eye, and she manages to make herself useful in a time of less sophisticated magic.

The next morning was no particular thrill. Opening her eyes to a world she'd inadvertently chained herself to (until it had become willing, she thought with a grimace) was hardly ideal, and especially not when a near-stranger was stirring beside her. James turned his head, looking at her.

"I hope it wasna too terrible," he said in a low voice, and for as much as she wanted to deny everything—especially her own pleasure—she found she could as easily let him linger in disappointment as she could kick a puppy.

"It wasn't, James," she said, turning onto her side to face him. He shifted to face her, brow furrowed with concern. "It's not… it's not anything you did, it's just—"

"The situation?" James guessed.

"Yes." She swallowed. "Yes, it's… all a bit much, I'm afraid."

"Maybe Dumbledore can help ye, Lily. Maybe ye dinna need to stay." He looked perfectly miserable as he reached out, brushing her hair from her cheek. "I dinna wish ye to be unhappy."

"I—" This was torture. Exquisite torment, particularly as she could see the shape of his chest, the muscle of his arms. She could feel the heat of him beside her, bringing an unavoidable flush to her cheeks. Was she really this kind of girl? Could she really throw away the relationship she'd had before, all because the man in her bed was—admittedly—quite up to the task of bedding her?

She shoved it aside.

"I'm not unhappy, James. It'll just… take some getting used to." She exhaled, shaking her head. "I'll need some time to adjust."

He nodded. In the spare glow of morning light from the window his black hair took on a rosy sheen, the wild thickness of it spilling onto his forehead as his eyes changed again, softening to amber. "Ye'll have it. All the time ye need. If you dinna wish to—" He broke off, hesitating. "If ye dinna wish to have me again, you willna need to, seeing as we'll hardly have the time. It's a verra long ways to my family home."
"What?" Lily asked, blinking. "Wait, we're leaving the castle? Today?"

"Yes." His mouth quirked slightly. "I told ye you would need to run a household, did I not?"

"Yes, but—"

"Our marriage is for Voldemort to be rid of me. We dinna have a choice, mo leannan."

"I know, but—"

She broke off, suddenly remembering something.

"What does that word mean?" she asked, frowning as she noted his repeated use of unfamiliar Gaelic. "You called me that last night."

"Oh, ah." James' cheeks flushed slightly. "Nothing, dinna worry. Just a pet name."

"A pet name?" Lily asked, arching a brow. "What, like… darling?"

"Aye, something like that," he said, not quite looking at her. "You havena much to pack, I reckon?" he continued, changing the subject back to what it had been and chuckling to himself. "While we're on the road, Lily, ye'll have to tell us how a lass such as yourself came to be without even a single worldly possession."

"Oh, um—" She hardly wanted to have that conversation. "Yes, I suppose I'll need to find some things. Some clothes," she added, clearing her throat. "It'll be quite cold, won't it?"

"Yes," James said, nodding, "but dinna worry. I'll have Mad-Eye fetch ye something."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Lily said warily, and to that, James gave her a bright, ferociously adamant look of opposition.

"You're my wife, Lily," he told her, though it seemed to mean something different to hear him say it this time. "You have ownership now of my name, my clan, and you have the protection of my body, if ye require it." He sobered for a moment, contemplating her. "This is what it means to be one with me, reubaltaich, and to be mine, as I am yours. From now on, you will never stand alone, and as for your needs, whatever they are—" He shrugged, the sheet slipping from his shoulder.

"Ye willna want for nothing, Lily, so long as I can help it."

Lily swallowed hard. It was… an excessive offer, to say the least.

Appealingly so.

"James," she said softly, reaching out for him, and his eyes widened for a moment with surprise, darkening to slate as he looked at her. She brushed her fingertips across his lips, saying thank you with the quietest of pressures, and he closed his eyes, leaning into her touch before snaking a hand out around her waist, pulling her closer.

He was still bare beneath the covers. She felt her heart leap in her chest, plummeting rapidly elsewhere, and as his eyes floated open, she could already taste the closeness of him; the still-strange, newly-familiar sense of being near him, breathing in the clean smell of his hair.

"Will ye kiss me, Lily?" he asked her, the words melting on her lips, and she shivered a little, letting him mistake her wanting for cold and permitting herself to be pulled closer, sheltered within the breadth of his frame.
You have the protection of my body.

"James," she said again, gratitude rasping into her voice, and tilted her chin up, touching her lips tentatively to his. He let her linger there, meandering slowly into the kiss, before his arms grew tight around her, yanking her closer, closer, hiking the material of her shift up to slide his palm smoothly over her thigh.

She could feel the tightness of his fingers where they fisted in her shift, holding it at her waist, all the tension between them channeled into the consequence of his grip as he slid her leg between his, putting skin on skin. Lily, feeling bold, ran her tongue across his lower lip, tasting him, and in response he groaned, lost to even the smallest of her movements. How many times had she made love to Severus knowing he was thinking of something else? Some research, some other thing he had to do, some stress or worry? And here was James, a man forced out from his rightful position because of her, treating her kiss like it was the fullest of luxuries. She parted her lips to deepen the kiss, shifting to take hold of the hand that had stilled at her side and easing the tightness of his fist, twining her fingers with his.

He was content to hold her hand, gently running his thumb over her knuckles, and she placed his hand on her hip, sliding it up to her ribs. She felt his breath stutter with understanding, with anticipation, and then he covered one of her breasts with his hand, smoothing his callused palm over it before tweaking lightly at her nipple. She gasped, the sound bursting out without her permission, and in answer he bucked his hips against hers, no longer quite so patient. He rolled on top of her, the sheet falling from his back as she traced her fingers up his spine, and it occurred to her that perhaps the night before hadn't been some trick of ale or desperation.

She wanted him, badly—and what did that say about her?

She went rigid beneath him and he stopped, pulling back to look at her with confusion on his face.

"Did I hurt ye?" he asked, voice gravelly with concern, and she swallowed hard.

She wanted terribly to have him again, to feel him. She wanted nothing more than to arch her hips up, to tell him to fill her, to whisper to him how safe she felt in his arms. She wanted to cry out obscenities about wanting to fuck him—truly, to be fucked by him—and every single one of them choked her into anguished silence, uncertain how she could possibly want him so badly even while knowing he wasn't the one.

"No," she whispered. "No, but I—"

"JAMIE." It was Mad-Eye's voice. "JAMIE, GET YER ARSE OUT OF BED, WE'RE LEAVIN'."

James winced, turning over his shoulder. "I'm a bit busy, Mad-Eye," he shouted, and the door burst open, leaving Lily to let out a squeak of dismay as James sat upright, blocking her from view.

"Let's go," Mad-Eye said gruffly, his good eye falling approvingly on where Lily was tucked behind James. "Congratulations on yer virility, lad, but it'll have to wait."

"I dinna appreciate you breaking into my bedchambers, Mad-Eye," James sighed, carelessly raking a hand through his tousled hair. "My wife requires a certain amount of privacy, ye ken?"

"Oh, I ken, alrigh'," Mad-Eye said with a laugh. "Proud of ye, Jamie, for keepin' the lass wantin' more at this hour—"

"Mad-Eye," James growled warningly.
"—but still, put yer cockstand away, we canna stay much longer. Remus needs ye," he added, and Lily felt the blades of James' shoulders going stiff.

"So soon? I thought it would be at least a week yet until the next moon."

Mad-Eye shook his head. "Days, lad."

Lily frowned, glancing questioningly at James. She couldn't see his expression from where she was hiding behind him, but she caught evidence of stress along the back of his neck.

"Get Lily some clothes," James said, suddenly a laird again. Even like this, naked and admonished, Lily had to admit he had a presence; a palpable sense of authority, which was hard not to admire.

"We'll leave in an hour."

Lily blinked. "An hour?" she asked tentatively, and James twisted around to look at her. "That's…it's just so soon—"

"Mad-Eye'll get you some clothes," James said. "I dinna have a choice, it must be now. Unless there's something else you'll be needing?"

Yes, she thought. To revisit the room on the seventh floor, to go home, to have never wanted you. To have never tasted you.

"No," she said eventually, and James nodded.

"Verra well," he said, and slid out from the covers, reaching for his kilt. "We'll be off shortly, then."

She couldn't decide if it was better or worse to be mounted in front of James on his horse. She wasn't exactly proficient on her own, but still. She hardly needed the steady rise and fall of his chest to remind her of her disastrous conflict about him—which manifested in the occasional drifting of her thoughts to the feel of his thighs astride hers, or the way his arms wrapped around her. Luckily, he seemed equally distracted, muttering things in Gaelic to Sirius or to Mad-Eye as they went, but paying little attention to her. Something was worrying him; whoever this Remus person was, he was important to James, and by the looks of it, to the others as well.

They hadn't ventured far from Hogwarts when James called their travel party to a halt, pausing in the midst of the castle's surrounding forest. "Wait here," he said to Lily, who blinked, startled.

"What? No," she said through gritted teeth, glancing skeptically around. "Alone?"

"I'll have someone wait with ye," James promised. "Mad-Eye willna let anything happen to ye—"

"I'm going with you," Lily insisted staunchly, and James grimaced.

"Reubaltaich, dinna be stubborn today, I beg ye. It'll be naught but a moment, I swear it—"

"I'm not going to wait here, James," she told him. "Why can't I come?"

He grimaced. "It's dangerous."

"So? This is dangerous," she reminded him, waving a hand at the forest and, more importantly, at his ragged crew of disciples. "I'd rather be closer to you than stay here with people I hardly know."
At that, his expression wavered slightly, humor passing over it. "Ye hardly know me, lass, in case you didna remember."

She set her jaw, irritated. "Still. You're not leaving me behind."

He scowled slightly, glancing at an expectant Sirius and then back at her.

"Lily, you dinna understand—"

"It's a werewolf," Lily said, and James blinked. "Right?"

"I," James began, immediately faltering. "I wouldna say—"

"It is," Lily said firmly, "and I can help him. Or her. Or whoever." She folded her arms over her chest. "I helped you, didn't I? And I have—" She blinked, remembering what she'd transferred from her cast-off jeans and placed in the little pouch she'd been given to keep tied around her waist. "I have monkshood, which will ease his transition, and—"

He seemed to have connected the offer with something that might succeed in helping, which even in her rightful time in history was woefully minimal.

"Alright then, lass. Sirius," James barked over his shoulder, holding out a hand to help Lily down from the saddle. She didn't hesitate, instead exhaling relief, letting him lift her with an inconceivable lack of effort before setting her on the ground. "Let's go," James said, steadying her as she nearly stumbled into his chest, finding the earth beneath her feet slightly uneven.

She looked up, her breath catching slightly at her view of him from where she leaned against his chest. His black hair was softer in the forest light, a crown of trees forming regally around his head, and at this proximity, his eyes fell like darkened jade on hers.

"Dinna be afraid of him," James said quietly to her. "He's kind, Remus. But his condition pains him."

"I'm not afraid," Lily said, and to that, James' smile broadened.

"No, I suspect you dinna fear much, mo leannan," he said to her before setting her upright on her own, beckoning for her to follow. "Now come on," he said, gesturing over his shoulder. "We have to find him yet."

The man called Remus was shivering slightly in the cold, wearing little more than rags. He was young, like James and Sirius, but had scratches and scars all over him; clearly the result of his transformations. There was a faint yellowness to his eyes as he looked up at them, fixing temporarily on her, and Lily tried not to falter, but she hung back in deference to James and Sirius as they approached carefully, hands outstretched.

"Remus?" James said. "Moony, can ye hear me?"

Remus turned his head slowly, acknowledging James' presence, but didn't take his eyes from Lily.

"This is Lily," James said, exchanging a worried glance with Sirius, "and she knows how to help ye, Moony. If you let her, she can help ye."

Remus let out a soft snort, his feet pawing with agitation at the ground. Lily could see he was missing a shoe.
"He'll get frostbite," she hissed to James, who didn't look at her. He shook his head, holding a warning finger to his lips.

"Moony," Sirius said, his voice pitched to a low, soothing tone, "it's nearly time. But she can make it easier, ye ken?"

Remus gave a growled-out sort of scoff.

"Just give it a chance, would ye? Ye stubborn arse," Sirius muttered under his breath, surprising Lily. "For once in your life, Remus Lupin, would ye do as you're told? Ye bloody cunt," he added, and though Lily was taken aback by the comment, it seemed to have done the trick. The yellow faded from Remus' eyes, becoming a lighter, softer brown, and he seemed to shake free of it for a moment, his posture going slack.

"Padfoot," croaked Remus, and then, with a slow glance at James, "Prongs."

"Well look at you, ye menace," Sirius drawled, beckoning Lily forward. "Seems the monster within manages some reprieves."

James laughed, the tension broken, and Lily took the opportunity to step closer, holding out the monkshood flower. "I don't have time to make a full wolfsbane potion before you turn," she said apologetically, "but if you just… if you crush this up, there's a bit of a waxy film, and if you rub it on your top lip, just under your nose—"

"Who's this?" Remus asked, glancing at James. "Got yourself a real witch, then, Prongs?"

He was English. Lily was stunned. She hadn't expected him to be so human so quickly, but it seemed the other two were favorable influences.

"I'll have ye ken this is my wife, ye abominable creature," James said, now perfectly relaxed. "Sorry you missed the wedding, but it was rather unplanned."

"Well, it's wonderful to make your acquaintance," Remus said, continuing to surprise Lily with every word he spoke. He reached out a hand, letting her place the monkshood on his palm. "Under my nose, you said? Like some sort of inhalant?"

"Yes," she said, blinking. "It'll ease your symptoms as you transition."

"I'm surprised you're so at ease," Remus remarked, crushing the bulb of the flower between his fingers. "It's not too many people who can stand to be around werewolves."

"Well—" She broke off, recalling his missing shoe. "May I?" she asked, reaching for her wand, and when Remus bared his teeth, hissing at the sudden motion, James launched himself in front of her.

"Careful," he warned her over his shoulder, one hand keeping Remus at bay. "He's an old friend, but still. This close to the full moon, there's no predicting."

"Right," she said softly, reaching slowly for her wand. "Um, may I?"

"May you poke me with a stick?" Remus asked, blinking back the brief return of his wolfishness, and she gave an uncomfortable laugh.

"No, um… just, this," she explained, transfiguring the leaves below his bare foot into a boot to match the other, wrapping around his foot and securing itself. "There," she said, pleased. She hadn't
had a chance to do that in a while; Severus usually insisted on fixing things. "And if you'd let me mend your clothes—"

"Let you? My god, please," Remus said, blinking with wonderment as he wiggled his toes. "This is the most human I've felt in weeks."

James warily stepped away, letting Lily venture forward to repair the holes in Remus' clothes, coming close enough watch the fabric stitch itself over. She relaxed into Remus' presence, moving slowly and carefully, and when she was done, he looked at her with a deep, solemn appreciation.

"I am forever in your debt," he told her.

"What, for this?" she asked doubfully, shaking her head. "This is nothing. The wolfsbane will be more complicated, but—"

"Wolfsbane?" Remus echoed.

"Yes, it's a potion to help you between full moons," Lily explained. "To, um. Keep your more troublesome instincts at bay, I suppose you might say."

"Would that mean he can travel with us?" Sirius asked, stepping forward, and Lily turned over her shoulder.

"Yes, of course," she said. "He'll live a perfectly normal life with wolfsbane, minus the actual full moon—but so long as you all take precautions, I see no reason why he couldn-'"

She broke off, finding herself enveloped in a hug from Sirius that prevented her from continuing, the rest of the statement muffled into his shirt.

"Thank you," Sirius said fiercely, his grip on her so tight she wondered if her ribs might break. "Ye've no idea, none at all, how much I thank ye."

"Oh, um. You're welcome," Lily managed to say, blinking with surprise as he released her. "It's nothing, really, it's just—"

She turned, catching James' eye. He was looking at her with a strange expression on his face; something like surprise, but also tinged with a bit of pride. As if he were proud of her, in fact. I'm not the one who's good at potions, she nearly said, breaths away from saying Severus' name, but instead, she let him step forward to take her hands.

"You canna possibly imagine," James told her, "how much ye've helped us. Remus especially, but Sirius, too. And me."

"Oh, it's nothing," she said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Really, it's… it's not difficult, it's—"

"It isna difficult, to look a man in the eye and make him feel he isna a monster? No, Lily," James told her, slipping a finger below her chin and lifting her gaze to his. "It is so difficult most men canna manage it, but you," he exhaled, pausing to shake his head.

In the moment, the trees rustling overhead and leaves displacing themselves at their feet, she could have sworn she saw something change in his eyes.

"I couldna wished for a better woman," he told her quietly.
She wanted to kiss him.

She wanted desperately, achingly, to throw her arms around his neck, to pull his lips to hers, to thank him; to cry and rage and sob that he could make her feel things she didn't wish to feel.

Instead, she merely nodded, stepping back.

"I'm happy to help," she said. "Though I should start working on the potion. I'll need to gather ingredients, get it brewing. He can start taking it the moment the full moon has passed."

James blinked, registering the distance she'd put between them, and gave a tentative nod.

"Verra well," he said, his voice slightly clipped. "Then I reckon we should get started."

James decided to camp for a few days on the outskirts of the wood, biding their time until the full moon. He spent some of that time with her, helping her to find the necessary ingredients for wolfsbane, but much of it was spent in the woods with Remus and Sirius. When he returned, Lily often noticed twigs in his hair, new marks and scratches on his arms; she asked him what he was doing but he only ever demurred, claiming it was "just lads being scoundrels, dinna worry, reubaltaich."

She noticed, though, that the rest of James' crew—Mad-Eye, a set of twins she couldn't keep straight named Prewett, a stocky man called Caradoc Dearborn, and a mostly-cheerful one called Benjy Fenwick—didn't seem to find anything odd about these occurrences. They mostly kept away from her, speaking to each other exclusively in Gaelic, and weren't overly fond of her, though she noticed they were typically hanging around to stand guard in her presence.

Considering they seemed more concerned with her than with the ominous threat of open woods, though, she began to wonder if this was less about her safety than it was about James' privacy. After all, Voldemort had certainly hinted at James' involvement in something nefarious, or at the very least, secretive.

"What's he up to?" she asked one of the twins. She was pretty sure this one was Fabian, though there was no telling.

"Never ye mind, lass," said probably Fabian, possibly Gideon.

Lily, however, was never one to easily give up. She reached discreetly for her wand, conjuring a series of glittering charmed birds. She'd always been especially good with charms, though Severus had considered that more a party trick than a skill. She'd told him party tricks were skills, and not everything required being bent over a musty cauldron.

"Hey, look over there," she said, pointing to the flashes of wings, and the person who actually might have been Gideon—now that she thought about it—pivoted sharply, taken aback.

"Ooh, shiny," said 90% probably Gideon, and Lily slipped away, making her way into the trees where she'd last seen James.

She followed a set of large footsteps, presuming them to be his, but much to her dismay, she was deep into the woods by the time they disappeared entirely, as if he'd vanished altogether. She blinked, staring around the soft earth of a forest clearing, and wandered its perimeter looking for something; broken twigs, perhaps, or something similar she could track. She saw nothing. She frowned, bewildered, and turned around to head back when she noticed something very interesting indeed about woods.
That when you didn't know them very well, it was a very simple matter to get lost in them.

"Fuck," she said under her breath, something catching her attention from out of sight as she whipped around, holding her wand out. "Who's there? James?" she called into the trees. "Sirius?"

She hesitated, then attempted, "Remus?"

Nothing.

She swallowed hard, trying to find the footsteps she'd used to make her way here. She couldn't identify the direction she'd come from and grimaced, finding any trace of footsteps far more difficult to see in this softer, more malleable earth. She took a step, about to simply guess at which way she'd come, when she heard another sound behind her.

She pivoted quickly, wand outstretched. "James," she said.

No answer.

Where could he have gone?

What could he have been up to with Remus?

Something itched in her brain.

Hadn't Remus called him something else?

"Prongs?" she called tentatively, and then something moved behind the trees.

It took her a moment to realize it was a deer; a stag, specifically, and one with a full set of antlers. It gave her the oddest impression she'd seen it before, and she blinked with the recollection of the trees against James' head, forming a crown of branches precisely the same way the antlers curled around the head of the stag.

"Prongs?" she asked again, and the stag flickered quickly out of sight. Then she heard rustling, twigs snapping; footsteps. She tightened her fingers on her wand. "I swear to god, whoever you are, you'd better reveal yourself or I'll—"

"Lily, is it really so verra difficult to do as you're told?" came an exhausted version of James' voice, and Lily let her wand fall with a sigh, stomping towards it.

"James, if you would just—"

She broke off, spotting him where he was standing behind the circle of trees, reaching down for his kilt.

He was…

She swallowed.

He was naked.

He was *spectacularly* naked.

And—

"Your back," she blurted loudly, and he turned, frowning slightly at her.
"What?"

"Your back, it's—" She shook herself, launching forward. "It's bleeding," she explained, about to reach out towards the trickle of blood that ran parallel to his spine until he turned to face her, distracting her with his... well, and his—

She blinked.

"Yes?" James asked, obviously stifling a laugh at her expense.

"You're naked," she said.

He shrugged. "Yes. A bit."

"A bit?"

"It happens."

"You—" She blinked, piecing it together: Prongs. "You're the stag, aren't you?"

He grimaced. "Yes. Which you shouldna know."

"But why would you—"

"For Remus," he said. "So he willna be alone when he turns."

"But—"

"Lily."

"But you," she blurted, stopping as he stepped closer. "But you... you lied to me," she attempted lamely, looking anywhere but at his chest, or his...

She swallowed.

"Yes. Because it is na permitted," he said, lips curling up with a grim bit of reticence. "A dastardly offense, all of this. Consorting with monsters, transforming ourselves—"

"You didn't trust me?" Lily demanded, and when James' expression faltered, she glared at him. "Turn around," she snapped, and he balked, obviously unused to being told what to do. "Now," she clarified impatiently, "before you get infected."

His eyes narrowed, but he obeyed. This was, of course, only marginally helpful. She could no longer see his dick or his abs, but she was, however, subjected to an eyeful of his sculpted back and arse, which were certainly no poorer a view. She forced herself to be as clinical as possible, casting a healing charm to repair the gash on his back.

"There," she said, watching the skin stitch itself over the same way Remus' clothes had done before stepping away, averting her gaze in relief. "And now, of course, I'll head back. To camp." She swallowed, pivoting sharply. "Just as soon as I figure out which way it is, and then—"

She broke off again, catching motion from her periphery as the frame of his shoulders vibrated soundlessly.

He was laughing at her.
"Don't," she hurled at him, and he laughed harder still, the sound joyously escaping his lips this time as she glared at him.

"Is there something you wish to tell me, mo leannan?" he managed to ask. "Perhaps something you feel you need to say about any of this?"

He was infuriating.

"Yes, actually," she sniffed, lifting her chin. "How is it you can't heal yourself, but you can somehow transform into a deer?"

He shrugged. "Necessity, I reckon."

"And why a deer?"

"Couldna say, lass. Was simply the form which came most naturally."

"And you do this for Remus," Lily said irritably. "So he won't be alone?"


She forced her mouth, which ached to be on his, into a scowl.

"You should have told me," she said. "I would have understood."

For once, he managed to look a bit remorseful. "You may be right about that."

"Yes. I am."

"I'm verra sorry," he told her, softening. "I didna think anyone would understand, ye ken? I shoulda known better—shouldna assumed, seeing as you've never given me a reason to doubt ye," he clarified, "and for that, I am truly sorry, Lily."

She didn't know what she'd expected, but it certainly hadn't been that.

"You're sorry?" she echoed.

"Yes," James said, nodding soberly. "Do ye forgive me?"

God, he was impossible.

She turned her head away. "You're going to freeze like that."

"Well, you didna say I could dress, did you?"

At that, she looked up, startled. "What?"

"You were upset," he said. "I reckon listening was the more important task."

"But—" She stared at him. "What?"

"Was I wrong?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

She was breaths away from him now. If he even inhaled too sharply, his bare chest might brush against the fabric of her dress. She counted the little skips of his pulse near his throat and wondered how loudly his heart was beating; whether his heart, like hers, had raced.
"Tell me, Lily," he said softly to her, "what would you have me do?"

She shut her eyes.

Take me. Have me. Trust me.

Kiss me. Fuck me. Love me.

"James," she said miserably, driven half mad with torment, and he reached out, curling a hand around her cheek.

"Would ye have me, Lily?" he asked her.

She shivered, raising a hand to his chest and placing her palm against it, smoothing her fingers out slowly. She savored the heat of him, felt his pulse quicken beneath her hand, and scraped her nails lightly over his chest, lower to the ridges of his stomach, finally letting her fingers settle around his hip to stroke her thumb beside the throbbing stiffness of his cock.

He was hard for her already. She was, without reservation, desperately wet for him, her breathing shallow and forced. He leaned forward, as if he might have kissed her, but merely slid his nose along her cheek, lips finding her ear.

"Say yes," he murmured to her.

Was there any other answer?

"Yes," she exhaled dizzily, and he swept her up in a fluid, rapid motion, yanking her into him with a growl and backing her against the broadness of the tree behind her.

She'd known him no more than a week, had made love to him only once, and yet her body molded perfectly into his, her back arched to press every inch of herself against him. Her breasts strained against the fabric of her dress and he bent his head, dragging her neckline lower, passing his tongue in tiny, circular swirls over the bud of her nipple until she cried out in desperation, tangling her fingers in his hair. He glanced askance, eyes wild, and located his kilt, moving to take hold of it; probably to lay it (and subsequently, her) over the ground, but she couldn't release him, not even for a moment.

"No," she whispered. "Now. Here."

She could see the glazed look of hunger on his face. "Are ye sure?"

In answer, she yanked her skirt up and grabbed his hand, propping one leg over his hips and dragging the tips of his fingers over the wetness between her thighs. "Do you feel that?" she whispered to him, watching him convulse with longing. "It means I want you, James. It means I want to have you now, right now, circumstances be damned."

He let his fingers saturate with the feel of her, stroking her until she let out a mewl of impatience.

"James, please—"

He grinned, bending to press his lips to her neck. He slid his tongue over her skin, languidly continuing to stroke her, exploring in broader and broader circles until she was sure her knees were going to buckle beneath her.

"James, you bloody impossible arseh-"
He kissed her gruffly, his tongue slipping between her parted lips as she gasped, clinging to him. She was hovering around the brink of orgasm now, precariously balanced on the edge of it, and he slid a finger inside her, then another, working them in and out of her with criminal patience, her breath coming short in his mouth.

She shoved his hand away before she came, yanking her skirts up (wishing, not for the first time, to be in one of her more helpful miniskirts if only for purposes of ease) and he grasped her hips with both hands, effortlessly lifting her to slide his cock inside her in nearly the same motion, both of them choking on groans of satisfaction.

"Yes, like that, James," she said, deliriously pleading with him as he thrusted into her, her skirts shoved up to her waist. She didn't care who saw, didn't care who heard; she only knew she wanted him, **needed** him; she could think of nothing but him, her vision blurred to everything but the forest's crown of branches around his head. "James," she gasped, legs and arms and cunt squeezed tight around him as she came, the rippling pulse of her orgasm thundering down the entire length of her limbs.

He came with a strangled groan after a few more thrusts, falling against her as she went limp. She couldn't begin to imagine the pair they must have made, him stark naked and covered in scratches and dirt and her with her dress yanked not only up past her hips but also down below her breasts. Still, she refused to release him, holding tightly to claw her nails into his shoulders, digging into the span of his back. The moment they parted, she was sure the remorse would set in; the sensation of wrongness, of having been so impossibly selfish she could manage to forget what her life had once been.

But for now, with him still inside her, she could think only about the way he filled her up, from the tiny little vacancies of her heart she hadn't known she possessed to the voracious craving she had for him, which she'd never known herself to have for anyone before. With him this close to her, holding her like this, she could forget anything else had ever existed, and that alone was far too blissful to release.

"Is this real?" James asked her raggedly, breaking the spell of silence. "Can this be possible? I didn't ken I could want something so badly," he murmured, an uncanny mirror of her thoughts. "Does it always feel like this, Lily?"

He seemed to be begging her for an answer, for reassurance, and she wished she could have answered yes. She wished with all her conviction that she could say she had felt this for Severus, the man she'd always loved. The man she'd promised her life to.

But she knew it would be a lie, and that, out of everything, was the worst of it.

"No," she whispered to him, closing her eyes and curling her fingers into the dark waves of his hair. "No, James, it doesn't."

"I canna breathe," he muttered to her shoulder, shaking his head. "Thinking of you, watching you, my breath comes short. I fear ye will be the death of me, reubaltaich, for how much I want ye. You could ask me to cut out my heart and leave it at your feet and still, I wouldna hesitate to slice open my chest."

She shivered, wondering if this between them was madness, or possibly something else.

Something worse.

"Are ye cold?" he asked, leaning back with concern, and she forced a nod, disentangling herself
"Yes," she said, and with all the restraint she possessed, added, "We should get back."

The first full moon after Samhain was, magically speaking, not to be underestimated. They had camped in place for days, anticipating its effects, and the day they knew the moon would be at its fullest left Lily feeling oddly restless.

"I'm worried, that's all," she said when James questioned her about it. She'd been almost finished with the wolfsbane, which would help Remus recover well enough to join them on the road. She would have enough to ease his condition until the next full moon, but she felt helpless for having little to do to prevent his turning that evening. "What if he gets hurt?"

"Ah, Remus only looks harmless," James said with a laugh. "He's got a set of claws, our Moony. You needna worry about him, reubaltaich."

She bit her lip, not wanting to confess it wasn't actually Remus she was worried about. James had come back from the woods that day with his arms covered in thin, shallow slashes, and Sirius had a freshly gruesome gash beside his eye.

"Just try not to do anything stupid," she told James flatly, and his mouth twitched at the corners.

"Me, lass? I almost never do stupid things," he assured her. "Aside from marrying reckless English rebels from time to time, I reckon I'm as careful as they come."

"He's a wolf, James," she said sternly. "It's not his fault, but his instincts make you prey. If he tries to hunt you—"

"Mo leannan, this isna my first full moon," he told her, vaulting her chin up with one strong hand. "It's a welcome surprise, though, to see you're so verra filled with concern for me."

They hadn't touched since the time in the woods two days prior. She was keeping her distance, and she suspected he was letting her. He hadn't said anything about it, letting her stick to the lie that she needed to focus on her potion, but now, with his thumb so close to her lips—close enough to stroke them, lightly, as she knew he would do if she let him—she tore her gaze away with a lurch, shaking her head.

"You're needed," she reminded him. "You're the laird. You're necessary."

"Oh?" he asked, laughing. "And who needs me for anything around here, hm? Not you, of course."

"Not me," she agreed, vehemently shaking your head. "But what am I supposed to do if… if something happens to you? You can't think to leave me here with Mad-Eye," she grumbled, thinking unhappily of the way his one good eye continued to fix on her with palpable disapproval. "I'd find you and kill you myself," she warned him.

"Ah," James said, "and as you're so busy already, that would be verra inconsiderate of me, would it?"

"Yes." She glared at him. He was laughing at her again, albeit silently. "I have a lot of things to do, James Potter. Murdering you would take a lot out of my day."

"Not to mention the necessary penance," he said, nodding sagely. "And the grieving."
"Grieving? You mistake me for one of your simpering lasses, your lairdship," she informed him stiffly. "We've known each other hardly over a week, and I assure you, I'd be perfectly fine."

To her alarm, he stepped closer at that, catching her off guard as she gasped and stumbled, her hand flying out only to be caught by his quick fingers.

"Lily," he said gruffly, pulling her into him and pressing her, hard, against his chest. "I will never make you grieve for me."

She swallowed, closing her eyes, and let her forehead fall against the beating pulse beneath his sternum. His arms wrapped around her, soothing her into quietude, and for a moment, she simply breathed with him, letting the expansion of his ribs be the rhythm guiding her to comfort.

"It's been barely over a week," she said again.

"Yes," James murmured, brushing his lips against the top of her head.

"This doesn't happen," she mumbled to him. "I don't... it isn't happening."

"You dinna want to care for me, lass?" He looked down, teasing her chin up again. "Am I so verra displeasing?"

No. No, he wasn't. He was kind to his friends. She'd seen him get his hands dirty for them, even though he was above them. Even though it was probably one of their jobs to repair something or to hunt or to cook or to tend the fire, James always did what needed to be done. He was funny, charismatic, clever. He was quick to temper, but easily cooled. He listened when others spoke. He was one of them, an equal, but he was still decisive, firm, logical. When there were problems, everyone came to James for his thoughts. Mad-Eye respected him. The others adored him. James Potter was handsome and charming and full of youth, full of loyalty, full of life.

He was irresistible, and what was worse, Lily couldn't resist him. True, these were circumstances beyond her control, but shouldn't she have had some reservation? Shouldn't she be warier of him? Severus would think him irresponsible, she was sure, and James was that and more, definitely. He was reckless, and for what she knew of the times, extremely careless with his own life for someone who had no living heirs. He was shamelessly, flagrantly absent any self-preservation, which Severus would surely detest.

If Severus were here, Lily knew, he'd call James arrogant, perhaps even smug. She'd probably even agree with him.

But Severus wasn't here.

And James was looking at her like that, and—

"I dinna need time," he told her simply. "A week, a year, a lifetime—I reckon I'd scarcely know the difference. Some things a man just knows, Lily," he said softly to her, bending towards her. "Some things a man feels in his bones and knows to be true."

She pulled away, flinching, before he could kiss her. If he kissed her after saying that, she'd fall for him. She'd fall for him, inescapably, and if there was one thing she couldn't do, it was that. She had to make her way back to Severus; back to her time, and to her life, and she couldn't allow James, with whatever strange appeal he possessed, to keep her from it.

"Just be careful," she said, and turned away, returning to her draught.
He waited a few beats of silence without moving.

"I see," he murmured eventually, and then he turned. "I willna bother ye any further, then."

She didn't answer.

His footsteps quietly faded away, and she felt a gruesome twisting in her chest that she told herself wasn't regret; it was homesickness. She missed Severus. She loved Severus. There was no denying those things were still true.

But once James was gone, the forest suddenly seemed completely empty, and she felt more alone than ever before.

She woke in the early hours of the morning to the sound of shouting. She'd gone to bed without any further sight of James, figuring she would simply see him in the morning when he returned from his little animagus jaunt with Remus.

With Remus.

She jolted upright, hurriedly reaching for her boots and tugging them on, grabbing her wand. She didn't bother to fully dress; merely pulled her cloak over her shift and ran outside, spotting Mad-Eye carrying something in his arms.

Not something, she realized, the blood draining from her face.

Someone.

"James," she shouted, and shot forward, shoving Benjy and possibly Gideon aside to reach him. "James," she exhaled, catching the troubling pallor of his face; he'd been wrapped up in his kilt, but it was obvious he was injured. He was unconscious, and his breathing looked shallow. "What happened?" she demanded from Mad-Eye, who grimaced in non-answer, shaking his head. "Get him in the tent. Now," Lily snarled, and Mad-Eye, who looked as though he'd never been ordered about by a woman half his size before, scowled at her.

"Listen to her," Sirius said, appearing from behind them. He had his arm around a pale-faced Remus, who looked stricken and traumatized with guilt. "Ye'll do as she says, Mad-Eye, or I'll strike you down where ye stand!"

"He's my husband," Lily insisted, her heart racing. James hadn't moved, and his color looked… She swallowed hard, dismayed. She was no healer by training, but he didn't look nearly as alive as he should have. He should have been laughing, telling a bawdy joke; he shouldn't be like this, limp and unable to stand. "He's my husband," she said again, unsteadily this time, "and I can heal him —"

Mad-Eye nodded gruffly, beckoning for her to lead as she hurried him into her tent. James had slept with his men in the open; the tent had been for her privacy. Now it would be for his, she thought with a grimace, noting the men who crowded with worry around them.

"Leave him alone," she snapped impatiently, shooing them away once Mad-Eye had settled James on the ground in her bedding. "Do you hear me? GET OUT," she said, letting Mad-Eye and Sirius take over the process of removing people as she ducked inside, peeling away the fabric of James' kilt to eye the damage.

It was bad. He'd definitely been thoroughly clawed at, though if he'd been bitten, it wasn't a
werewolf bite. She fumbled for her wand; she'd have to repair the damage to his intestines, regrow the skin. He'd be dead without a spell, that was for certain, but she had to be calm enough to cast it. She had to focus, and she had to do everything in her power not to panic. She inhaled slowly once, exhaled it out, and searched for something to ease her apprehension.

_Some things a man just knows, Lily._

She swallowed hard, shaking her head.

"Don't die on me," she whispered to him. "Not today, you idiot. You stupid, stupid rebel laird. You will not die on me today."

She held her wand to his wounds and got to work; it would be a lengthy process. His injuries were substantial, and she certainly wasn't a healer by trade. Still, he was young, his body was healthy… he had things to live for. Surely the rest of him would fight to stay alive.

There was a weariness in her bones before long. The muscle in her neck and shoulders pained her, and the tension in them just from enduring the use of the spells was enough to strain the rest of her limbs. Her head hurt, her heart pounded, she could feel beads of sweat dripping down her spine, but this was for James. For James, who'd taken a beating for her that nearly killed him. Who married her at great cost to himself, just to save her life.

When the skin closed up, stitching itself neatly (it would scar, but James had scars already, all over his torso and back and littering his arms and legs) she waited, eyes closed, for what might come. Perhaps nothing for some time. His body would still need to recover its usual functions; he may not be conscious for many hours yet. She lay down at his side, facing him, and realized he would need to be warmed. She took her cloak, spreading it over them both, and pressed herself close to him.

Then she waited, his shallow breathing beside her identifiable, but slow.

So she waited.

And waited.

Outside, the light came and went.

And still Lily lay beside him, waiting for him to wake.

"Lily."

Her eyes snapped open. He'd said it raspingly, croaked it out, his eyes still closed. She sat up quickly, checking him, though for what, she had no idea. She ran her fingers over his chest, his stomach, lightly brushing over his new wounds, and his arm shifted, his fingers closing around her wrist.

"Careful," he said with a little laugh, "ye keep touching me like that, mo leannan, and I willna be able to keep myself from returning the favor."

"Oh god, James," she exhaled, bending over him with palpable, furious relief. "You bastard," she muttered into the skin of his chest, his hand rising slowly to cup the back of her head, fingers twining languidly into her hair. "I specifically told you not to die!"

"Aye, and I listened, did I not?" he murmured to her, laughing weakly. "It wasna Remus," he explained. "We ran afoul of some other creatures—"
"I don't care. God, I don't care, I never want to hear it, I'm never letting you out of my sight again. You bastard. You bloody fucking bastard." She felt his fingers tighten in her hair, both of them seeming to realize at the same moment and with precisely the same stiffening of surprise that she was crying into his chest. "You fucking arsehole, you nearly—you were almost—"

"I wouldna left you, Lily." His voice was soft now, tender and comforting. As if she'd been the one who'd nearly died instead of him. "I made a promise to you, reubaltaich. You'll grow old with me, ye poor lass." He pulled her closer, tucking her against him, and she curled up into his side, letting him cradle her head against his chest. "I promised you I would love you for your whole life," he whispered to her, "and I swear, mo leannan, I meant it. No pack of wolves could take me away from you, Lily. No force on earth could keep me from your side."

She shuddered without a sound, clutching him.

And then, after a moment, she felt him swallow. "If ye'll have me, that is."

She shut her eyes.

"I don't want you to die," she said. "I don't—I can't—"

"Aye, you saved me again, after everything," he noted to himself, toying with her fingers. "I'm beginning to owe you so many lives, reubaltaich, I reckon I owe ye my devotion for more than just the one of them."

It was terrible. Impossible. He was the most impossible man, and she doubted this would be the last time she would have to save his life.

She didn't want to make promises. She didn't want to say forever.

But god, she wanted him.

She reached up without warning, abruptly giving in, and pulled his mouth down to hers to kiss him so fiercely he gasped, choking slightly with pain. "Ah, lass—"

"Sorry, sorry," she said quietly, whispering it and stroking her fingers over his cheeks, his nose, the shape of his brow, the scar on his chin. "Just… let me," she said, and in the dark she felt his brow furrow, not grasping her intent.

"Lily, I—"

She kissed him again, softer this time, and then slid down his torso, carefully trailing her lips over his injuries, old and new. She kissed his ribs, his sternum, down to his navel; kissed the places she had just healed, and then slid lower, listening to his breath come short.

"Lily—"

His cock was hard, unmistakably so, and she took it in her hand, wetting her lips and sliding her tongue over his tip.

He inhaled so sharply she was sure it must have hurt. "Lily, what are ye—"

She didn't let him finish. She drew her mouth over him, running her tongue along the shape of his cock. She'd done this plenty of times, for Severus and for other people. It had always been a chore, something of a stopover to better, more desirable things. Who'd ever liked getting something speared inelegantly into their throats? But with James, it felt like a necessity to taste him, to run her
lips and tongue along the shape of his hardness, to feel him writhe helplessly beneath her. She moved with excruciating slowness, taking him deeper with each thrust into her mouth. A shallow motion at first, sweeping her tongue broadly across his tip, and then deeper.

He groaned, something unequivocally obscene falling from his lips in Gaelic; he slapped a hand over his own mouth, realizing belatedly that someone outside might be listening, and she felt a little thrill of satisfaction. She was wet and throbbing, aching to take him inside her to ease the growing pulse of desire between her legs, but she also wanted him to know she was more than just a healer. More than just an unwanted, unwilling wife. And most of all, she wanted him keening for her again, calling out for her, begging for her with the motion of his hips.

She had wanted him so badly and so powerfully she now needed him to want her just as fiercely. She wanted him, the next time he came close to recklessness or death, to think of how her lips felt when they were wrapped snugly around his cock and decide to turn away, preferring the precariousness of being in her grasp to any other form of risk.

When "Lily, please," slipped half-whispered from his lips, his hands trembling where his fingers slid into her hair, she sat upright, lifting the fabric of her shift and straddling him carefully, delicately, so as not to disturb his wounds. His hands wrapped tightly around her hips and she moved with exquisite slowness, holding the tip of his cock to the wet slit of her cunt and then taking him inside her, inch by blessed fucking inch, until he filled her up entirely, both of them stifling gasps.

She rode him slowly, quietly, his hands rising up to slide under her shift and cupping her breasts, thumbs brushing over her nipples. He was staring up at her, the outline of his face just visible from the dying embers of the fire outside, and she looked back at him, watching the ardent parting of his lips.

The ache at her core grew, desperation festering to molten need inside her, and she bent to kiss James just as she came, crying out softly into his mouth. He held tightly to her, reaching for every part of her he could touch, his arms circling around her with a defiant, immovable certainty.

"Do you fear it," he whispered to her, "whatever this is between us?"

"Yes," she told him honestly, and he gave a ragged exhale, his breath coming short.

"You are not alone in that, Lily," he said, barely more than a murmur. She could feel him struggle, restraint lining the edges of his mouth. "I fear you almost as much as I want you."

In answer, she picked up the pace of her motions, grinding against him and letting him guide her hips as he wished. His fingers dug into her thighs, his teeth clenched as he came close, so very close to release, his head falling back.

"Dinna send me away," he gritted out. "Please," he said, the effort of pleading manifesting in his touch, "I canna bear it, Lily. If ye must push me away, then let me stay gone, but if you dinna wish to—" He broke off, teeth clenched. "If you want me at all, Lily, please—"

"I won't do it again." She knew that much. Whatever this was, it seemed more and more pointless to deny it. "I won't push you away again, I promise, I won't—"

He came with a groan, pulling her into him and rolling firmly over her as she gasped, panicked.

"You were just injured, James, you shouldn't—"

"What life is worth saving if it means I canna kiss my wife when I damn well wish to?" he
informed her, and she shivered beneath him, giving in.

"They'll want to know you're alive," she told him, admonishing him with something she hoped was a requisite sternness. "They'll want to see you, and—"

"They can wait," James said gruffly, and kissed her again as she relented, savoring the brush of his tongue against her lips.

By morning, James was almost fully healed. Lily, who had never considered herself a particularly skilled healer, was pleased to see she'd done moderately good work. Severus could have done better, she was fairly sure, but James was positively exuberant in his praise of her, and even Mad-Eye appeared to have softened slightly, grudgingly making his way over to her and muttering, "Ta, lass, for savin' our Jamie," softly in her ear.

They camped an additional day in place, James eating ravenously to regain his strength, before setting off again towards James' home in the northern Highlands. Remus, who had been sheepishly avoiding camp, came at Lily's beckoning to receive his wolfsbane potion.

"Here," she said briskly, shoving the draught at him. "Once you take this, you'll be perfectly fine to travel with us."

"I'm not sure I should," Remus said, eyeing it. "I'm grateful to you, of course, but… I don't know. I worry about what trouble my presence will bring for the others."

"Don't be ridiculous," she told him, shaking her head. "James and Sirius want you along, so you're coming. Everyone knows that what happened to James wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it, though?" Remus' eyes made their way tentatively to hers. "Surely you must have blamed me at least once when you—" He swallowed. "When you saw him like that."

"Why?" Lily demanded.

"Well, I—" Remus hesitated again. "If I were you," he said, lowering his voice quietly, "I would blame me. For putting him in harm's way. He could have died, and all because of me."

Lily vehemently shook her head. "James always knew what he was doing when he joined you that night. We all knew it would be dangerous."

"Still." He cracked a wary smile. "I cannot imagine you thanked me much when you saw your husband nearly bled to death."

"I—" She meant to scold him again, but in truth, the vision of James' shallow breathing hadn't fully left her. "I was worried about him, yes," she conceded, "but he's strong, and it was his choice. He chooses to stand by his friends, whatever the cost to himself," she said firmly, "and for that, I could never hold it against you. It would be thoroughly pointless to deny the best parts of him by wasting my time blaming you."

Remus' smile broadened. "You really care for him, don't you?" he asked, and she hastily demurred, holding out the potion for him again. "I'm fairly certain it's mutual. Many young women have been infatuated with our Prongs," he informed her wryly, accepting the draught from her this time, "but it's something different between you."

*Don't remind me,* she thought grimly, but forced a smile.
"He's a good man," she said simply, watching Remus drink the potion. "By the way, how did you two manage to meet?"

It must have tasted something awful. Remus shuddered a little, then shook himself.

"I was on the run," he explained. "I was chased out of my own village, for obvious reasons," he said as she grimaced her understanding, "and I was making my way as far north as I could go. James and Sirius were riding by when I was stopped by some Death Eaters."

"Death Eaters?" Lily echoed, and Remus nodded.

"Lord Voldemort's private army, his guards. They've overrun the Highlands, harassing the clans and stealing from countrymen," he said, scowling. "They surely would have killed me for having nothing to take from me—or for simply being what I am," he muttered, and Lily nodded, "only James came to my aid. He was… my god," Remus exhaled, shaking his head, "we were all only teenagers then, and he took a thrashing for intervening." His tone was reverently grateful. "I am only alive today because of James' protection, and I do not forget that."

Lily, who knew well the old look of countless scars on James' body, found herself lost for words.

"Same," she managed to say, and Remus smiled thinly.

"So, then you see," he told her. "Don't you? How I would hate myself for eternity if I ever harmed him. Or if he were harmed in any way because of me."

She nodded, wordless, and let the thought turn over in her mind as they readied themselves to resume their travel. The next time she saw James—who had been helping the Prewett twins with the horses—he was holding his hands out for hers, readying to help her into the saddle.

Instead, she took hold of him without hesitation, yanking him into her, and kissed him as thoroughly as she could manage, her hands coveting the angles of his face as he stiffened slightly, startled, and then melted into it, gradually throwing both his arms around her. The rest of his men lewdly whooped their approval; he chuckled against her lips and turned her, concealing her from view to kiss her longer and ending on a distinct note of sweetness before they parted.

"What was that for?" he asked, hazel eyes a warm and molten amber with surprise before adding hurriedly, "Not that I disapprove. I verra much enjoy your enthusiasm, but—"

"Nothing." She brushed his hair from his forehead; the color was back in his cheeks, and he looked well again, as if nothing had ever happened. As if he'd never been circling death in her arms. "You're just… you're my husband," she reminded him. "I can kiss you however I like, can't I? And you promised to let me."

He smiled at her, pleased.

"I did, aye," he said. "Lucky thing, that."

He was staring down at her, a little transfixed, and she was considering the prospect of kissing him again until he suddenly took hold of her waist, lifting her roughly onto the saddle before giving her arse a light and artless smack.

"Well, off we go, then," he told her, swinging himself up behind her, and she sighed, rolling her eyes.

"You ruined a very nice moment," she informed him, glaring over her shoulder, and he laughed,
leaning forward to speak in her ear.

"Only because I wish to have you in our bed, reubaltaich," he whispered, hands pointedly brushing the curve of her thigh, "without a moment's delay."

For two days they rode almost incessantly, barely stopping to make camp. Twice, James nearly fell asleep on horseback, Lily only catching him as she noticed his iron grip on her going slack. She asked him more than once—sore as she was, considering she'd hardly experienced that sort of discomfort much before—why he was so loath to stop, even with his men growing tired, but he only shrugged, saying the roads weren't safe.

Partway through day three of travel, she finally understood what he'd feared.

"Stop," called someone in a uniform she only half-recognized, noting the design of a snake interlaced through a skull. "Where do you lot think you're going?"

James nudged their horse forward, addressing the uniformed men—two or three of them, all in uniform—as Lily caught sight of Sirius and Remus slipping out of view, concealing themselves behind the caravan.

"James Potter," he said, "Laird of Clan Potter. We've been sent from Hogwarts at your master's behest."

"Ah, Jamie, we meet again," said the man Lily realized was a Death Eater, now recognizing Lord Voldemort's ensignia on him. "Have you got your werewolf in tow, hm? Bet you do. Come to think of it, we owe him something, don't we lads?" he muttered over his shoulder to the others, who glared, unsmiling, at James. "Ah, and you've got yourself a lovely little whore now, too—"

"Leave us alone," Lily said flatly, and the Death Eater chuckled.

"Ah, feisty, I see," he said. "Are you well, sweetheart? Hope these filthy Scots haven't roughed you up too much. To think," he mused, "what harm could befall them for kidnapping an Englishwoman, lads? Hate to consider the consequences—"

"You're the only filthy one here," Lily snapped, but James' hand tightened warningly on her waist.

"I havena seen a werewolf myself, save for the one in your master's keeping," James said coolly, "but I'm sure he would happily inform you it's on his orders my wife and I are heading north."

"Wife, hm?" the Death Eater said, openly staring at Lily's breasts. "Well, pity that—"

"Yes, quite a pity," James half-snarled, obviously barely restraining himself from doing far worse. "If that's all, Lestrange?"

"Oh, that's all," Lestrange replied with a laugh, "for now. But we'll be watching you, Jamie. The moment you slip, or that werewolf of yours makes an appearance—"

"I dinna think ye should be threatening me, Lestrange," James snapped. "Unless ye've forgotten what harm came to ye last time you ran afoul of my arm."

Lestrange turned impassively to Lily, ignoring James' warning. "My goodness, I don't know how you understand him. Unless you happen to speak dumb brute quite fluently?"

She set her jaw. "Are we done here?"
Lestrange gave their horse's flanks a smack. "For now, My Lady," he said with a mocking bow, and James led the horse back onto the path, his knuckles white with tension where he gripped at the reins.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do worse to him for insulting you," he said. "I simply wished to be out of there with some haste, for Remus' sake—"

"No, I understand," she said quickly. "I don't need you getting in trouble for something as stupidly ill-conceived as that bastard's fuckery."

James snorted lightly, prompting her to turn towards him. "What?" she demanded, and realized he was yet again laughing at her. "What, James—"

"You've got quite a mouth on ye, mo leannan," he said, looking somewhere between impressed and amused. "I thought it was just passion when ye said it before, but I'm na sure it was just that, was it?"

"What, fuck?" she asked, watching him fight a laugh again.

"I havena heard an Englishwoman—or any woman," he corrected himself, "swear as mightily as you do, Lily."

"Well, perhaps none of them have been as angry as I am," she informed him. "You shouldn't have to take that sort of nonsense from Lord Voldemort, and certainly not from his men. Isn't there something to be done about it?"

James shook his head. "Voldemort controls most of the Highlands since he took over Hogwarts," he said. "He has more magic, more money, more weapons, and aside from that, the English have always enjoyed meddling in our affairs," he informed her, resting his chin on her shoulder. "Hence Mad-Eye's… well, his certain coolness towards ye, lass, ye ken?"

She'd forgotten most of her history, it seemed.

Though, speaking of history—

"Why don't you simply take Hogwarts back?" she asked, abruptly recalling the painting she'd seen from the Battle of Hogwarts memorial in the castle's modern iteration. "Surely if you could gather enough support from the other Highland clans, you could stand against Lord Voldemort, couldn't you?"

"There are many who fear His Lordship's wrath," James said, shaking his head. "He is an unnaturally cruel man, and not many have the stones to stand against him."

"But you do," she said, and James' brows arched, surprised at her enthusiasm. Suddenly, she felt it quite obvious what needed to be done. "I mean, if you led them, James—"

"Me?" he asked, surprised. "I thought perhaps Dumbledore, but—"

"Fuck Dumbledore," Lily said, stunning James into silence. "I mean sure, he could help—everyone could help—but it's you who'll win, James." She twisted around to look at him. "You're actually from here," she reminded him. "This is your land, your home. You're brave, you're strong, your men love you—I'd be willing to bet there's not a single Scot who wouldn't follow you into battle. If you lead them, James," she murmured to him, reaching around to run her fingers appealingly through his hair, "I promise you, you'll win."
He rested his forehead against hers, shaking his head. "How can you be so sure, reubaltaich?" he asked her. "Nothing is ever so certain."

In her case, though, it was.

"How could you not win?" she asked him. His mouth was perilously close to hers, his breath hot against her cheeks, his hands resting on her thighs. Her entire body seemed conscious of the fact that it had been some time since they'd last put skin on skin, and every inch of her craved to feel him again. "I don't need to see the future to know it for certain, James. You were meant to do this. Reubaltaich," she said in a low voice, trying to mimic his pronunciation of it, and he gave a dry, throaty laugh, obviously as aware of his closeness to her body as she was to his. "If you lead them, James, there's no way Voldemort could stand against you. You'll win."

He lifted one hand, stroking it slowly over the column of her throat.

"You are so verra dangerous for me, Lily," he said in her ear.

She wanted his hands on her breasts, his mouth on her cunt. She wanted to feel his cock inside her again, his hips thrusting into her with her hands smoothing over the firm curve of his arse.

At the same time, though, it occurred to her that coming back to Hogwarts meant trying again with the door on the seventh floor. If James took back Hogwarts, there was a chance it might appear; that if it did, she could go home.

Perhaps this was merely infatuation, she reminded herself. It would pass, and then what would she really want? Her parents, her friends, her sister, Severus—she could be back with all of them, and surely that would outlast her hunger for one man, however appealing he was.

Still, that was a question for another day.

"Are we home yet?" she breathed to James, who groaned softly in her ear.

"I might go mad before we reach it," he answered her, and she shivered, equally in agreement.

It took another two days before they arrived at James' 'house,' which was really more of a castle, though significantly less so than Hogwarts. It became clear to Lily just what it meant that James was a laird when many of the men and women inside were quick to show him deference, quite obviously pleased with his return.

She was also surprised to see how much attention was lavished on her—minus the younger women, who seemed instantly furious with her existence—and noticed people were quick to come to her aid. Mostly, though, she was desperate for a bath.

"Minerva here will take care of ye," James said, swiftly kissing Lily's cheek and gesturing her towards the stern-looking woman who'd been running the house in James' absence. "Minnie, may I entrust my wife to you?"

Lily noted the pleasure James took in the phrase my wife, using it as often and as pointedly as possible. She wanted to laugh at how endearing it was, only at the moment, it seemed Minerva was quite unamused.

"Come, then, lass," she said briskly, beckoning for Lily to follow, though Lily paused, apprehensively catching James' arm before he left.
"Will you, um. Be long?" Lily asked, and James smiled at her, reaching out to stroke his thumb across her cheek.

"Not a moment longer than required, mo leannan." He kissed her firmly, ignoring the throngs of people watching; Lily felt it shamelessly obvious what he was promising her with the kiss, and though she was a bit more hesitant with such a keen audience, she figured it wasn't the worst thing for the rest of his household to know their laird was a man who bedded his wife well (or, at least, thoroughly).

"I only need to chat with Mad-Eye about your… proposition." James winked at her, spinning her with a kiss to her cheek to face Minerva. "Take good care of her, Minnie."

"Impertinent lad," Minerva sniffed, but she seemed to have warmed slightly, beckoning for Lily to follow her. "Come on, then."

Lily was startled to find she'd been more comfortable with James' men than with the women who worked in his household; she realized she was now essentially their employer, and felt immensely uncomfortable at having to order them around.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," she said to one girl, a scullery maid who was unpacking what little things Lily possessed, but Minerva scoffed.

"She certainly does," Minerva insisted. "You're Jamie's wife, and the lady of this house. Dinna be putting silly ideas into her head about what she can and canna do. You're livin' in her ladyship's chambers now." She busied herself with the bath water, eyeing Lily closely. "You're too thin," Minerva ruled after a moment. "We'll need to feed you better than those troublesome lads did if you're plannin' to bear Jamie's sons. Why, Jamie himself was a wee bit of a thing and still, he nearly broke his poor mother in two—"

Lily blinked. "I—what?"

"Jamie wrote me about ye before you left the castle," Minerva continued, brusquely stripping Lily of her shift and leaving her to awkwardly cover her private bits, "and I will confess, I didna think you'd be any more than an arrangement. But hearin' what he called you—"

"What?" Lily asked. "Reubaltaich? It's just a joke, really—"

"What? No, lass." Minerva stopped for a moment, staring at her, before putting two and two together, realizing Lily was missing something. "Lass, Jamie calls you his love," she explained, softening.

"I—" Lily blinked. "He does?"

"Do ye not know, you silly child? 'Mo leannan,'" Minerva clarified. "It's what Jamie's father called his mother before they passed, bless them both—"

"It is?" Lily echoed, swallowing. "I thought it just meant… you know, like, 'sweetheart,' or something—"

"Oh, aye, it does," Minerva agreed, holding a hand out to help Lily into the bathtub, "but our Jamie, he would only call ye that if he meant it. He's a sweet lad," she added fondly, with an incongruously iron grip on Lily as she helped her into the water. "If he loves ye like he says he does, then you are a lucky lass indeed."

Lily, scalded by the hot water, scarcely noted her displeasure, distracted by what Minerva had just
"He loves me?" she asked, and for the first time, Minerva smiled at her. It looked unnatural, rare and unpracticed and somewhat crooked, but still, it was a smile nonetheless.

"Can ye not tell by how he looks at ye?" Minerva asked. "Like you are the only woman in the world."

At that, all Lily could feel was a perilous bliss floating up in her chest.

"I suppose," she managed faintly, the water settling to warmth against her limbs.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: More tomorrow!
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Rebel North, Part III

Pairing: Jily (James Potter x Lily Evans)

Universe: magical Outlander-esque AU (time travel + Scottish Highlands)

Rating: M for sex

Summary: The continued saga of Rebel North, thusly concluded. When Lily's identity is revealed, she faces a difficult choice between two loves while the Order prepares to take back Hogwarts Castle from Lord Voldemort's control.

An alternate summary, courtesy of aurorarsinistra: "Male significant other got you down? Not doing the dishes? Not listening? Not transforming into a deer in his free time? Well, I've got just the escapism for you!

It was late by the time James came to find her. He bounded noisily into the room as Lily was already preparing for bed, turning with surprise at his sudden entry.

"Take that off," he said, lips twisting up in a smile as he pointedly eyed the outline of her breasts beneath the thin material of her shift. "I want to see you, wife."

He seemed a little tipsy, certainly merrier than usual, but no less impossible to resist. The candles flickering beside the bed gave him an entrancing glow, and he stripped his shirt off one-handed in that careless way he always did, one hand bunching the fabric to yank it overhead.

Still, she bided her time, playing at disinterest. "Is that the best you can do, James?" she sniffed, turning away, but he was quicker.

"Ah, my apologies—" He reached out, catching her arm, and drew her back flush against his torso, forming her spine to the shape of his chest. "Is this better?" he asked her, running his hands from her hips to her waist, curving around her breasts. She let him tilt her chin over her shoulder, the spice of the mead he'd drunk warming her lips as he kissed her slowly. "I dinna think I would survive such a wait," he murmured to her, one hand coming around her jaw. "I wasna sure I could keep myself from touching you much longer."

His hands drifted low, fistng the fabric of her shift tightly. He slid the material up her legs, fingers tracing the slopes and valleys of her, and she lifted her arms for him to pull it gruffly over her head before he stepped back, looking at her.

"Lily," he said, swallowing appreciatively as she turned to face him. "My Lily. Mo leannan. You're beautiful."

She felt a flush creep up in her cheeks at the heat of his eyes on her. "You don't know any better," she reminded him. "You've only been with me."

He shook his head. "I only need you."
She opened her mouth, considering an argument, but then shook her head instead, sitting back against the bed and gesturing.

"Take off your kilt," she said.

He blinked. "My kilt?"

"No, take your shoes off first," she corrected herself, and he bent down with a grin, kicking off one boot, then the other. "Okay. Now the kilt."

"Yes, my Lady," he said, removing his belt to let the material fall away. "Anything else ye wish?"

She pushed herself back on the bed, propping herself up on her elbows. "Come here," she said, beckoning to him, and he took three eager steps forward until she held up a hand, shaking her head. "Stop," she said. "Wait there."

He groaned a little. "Lily, ye little minx—"

"How was the meeting?" she asked neutrally, adjusting her hair to fall away from her bare breasts.

His gaze raked openly over her torso, hungrily taking her in. "Fine," he said, swallowing. "We… we made plans. Sirius and Remus will get a message to Dumbledore about gathering the Order."

His throat was dry, his cock already unapologetically hard for her. He slid a hand over it, just once, but didn't look away. "I, meanwhile," he muttered, "have plans to never leave my wife's bed until I return to Hogwarts—"

"You?" Lily echoed, suddenly abandoning her pretense and sitting upright. "You mean we, don't you?"

He blinked, catching her shift in tone. "Surely you dinna mean to suggest I bring ye with me."

She felt a bit of panic rise up in her chest. "You'd leave me here?"

"It's my job to protect you." His voice was grave now, and solemn. "I wouldna dare to put you in danger, Lily. I dinna think it unreasonable to keep you here, safe, where ye canna be harmed."

"I'm coming with you," Lily said, scowling at him, "because that's ridiculous. You think it's your job to protect me, James? Let me remind you I've already saved your life twice," she snapped at him, and he frowned. "Who do you think will do it if I'm not there?"

"But—"

"No buts," she said, and then, flatly, "Come here."

He blinked, then stepped forward.

"Lily—"

"Tell me you want me," she told him, reproachfully folding her arms over her chest. "Not just in bed. Not just as something to amuse yourself with. I'm not just a warm body, James, I'm useful, I'm —" She blinked, something infuriating rising up in her throat. "You can't honestly think I'll let you do this without me."

"But—"

"You can't just want my tits or my cunt," she told him, watching his hazel eyes darken to sage as
she spoke. "You have to want my brain, James. My abilities. You have to want my—"

"Your strength," he cut in, with something else in his tone that was just as hungry as before, but markedly distinct. "Your defiance."

She swallowed.

"You are braver than any man I know, reubaltaich," he said softly, reverently. "I wasna thinking clearly."

He dropped to his knees in front of her, his hands rising to the bed to curl around her calves.

"Forgive me, I dinna think—I wasna in my right mind," he said, turning to press his lips to the curve of her thigh. "I canna do it without you, Lily. I was wrong to think it. Can ye forgive me?" he murmured, and he nudged her knees apart just slightly; just enough to let his lips gently brush across her clit. It was a kiss, soft and sweet, to the most intimate part of her.

"If ye wish me to beg, Lily," James said, "I willna hesitate."

"I—"

His lips meandered slowly, gradually making his way over her. His tongue slid out every now and then, darting over her with pensive longing before moving slower, savoring her. It was blissfully perfect, terribly distracting. She gasped, his tongue laving inside her, and then he took the whole of her clit in his mouth and sucked experimentally, intensifying his efforts the more her legs started to shake around him.

"James," she gasped, placing the arch of her foot firmly on his shoulder and shoving him away. "I want you inside me, now—"

"I—"

"I havena been forgiven," he said, hands firmly digging into her hips as his mouth returned to her cunt, and she nearly cried out in frustration.

"James," she attempted, his tongue steadily passing over her as his thumb circled her throbbing slit, dipping inside her once before being replaced with his fingers. "James, my god, James, I'm going t-oh god—"

She came with a cry she was certain the rest of the castle had heard, shoving him away as the aftershocks of her orgasm ricocheted through her. She shuddered, feeling the ripple of pleasure leave her like a wrench of dissipation, the whole of her going numb.

But even as she panted out her satisfaction, letting the waves of pleasure ebb gradually away, James remained on his knees at the edge of the bed, waiting for her approval.

"Will ye come with me, Lily?" he asked her solemnly. "I willna be able to do it alone. I will need you by my side."

She was aflame for him, her entire body arched with craving.

"Yes, fine," she panted, shuddering again as he rose to his feet, one hand on the utter luxury of his shaft as he waited for an answer. "Yes, I'll come with you, just—fuck me," she gritted out, scrambling back as he knelt onto the mattress, making his way towards her with an infuriating slowness. "Please, I want you so badly, James, please—"

"You dinna have to beg for me," he said with a laugh, gruffly catching her around the ankle, "but I
He stroked her swollen clit, gaze dropping to look at her. Even in the candlelight, she could see how pornographically wet she was for him, her clit that rose-red color of desperation as he positioned himself between her legs, the rest of her keening shamelessly for want of him.

"I want ye like I've never wanted anything," he told her, his voice gravelly and low. "Truth be told," he murmured, stroking his tip over her clit and diminishing her to a shiver, "I wanted ye the moment I saw ye. I dinna think you'd want me, not like this."

"James." She was practically crying for him now, her voice hoarse. "Please. I need to have you. I need to feel you—"

"Do ye want it slow, reubaltaich?" he asked her. "Because I dinna think I will be able to control myself. When I see you like this, I canna stop my thoughts. I want to bite the little pearls of your breasts," he said, leaning forward to slide his tongue over her nipple. "I want to put my teeth on your perfect skin. I want to feel the heat of you around my cock," he whispered to the unsteady race of her pulse, "and I dinna want slow, Lily. Sometimes, I want you so much I dinna know how to control myself—"

"Don't go slow," she whispered to him, aching. "Have me, James. Take me, have me as hard as you want and I swear, I want it too—"

"Dinna play with me, reubaltaich." He swallowed. "You are my wife. You are no common whore, and I wouldna—"

"James." She let her hand drop down, stroking at his cock as he gritted his teeth. "In this, whores and wives are no different. Don't think I don't enjoy it, because I do." She sat up, picking up the pace of her grip on his cock. "You think I don't like sex?" she whispered to him. "That I only want slow and gentle, even when I ask you for more?"

"I—" His eyelids were heavy. "I…"

"I like it, James. I like it very much, and I like it with you. I like the way you feel inside me. I like how hard you get for me." She saturated her thumb in the pooling wetness at his tip. "I like when you lose control, when you take me and—"

She let out a yelp as he shoved her slightly onto her back, yanking her hips down and filling her in the same motion, both of them delivered to the immediacy of need. He seemed to have taken her words to heart, one of her legs wrenched over his shoulder, and he slammed so perfectly into her she knew it would be a matter of seconds before she came.

It was sex, but it was more than just carnality. Their rhythms were equally paced with desperation, their motions perfectly fluid, each of their bodies so keenly fitted to the other. For once, she didn't care how her hair looked, or whether she'd eaten too much at dinner; she didn't care about anything, not even the sweat pooling between them. The only thing that mattered was that she and James were touching in every possible place, not an inch between them wasted, and as the pressure of her orgasm built—agonizing urgency built-up and knotted, tangled somewhere inside her—his thrusts were hardly gentle, but still, in his arms, she was safe. She was wanted. She was coveted like this, and rough as he was, and as unsanctified the act—however wrong it was—it was still fervent, almost worshipful. There was no missing the devotion in his touch.

In return, she made sure to let him see, the moment her orgasm hit her, how much she'd enjoyed it; she let her head fall back, his name ripping from her throat as the full impact of what he'd built
inside her quaked in fissures through her body. She let the unabashed unloveliness of orgasm take over, the gruesome, elated anguish of it unhidden on her face, and he stared down at her in disbelief, one of his hands stroking gently at her cheek.

She turned her head, catching the tip of his finger on her tongue, and sucked it lightly. He gave a visceral shiver and came with a sputter of "Lily," choked out so passionately and so reverently on his tongue she wouldn't have ever guessed it to be her name.

She'd never had sex like that with Severus.

She'd never had sex like that at all, and she wondered now if it was merely chemistry, a simple matter of physicality, or if it was something else entirely. Something as indescribable, and as undeniable, as the existence of magic itself.

"Mo leannan," James whispered to her as he collapsed against her, so quietly it might have been a breath.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, the rise and fall of their chests gradually joining in syncopated comfort.

"My love," she murmured back to him, and he buried his lips in her neck, sighing into her skin.

Now that they were in James' house, it was impossible to ignore whatever was growing between them. Lily still felt it unlikely to truly be love—at least not the sort of love that was practical, and meant to last—but it was certainly something very like it. She was ravenous for him; not merely for sex, but for his company as well. He was something different here in his own house. A bolder, even more certain version of himself (something she hadn't imagined possible, and yet…) and more commanding, too. Among his men he was an equal, a friend, a confidante—but here, he was in his element as a leader, particularly when piecing together what disarrayed pieces existed of their resistance against Lord Voldemort. Other lairds had begun approaching James since he'd sent Sirius and Remus off to speak with Dumbledore, all of them pledging their loyalty to the Order, and what Lily might have called arrogance before was serving him well now, easily establishing him as the most influential man in the room.

Which is why it certainly wasn't not sex. Flawed as she was, she couldn't separate her admiration for him and her want; instead, she religiously counted the hours until dark when he would join her in their chambers, undressing her without a word and taking her without hesitation. They found ways to touch each other during the day, too, his fingers stroking her spine or resting too long on the small of her back, and she would let her hand linger in his, discreetly tracing the lining of his forearm. His house was large enough that they could get lost in it for a few minutes at a time, and even after weeks with him—when her appetite for him had still not faded—she was still pulling him into vacant corridors more often than she cared to admit, letting him wrestle with her skirts as her back pressed against the cold stone walls.

He'd been a virgin when they'd met, and now he was haute couture, bespoke to her desires and designed for every inch of her pleasure. There were plenty of pretty young girls who tried to tempt him, positioning themselves favorably to brush against him in the halls, but it was Lily alone who held his eye. He watched her so closely, his gaze fixed so intently on everything she did, that she half-felt it necessary to warn him that everyone could plainly see what was on his mind.

She didn't, though. She felt a new and irrepressible thrill at being wanted so often and so badly it burned between them even when they stood apart, and she had no compelling interest in dousing that particular flame.
"Lily," James would whisper while he pulled her astride him, letting her take the lead while she leaned back to let him run his tongue along her sternum. "Mo leannan, ye always taste so verra sweet."

She loved the smell of him; something she wouldn't have thought she'd say about a man who spent most of his days sweating through some new physical task. She would bury her nose and lips in the crook of his neck, her fingers tangled in his thick black hair, and inhale the scent of wood and trees, clean air on cedar skin. Prongs, she'd whisper, his true self always there on the tip of her tongue, at the edge of each inhale. Salt and sage and pounding hearts.

The rest of his household adjusted to her presence. Mad-Eye was kinder to her now, in his way, and she even learned to identify the Prewett twins—Gideon had a birthmark on his left ear, while Fabian had a scar across his knuckles. Minerva was a relentless taskmaster, always reminding Lily of household things that needed to be done, but after seeing that Lily's magical proficiency could ease both their workloads considerably, Minerva spared a rare expression of satisfaction for her (which of course earned a scullery maid a scolding for gadding about, presumably in the interest of balance).

About a month after their arrival, Lily thought she'd finally found a place there amid forced blood oaths and unwilling marriages. She was even beginning to consider herself happy, perhaps even lucky.

She should have known that couldn't last forever. It lasted very specifically until the disruption of a stolen moment—James was kissing her breasts against the wall of an empty corridor, his tongue on the edge of fabric and fingers drifting under the edge of the bodice—when they were interrupted by a loud, throat-clearing cough, the two of them leaping apart.

"Aye, Sirius, what is it?" James said gruffly, blocking Lily from view as she hurried to adjust her bodice.

"Oh, nothing really," Sirius said spiritedly. "Only that Dumbledore's here."

"What?" James asked, and Lily glanced sharply at Sirius, equally surprised. James said Dumbledore's magical and financial aid would be crucially important, but he hadn't expected him to arrive in the flesh. "He came here? Does that mean—"

"He's willing to help the Order? Aye," Sirius said, as Lily swallowed hard, abruptly chilled with a flood of concern. "He's brought some men and guns, too, and he wishes to speak with ye."

"Oh, that's—" James blinked, reaching behind him for Lily's hand. "Do ye need a moment," he murmured to her, "or are ye ready to see him now?"

"Me?" she managed to say before being tugged after him, his footsteps quickening with urgency. "James, I—this is a very important guest," she said faintly, though her concern was far less for Dumbledore than it was for herself. "Perhaps I should make sure Minerva has everything she n-"

"Nonsense, Minnie's been waiting for this day since she was born," James said firmly, pausing before entering the castle's receiving hall. "Is Remus with him?" he asked Sirius, who shook his head.

"No," Sirius said. "He said he wished to speak to you alone."

"Verra well—" James paused, glancing at Lily, who was desperately seeking a way out of the introduction.
"Are you sure?" she asked him, warily eyeing the door. "If he says he wants to speak to you alone —"

"What's got ye so skittish, reubaltaich? It's na like you to be so meek," James said with a laugh, resting a steadying hand on her waist. "Surely you're na afraid of Dumbledore, are ye?"

"Well, you're the one who told me I hadn't any idea how to run a house," Lily retorted, swallowing hard. She was hovering near another episode of panic, reaching somewhat frantically for a reason —any reason—not to enter the room, despite knowing she could hardly avoid it for long. "This is my first real test, James, and I don't want to disappoint you—"

"Mo leannan." He tilted her chin up, pausing her. "When I said that, I was a laird in need of a lady. Now, I am a man wedded happily to a woman, and I require nothing but you, just as you are." He bent down, pressing his forehead to hers. "Any lass can make sure there's food in the kitchen, Lily. If something goes wrong, so be it. In this, you canna disappoint me."

"I—" There was no getting around it. "Okay," she said lamely, and James tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, nodding to a fondly smirking Sirius to open the door.

Inside the hall, an older man was waiting, salt and pepper flecked into a long auburn beard that shifted as he turned over his shoulder. Abruptly, Lily recognized the face of the man who had been painted on the wall of Hogwarts Castle in 1983, all of the pieces coming together in history even as the pieces of her life remained in disarray.

"Dumbledore," James said, sweeping into a bow as Lily dropped to a semi-awkward curtsy. "I dinna expect us to join us."

"Ah, I hope you don't mind the imposition," Dumbledore said, turning a blankly polite smile to Lily.

"Nonsense, you are verra welcome here—and surely you know my bride, Lily," James said. "You are the reason we are wed, are ye not?" he laughed, and Dumbledore nodded blankly, acknowledging neither Lily nor the reference.

"Well, my congratulations to you both," Dumbledore said with an obvious lack of recognition, prompting James' expression to falter, his brow stitching together with confusion. "Shall we discuss how we're going to get you into Hogwarts? I'm sure it won't interest the lady at all," he remarked, and Lily nodded quickly. She curtseyed again and pulled hastily away from James, who was hesitant to release her.

"Surely you want Lily here," James said to Dumbledore slowly. "Do ye not?"

Dumbledore's smile faltered. "If you prefer, James, but—"

"She's gotten into the castle for you before," James said firmly, "has she not?"

"James," Lily said quietly, watching Dumbledore's gaze fall on her with suspicion. "You two can talk privately. I'll speak with you when you're finished."

"Very kind of you," Dumbledore told her as James seemed to fumble with uncertainty.

"I dinna understand," he said, and Lily shook her head.

"We'll talk later, James. My Lord," she said, bidding farewell to Dumbledore with a nod, and then she turned briskly, not bothering to see if James' glance of dismay had followed her out the door.
She was hiding in her chambers when he came to find her, the look on his face precisely as she feared it would be. As if she were a fraud, a liar, a stranger.

It was worse to know she was all three.

"Who are you?" he asked her, and she cast her gaze down, stung.

"You know who I am," she said quietly, and he shook his head.

"I know who I thought ye were," he said, frowning.

He stared down at her for a moment where she sat on the bed.

"Dumbledore never sent you," he said eventually.

She swallowed hard. "No."

"Then how did ye get there? What were ye doing in Hogwarts?"

She said nothing.

He exhaled raggedly.

"Are you a spy?" James asked, and she looked up, startled.

"What?"

"This. This marriage between us," he said slowly. "Were ye trying to... to—"

"To what?" she demanded, rising sharply to her feet. "You honestly think I was spying on you, James? That I saved your life just so I could betray you, is that it?"

"Dumbledore thinks it's possible Voldemort arranged this," James said, turning his gaze away from her. "He suspects that you are a spy for him."

Lily stared at him, stunned. "You really think that?"

He wouldn't look at her. She reached out, forcing his chin towards her, and he stepped backwards with a grimace.

"I dinna what to think," James said stonily, folding his arms over his chest. "I dinna wish to believe the worst of you, Lily, but I need you to tell me why you're here."

"I... I can't," she said, shifting away from him and starting to pace the floor. She'd known this was coming, and still, she hadn't prepared a defense.

What defense could she possibly have?

"James, listen to me, I'm not a spy, I was never—I wasn't trying to hurt you, I didn't want to harm you or even... I never wanted this," she spat, gesturing to the ring on her finger. "I wasn't—I was just... James, you have to—" She broke off, choking. "You have to believe me, I wouldn't—I would never—"

The room was spinning, her mind heavy, chest flooded once again with panic; she felt somewhere between tears and vomit, knowing he would never believe the truth just as she knew there were no
satisfactory lies. He obviously worshipped Dumbledore; what if he believed him over her? What was she going to do if he cast her out, or worse? What would she do without him? The reality of her situation crashed down on her with ruthless uncertainty and she reached out to steady herself on the post of her bed—*their* bed.

"James, please—please, you have t-"

"Lily." He exhaled it out, sighing it, and came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her ribs and holding her tightly, his cheek resting beside hers as she inhaled sharply and gasped it out. "Breathe, Lily. In, out." He went through the motions with her, his chest filling and emptying against hers. "In," he said with her again, his fingers stretching out to capture hers, "and out."

Her breath steadied, his hand firm on her waist.

"Tell me the truth," he said quietly, his voice a low vibration in her ear. "I will listen, I promise ye. I swore it on my blood," he reminded her, "on my heart and my life, and I only need ye to be honest, Lily, and tell me the truth."

She shut her eyes, fearful still. "You won't believe me."

"I believed you once," he reminded her. "I can do it again, mo leannan, as many times as you wish me to."

She hated how much she didn't hate him. How patient he was, and how fair.

Maybe he would listen to her.

She inhaled shakily, sighing it out, and turned to face him.

"I'm not… from here," she said, and he nodded, having known as much already. "Not… not just from England. I'm… I got to Hogwarts by accident. Well, I was there with my fiancé," she said slowly, "and then I went through a door on the seventh floor, and then… you found me."

James blinked, startled. "I dinna understand. You… never left?"

She shook her head. "When I walked in through the door, it was Samhain in 1983," she said, watching his eyes widen, "and then when I walked out—" She waved a hand, gesturing between them. "This is why my magic is so different, James, and why I have a wand. And this is how I know you'll win," she told him, watching his hand rise helplessly to his mouth. "I know because it already *happened*, James. You're going to take Hogwarts back, you and the Order, and I—"

"Your… betrothed. He's alive?" James asked, feeling behind him for the bed. "You… you are promised to another man. He is waiting for you?"

"Yes," Lily said slowly, wincing as James sat down with a heavy drop, obviously shaken. "It's why I… why I didn't want this to get, well, here." She sat down beside him, shaking her head. "I didn't see a way around it, and I certainly didn't think you'd believe me. I tried to go back, but—"

"The castle is magic. Even I know strange things happen there, though I wouldn'a imagined something this strange." James stared down at his hands, shaking his head. "The door wouldn'a reveal itself to you a second time?"

"No. You saw, it wasn't there." Her stomach twisted with anguish. "And I know, James," she rushed out, "that you have no reason to believe me, but at least let me help you. I can help you fight for your freedom, and—"
“Do you wish to go back?” he asked, not looking at her. “Is that what you want, Lily? To return to where ye belong?”

She swallowed hard. Hadn't she been asking herself precisely the same question for over a month?

“I don't know,” she said slowly, which was obviously the wrong answer. His mouth tightened, and she hurried to reassure him. “I didn't think I could feel this way,” she said, reaching out for him, “but I left a whole life behind, James. I have my parents, my sister. I have—”

“Your betrothed.” He looked stricken with pain. “I dinna realize. I dinna know, I was—”

“Of course not, James. I couldn't tell you, but I—” She reached out for his hand, holding it to her lips; she kissed his knuckles, then uncurled his unwilling fingers, placing a kiss in the center of his palm. “I haven't been pretending with you, I swear. This, between us, it's real, James. I just… I already made promises, and now—”

Abruptly, he pulled his hand from her reach and turned to look at her.

“This is why ye wished to come to Hogwarts,” he said flatly, and she blinked.

“James, no, I—”

“Perhaps ye wanted to help me,” he conceded grudgingly. “But it was him you were trying to return to.”

She couldn't deny it. Still, it felt wrong to let him remain in his thoughts. She reached out, taking hold of his chin to turn his face towards her.

“You're the one who said we should start over,” she told him firmly. “You and I were supposed to have something that was just ours, just yours and mine. Weren't we?”

He wouldn't look at her. “I didna know the truth then.”

“And I didn't know I could feel like this. For anyone. For you.” He looked up, grudgingly meeting her eye, and she took his face in both hands. “Everything between us, James, it's been real. Yes, I was engaged to another man. But what I feel for him, and what I feel for you…” She swallowed. “It couldn't be more different.”

James exhaled wearily. “But you love him.”

Again, she couldn't deny it. “Yes.”

He was silent for a few long moments.

He turned, pressing his lips to the inside of her wrist, and then he carefully removed her hands from his face, placing them gently in her lap.

“We will leave tomorrow for Hogwarts,” he said carefully. “I will take you back to that room myself.”

“James—”

He rose to his feet, shaking his head.

“Stay here tonight,” he said. “I will sleep in my chambers.”
Her chest heaved with difficulty. "James."

"I willna ask you to… to break your word again."

He turned to the door, about to leave, and Lily rose hastily, chasing after him.

She grabbed his arm, pulling him back. "James—"

He caught her around the waist, his forehead falling to hers. She could see the pain on his face, unmissable in the contortion of his features, but as she slid her nose along his, trying to comfort him, he skirted her kiss.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered to him, pleading. "I'm bound to you by blood, I know, but I'm not… I don't belong here, and—"

"Dinna worry about the blood oath," he said. "I release ye from it."

"James, it doesn't work like that," she said, shaking her head. "You can't just… release me, it's… it's blood magic, it's binding, and you could—"

"Die?" he asked drily. "I may die verra soon regardless. You dinna say I would survive, did ye? Only that the Order will win."

"I—"

It was true she didn't know for sure; he wasn't the one whose name or face had been remembered. Something could happen to him. Something could happen to him, and that was unbearable. Unutterable. Unthinkable.

"Mo leannan," she choked out, but he exhaled raggedly, shaking his head.

"Good night, Lily," he said, and then he tore himself away, departing from the room without another word.

The journey from Potter castle to Hogwarts was a difficult one. They were traveling through mud, trying desperately to cover the weapons Dumbledore had brought for the men who would be joining the Order from the other Highland clans, and this time, James had procured Lily a horse of her own. It was a journey made unquestionably worse for lack of his chest comforting her through the long hours on the road, and though her horse was docile enough, Lily felt more isolated than ever. James wasn't outwardly cold to her, but still—it was obvious that everyone knew something had come between them.

"You look unhappy," Remus noted, sidling up to her one evening when she sat alone before the fire. James had brought her food, nodding curtly before wandering over to see if the Prewett twins needed anything, but outside of that, everyone had mostly left her alone, save for Remus.

"Something wrong?"

She watched James climb atop one of the caravans, pulling the protective lining taut.

"A few things," she murmured, and Remus gave her a sympathetic glance.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure the two of you will be back to normal soon," he told her, and she shook her head.

"Not this time." She tore her gaze away, staring down at her lap. "I think I've lost him this time."
Which was probably for the best, she didn't add.

It made her decision easier, at least—if the door actually managed to appear for her this time.

"Ah, I don't think you've lost him." Remus shook his head, chuckling a little under his breath. "You didn't happen to see Mad-Eye today, did you?"

"No," Lily said, frowning. "Why?"

"Well, if you happen to notice he's sporting a bit of a bruise on his eye, know it's because James took a shot at him for saying you shouldn't be here. James said just this morning you were worth ten men, and that he'd prefer you by his side over anyone." He turned to look at her, half-smiling. "He loves you," he told her, shaking his head. "Whatever's come between you, believe me, James will either fight it head-on eventually, or it will pass."

Lily wondered which she preferred. After all, wasn't it much easier, knowing she could go back to the life she'd known? It was easier, wasn't it, when she had only loved Severus?

She fought the briefest image of her last night with Severus, his face lit by his desk lamp as she waited for him to come to bed, and exhaled slowly.

"I suppose we'll see," she said, and Remus patted her shoulder, rising to his feet as they made to return their journey on the road.

Dumbledore's aid meant at least a hundred Scots now had weapons, crude firearms made with ballistic magic (from what Lily could tell, essentially pulverized blasting charms) along with swords and daggers designed to be wielded by the deftness of wizards. The cold metallic assemblage of weaponry was stowed covertly, disguised as tax revenue, as they approached the castle through the woods. The other clans had joined them there in the forest, all of them meeting up for a surreptitious strategic meeting which Lily observed from afar.

She'd been right that it was James who would lead them. Dumbledore was a stranger to them, wealthy and old and English, and the clans deferred to James, one of their own, who was clever and fierce and brave. Watching James like this, so obviously in his element, caused another creak of longing in Lily's chest, though she clung to the knowledge that even if she'd lost him with her betrayal of hesitation, she had given him something, at least. She'd given him the courage to lead an army. She'd proved him capable of declaring his birthright. She'd put him on the path to reclaiming his freedom. He, the man who was a stag, valued his freedom above all things, and if nothing else would come from them having had each other, then at least James and his countrymen would take back what was rightfully theirs.

When it came time to plot their descent on the castle, everyone looked to James to lead them; to inspire them, the way no other man could. History would have it wrong, Lily thought. They would praise Dumbledore for his money and his magic and his might, but it would be another man entirely who'd truly made the difference. Lily made her way through the crowd of the Order, standing beside Remus and Sirius as James took to his horse, wheeling it around to speak to his audience.

"Lord Voldemort thinks he can take our home, tame us," he called to them. "But we are as wild as this country; we are as unbroken as this land. We are no more born to be captive men than the trees are born to bend, or the highland hills to bow!"

He paused as the Order cheered, and for a moment, he seemed to be looking for something. He was
scanning the crowd, and part of Lily's chest abruptly filled and burst, torn apart by the perilous mix of both optimism and longing.

"We have a right to rule ourselves," James shouted, and the crowd roared back in agreement. "By the sovereignty of the blood in our veins, this land is ours," he called to an uproarious shout of approval, "and in that, we are united. There are no titles between us. No lairds, no lords; we are all equals, and together, we are all—"

He broke off, spotting Sirius, Remus, and then, with pained deliberation, finding her.

"Rebels," he said, and locked eyes with her in the crowd.

It was an impassioned moment; James was gleaming with greatness, with fervor and fury, and when he looked at her, she realized she was crying at the sight of him. He was history itself, victory incarnate, and it was impossible not to take strength from him. He was a man born to lead a revolution, and she was as willing to follow him into battle as every Scot who stood breathless at her side.

She smiled through her tears, overcome with pride in him, and after a moment—after a helpless shake of his head—he jumped down from his horse, hair wild and eyes bright as he raced through the throngs of men to aim himself in her direction. The crowd cheered again, parting for him to make his way through, but he paid them no attention. He didn't let his gaze drop from hers until he had reached her, her attention fixed so completely on his oncoming form that she didn't notice Remus and Sirius fading into the background.

James held out his hands for hers and she took them without hesitation, unthinking.

"I dinna care who loved you first, Lily, or who will love ye last," he told her gruffly, taking her in his arms. "I will love you best, reubaltaich."

She shut her eyes, lips parting with a gasp as his mouth fell on hers, his kiss as familiar and as wild and full of freedom as ever. She could taste the adrenaline on his lips, pounding in his heart, and she coiled her fingers desperately in his shirt, refusing to let him go even as the men around him whooped their approval.

They parted briefly, his eyes falling gladly on hers. "Will ye fight at my side, reubaltaich?" he asked her, breathless with relief. "I wouldna have you anywhere else."

"James, if I don't stay close to you, someone's surely going to try to kill you," she said, and then laughed through her tears, letting him kiss her again. "But I won't let them," she whispered to him, and he pressed a kiss to her nose, her eyes, her forehead.

"So long as I have you, Lily," he said. "Mo leannan, my love, with you by my side, I canna fail."

She didn't bother to correct him. He had her, fully, for at least the rest of this day, and she sensed that even if she left his side, he would still have her—all of her—in a way no one else ever would.

"Let's go take your country back," she said to him, and he smiled at her, hoisting his sword in the air.

"Reubaltaich!" he shouted to the crowd.

"Reubaltaich!" they shouted back, and the echoes of their voices rained down around them as James kissed her again, his lips ripe with the honeyed taste of victory.
Lily understood why James had been quick to believe she'd been sent into the castle by Dumbledore, and why Dumbledore had presumed her to be a spy; the old Englishman was far more sly than he seemed, overly fond of espionage, and advised James to take a furtive way in to keep Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters distracted.

"There's a tunnel," Lily recalled, blinking. Severus had mentioned it at least twice while they'd been on their initial tour of Hogsmeade. "It runs from somewhere in Hogsmeade into the castle."

James nodded his agreement. "They willna refuse us," he said firmly, glancing at Sirius. "They will let us in. Do you know where the entry is?" he asked her.

His glance at her was attentive again, steady with his iron certainty and unshakeable faith in her, but she faltered, unsure how to explain it had been a sweets shop in 1983.

"It's nearest to the castle," she said, and James nodded, sending Sirius and Remus off with a gesture. "What about you?" she asked him, and he shook his head.

"Us," he corrected her, and she frowned.

"But what am I—"

"You said you wouldna hesitate to stand at my side, did ye not?" James asked, grinning at her. "It's your lucky day, reubaltaich. That's precisely what you'll be doing."

"But," she began, and faltered. "But I can hardly wield a sword. Or a gun, for that matter—"

"Ye'll not have to, mo leannan," he said, taking her face between his palms and kissing her forehead gruffly. "Ye've got that magic stick of yours, do ye not? And me," he promised, pressing his forehead to hers. "Ye'll have me, Lily, and I willna let any harm come to ye."

She believed him, strange as that was—which was why, she supposed, she found herself doing the most insane thing she could possibly fathom: agreeing to face Lord Voldemort.

She found she wasn't afraid; not even remotely.

She didn't need to be.

"Will you have my back?" she asked him, and he smiled.

"Aye, and your front," he murmured to her lips, "and your side—" A kiss to her cheek, brushing down to her neck. "And your—"

"Jamie," Mad-Eye growled. "Surely there's a better time for this?"

He winked at her, shameless, and she laughed, lacing her fingers in his and forging boldly ahead.

"My husband has earned his place here," Lily said loudly, glaring at the Death Eaters who surrounded them. As she spoke, she knew that Remus, Sirius, and Mad-Eye were leading the other clans of the Order through the tunnel to break into the castle en masse; she and James only had to keep Voldemort distracted for perhaps twenty minutes. "You cannot keep him from his right to participate in the ruling of the Highlands. This castle—"

"Let me stop you there," Lord Voldemort said, eyeing her with palpable annoyance. Beside him, Greyback licked his claws, not taking his eyes from hers. "This castle is mine, Lady Potter, by order of His Majesty, and you should be quite grateful for my assistance. I recommend you both
turn and go back to your estate," he added to James, "unless you'd like to be punished anew for your wife's inability to hold her tongue."

"Dinna speak to her that way," James warned, one hand falling on the hilt of his sword. "She speaks on my behalf, and she doesna speak false. This land isna yours to rule, Your Lordship," he said, sparing pointed traces of mockery at the title, "and ye canna keep your interests here for long."

"My god, this is exhausting," Lord Voldemort declared, falling back in his chair with a weary sigh. "Fenrir, would you take care of this, please? Just..." He waved a hand. "I don't know, put them somewhere, eat them, do whatever you like—"

"You can't be serious," Lily said, trying not to flinch as Greyback unfurled a long claw and smiled; even James looked unnerved at the prospect, stiffening slightly at her side. "You can't intentionally set a creature on a wizard, that's illegal—"

"Oh drat," Lord Voldemort drawled. Beside him, his Death Eaters were losing interest, clearly letting their attention wander at the prospect of James and Lily being dispatched. "Add it to my list of unprovable offenses, Greyback, when you're done with your present instructions—"

This wasn't going to work. It wouldn't take twenty minutes for them to die; she had to think of something else, and quickly.

"How about a duel?" Lily asked suddenly, and James' hand shot out to hold her back, but she'd already stepped forward, ready this time when Lord Voldemort's ice-blue eyes shot to the wand she slid down from her sleeve. "Just try me. If nothing else, a bit of sport for your noble court," she said, gesturing around to the jeering Death Eaters. "Unless you're afraid?" she mocked, and behind her, she was certain—had memorized him well enough by now to know—James had cracked that crooked, arrogant smile, trusting even her most reckless of ideas.

Under other circumstances, now would have been time to panic. Under most circumstances, in fact, she would have panicked, but not with James here.

With James at her side, she felt madly certain there was nothing to fear.

"Please," Voldemort said, sweeping a hand, but she was ready. His magic, in this time—with only limited advancement and training and without the refinement of a wand—would only manage to be elementary; a crude form of *Avada Kedavra* without something to channel its effects. She flung a stunning spell at him, just missing something that brushed her ankle to bring her a shudder of torment; probably a primitive form of *Crucio*, she guessed, gritting her teeth through a bodily ricochet of pain.

He was better than she expected, even with her advantage. Still, she didn't need to beat him; she needed to keep him distracted, and more importantly, she needed to disarm his guards and his men. She glanced around, trying to think of the best way to manage it, and aimed a blasting curse at the ceiling, sending part of it crashing down overhead.

"Lily," came James' growl, thrusting a hand up to pause a fallen slab of stone from landing on her, "be careful, ye reckless little—"

"Get over here," she hissed to him, grabbing his hand and tucking him behind her as she cast a charm to slow the rubble over her head, watching Lord Voldemort manage to do the same with only the magic that expelled from his palms. "I'm—I'm just trying to—"
"I know what you're doing, mo leannan, and you're making a verra fine mess," James told her, "but still, ye need to watch your head, or who will do the healing?"

She shoved him back to avoid another spell from Lord Voldemort, and then, from the courtyard, she heard the sounds of men and shouting; signs the barricades of the castle had been breached by the rest of the clans.

Emboldened, she threw another blasting curse, this time caving in the exit the Death Eaters were using to try to escape. "We have to make sure to get Lord Voldemort," she said to James, panting as she tried to climb over the piles of stone. "Do you see him?"

James' arms came around her waist, tugging her back just as a spear of magic sliced at where she'd been.

"Found him," he said in her ear, both of them choking on the rise of dust from the impact of the castle crumbling.

"Who are you?" demanded Lord Voldemort, appearing from within a thick cloud of smoke as bits of the ceiling continued to rain down, the rebels making their way inside with the heady smell of gunfire to apprehend the Death Eaters. "You," he flung at Lily, "you're not one of Dumbledore's, you must be—"

He stopped, blinking.

"The seventh floor," he said slowly, swatting away her stunning spell like it was nothing more than a fly. "The room—you found it, didn't you?"

She didn't bother registering his remark.

"I'm a fucking rebel, Your Lordship," she assured him, "and you may as well have dug your grave the day you tried to kill me."

She threw another stunning spell but was forced to duck as Lord Voldemort sent a crude ball of magic her way; surely a killing curse. Curses were faintly colored, just as they were when cast with a wand, and she suspected she knew what he was doing with that one.

"You're good," came Lord Voldemort's voice, "but you can't outlast me."

"Oh, is that so?" Lily said, feeling a telling vacancy behind her.

Will you have my back, James?

Aye, and your front, too—

"Watch me, Your Lordship," Lily snarled.

She threw another stunning spell, catching the tell-tale flash of motion behind Lord Voldemort as he dodged it again, flinging another curse at her. She hurled a blasting curse his way, upending the floor between them to root him in place as he stepped towards her, and then caught a glimpse of exactly what she'd been waiting for.

"NOW, JAMES!"

Lord Voldemort cried out as a sword flashed amid the rubble and smoke, burying itself in the Baron's back. He staggered forward, choking, and blood dribbled down from the corners of his lips.
as he dragged his gaze up to Lily, coughing.

No, not coughing.

_Laughing._

"I'll be back," Lord Voldemort gurgled up, and she shoved him to his knees, the extension of James' sword from his sternum holding him upright amid the shards of stone. "You'll see, just watch and —"

She aimed her wand. "That's enough from you," she said flatly, and felt James' hand steadying her at her elbow as she cast a final spell, stunning Lord Voldemort to silence and leaving him to bleed out on the floor of the castle he'd stolen.

Then she turned with exhaustion and relief, seeking the broadness of James' chest.

"Lily," she heard him say in her ear. "Lily, we have to get out of here—"

She nodded hazily, a little drained from the effort of duelling, and without hesitation, James scooped her up and lifted her from the ground, carrying her over the sharpness of jagged wood and stone. He hurried her away from the fighting for what seemed like miles, eventually kicking down a door to duck into the room she was ironically certain would one day be the potions dungeon where Severus had been working the day she'd disappeared.

James set her down slowly, placing her with grave care atop the surface of the wooden table.

"Are ye hurt at all?" he asked worriedly, scanning her for injury. He tested her arms, her wrists, checking over her shoulders; her dress had been torn and she had some cuts she'd need to heal. She watched his brow furrow, his entire focus on her, and felt a stirring of something she wished she'd known sooner.

But once she knew, she dragged his mouth to hers, unwilling to wait. He gasped with surprise, the salt of sweat and hard-fought triumph mixing with desperation on the tips of their tongues. He held her without reservation; he kissed her with fervor, with ardor, and with the sanctity of lifetimes; with the conviction of being bound to her, wholly and completely, with his breath between her lips.

She pulled him into her, fitting his hips between her legs as she kissed him deeply, without hesitation. She licked the ash from his mouth, eagerly permitting his touch to kindle the adrenaline already sparking through her unsteady limbs, and his hand came down to rest over her racing pulse, tearing them brusquely apart.

"It isna easy, resisting you," James managed hoarsely, half-laughing at himself, "but still, Lily, are ye sure—"

"I want you," she said, bunching up the material of his kilt with all the foregone patience she felt certain she'd never have to waste again. "James," she whispered, "I shouldn't have—I should have told you, I should have told you every day that we weren't speaking that I wanted you, and—"

He shuddered as her hand closed around his cock; it seemed fighting had directed the majority of his blood helpfully elsewhere. "Mo leannan," he choked out, "if you dinna plan to stay, I dinna think I can bear it, I canna think t-"

He broke off as she brought his hand to the wet slit of her cunt, guiding his fingers against her. She was certain that if she'd been bare before him now, he would have seen how much her cunt glistened for him, even in the ruddiness of the dungeon's light. She felt like a randy teenager again,
diminished to traces of her younger self, even as she saw well into the future, too.

She marveled at how temporally misplaced she always was with James; never quite rooted in any time or another. Not 1983, not 1633, not in any time or place she'd ever been before or would ever be, but just... with him.

Just him.

"Don't refuse me, James," she rasped, moving his hand to stroke herself with his fingers. "You know how pointless it is; you know I'll only—"

He cut her off with a ravenous kiss, his hands dropping to her bodice.

"Can ye fix it," he said, gesturing down, "if I—"

"Rip it," she whispered, and he shuddered hard, his cock leaping against her thigh as he tore open the front of her dress.

He dropped his head, inhaling the scent of her, and brushed his lips to the swells of her breasts.

"Lily, I swear ye'll be the death of me," he told her, shivering as he pushed himself inside her and they both cried out in unison; in harmony; in satisfaction, at long last.

This time, the door was there.

She and James stood still, staring at it.

"What is he like?" James asked, and Lily glanced at him. "Your betrothed."

"Not like you," she said, turning to face him, and he chuckled. "He's a scholar. Very serious."

"Ah," James said sagely, nodding. "Less likely to get injured, then."

"Yes, much." She chewed her lip, eyeing the outline of the door again. "But it was never just him. It's my mother, too, my father, my sister—"

"Of course." James pressed his lips to the top of her head, brushing a tender kiss. "I dinna ken how it happened, reubaltaich, but if this is as much as I've been given—"

He shook his head, taking her fully in his arms.

"I took a vow," he said, "to love you. And I will." He kissed her forehead. "Whatever you choose, mo leannan," he murmured to her, "and wherever ye go, I will die with your name on my lips."

She closed her eyes, exhaling, and tilted her chin up, letting his kiss float down to her mouth, blessing her with certainty.

"I'd better stay then," she whispered, "or else that will surely happen sooner than you'd like."

He froze, then took a step back, looking down at her. "Lily, are you—"

"Am I sure? Yes," she told him, reaching up to wind her arms around his neck. "Thank you for giving me the freedom to choose, but I promise you, I'm sure—about this, and about you, James, I'm sure."
She stood up on her toes, waiting for the thrill of his lips meeting hers, and he didn't disappoint. His kiss was warm and comforting, alive with everything that was to come, and she pulled him close to rest their beating hearts against each other, letting their rhythms intertwine.

"Mo leannan," she whispered to him. "My rebel laird."

He smiled down at her. "My love," he said, and she smiled slowly in return, basking in the promise of all that was yet to be as she left the door on the seventh floor behind her.

Halloween was Severus' least favorite holiday.

Primarily because his fiancée had disappeared without a trace the year prior, and just days before their wedding. There'd been no sign of her; local aurors only insisted she must have run away, though Severus doubted it. Her clothes were still there, untouched, as if she'd simply vanished into thin air.

At least Lily's disappearance meant Severus was free to pursue his academic career at Hogwarts now, which was something she would have found mundane, to say the least. Potions had always been Severus' first love, and Lily had never quite understood that. She'd always been itching for something, nothing either of them could identify or explain, and he had never found himself properly able to give it to her.

Since Hogwarts had been reopened as a research facility, though, Severus found Samhain an unbearably touristy holiday, during which he could get little work done. It was always crowded, most of the castle open for tours, and it was exhausting. He rubbed his temple, shaking his head, and made his way up the stairs.

Luckily the seventh floor was always vacant. He'd gone up there several times after Lily had insisted there had been a room there, but he'd been right. She must have been mistaken. There was nothing there, nothing there at all, and this time was no diff-

He stopped, eyeing an ornate wooden door just as the handle turned, someone stepping out at the precise moment his feet touched the landing.

"Hello?" Severus said, and the black-haired man in a strange costume turned, eyeing him.

Severus blinked, stunned.

The door had never been there before.

Had it?

He shook himself.

Clearly he was starting to hallucinate.

"Where am I?" the man asked. English, not Scottish, though his accent was difficult to place.

"Hogwarts," Severus said slowly, and the man frowned.

He looked familiar, though Severus couldn't quite place it. He thought of a portrait on the bottom floor, but that couldn't have been it. Perhaps the man was some sort of actor hired for the evening's 'traditional' Hallow's Eve feast (which was hardly traditional so much as it was overpriced and ghastly).
"What day is it?" the man asked.

"31 October," Severus said, and then, in the interest of accuracy, "1984."

The man blinked.

Blinked again.

"Ah, Samhain, I see," he said, and settled into resolution, a slow smile spreading across his lips. "Yes, of course. I was lost for a very long time, I'm afraid."

"Are you looking for the feast?" Severus asked. He had no time for this, of course, but it seemed rude not to ask. Lily had always told him he was too invested in his own little world; perhaps that was why she'd left him, in the end. He made a note to himself to simply take this particular day off next year. "Do you need help finding..." He trailed off, eyeing the man's dingy costume. "Wherever it is you're going?"

The man, whoever he was, looked positively delighted.

"No, actually," he said. "I think I'm precisely where I need to be."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Hope you had fun! I'll be back soon with a dramione for Chmura's birthday. I do have some other things in the queue, but tbd on how long they'll take. Reminder that my new book, Lovely Tangled Vices, is now available to you, should you wish to have it. Thanks for celebrating Halloween with me!
The shot of rebel explosives narrowly missed where Draco was stationed, the rubble from the blast clipping him in the shoulder. He broke out in a slew of expletives, hurrying to repair the damage. It would be a matter of minutes before the spacecraft went down, and there was no amount of magic in the cosmos sufficient to keep him alive if he happened to careen into space without oxygen.

"Damn, damn, damn," Draco muttered to himself, army-crawling through the rubble to reach the communication device strapped to a dead Death Eater's waist. So much for his first tactical mission. His father was going to kill him, assuming the Dark Lord didn't do so first. Maybe death here would be preferable. He could simply float into empty darkness, become a comet, explode into a million tiny pieces. It was that, it seemed, or another wretched paternal lecture.

"This is Lieutenant Draco Malfoy," Draco said to the Floo device. "Slytherin module, do you copy? Over."

The voice on the other end crackled a response. "Lieutenant, we hear you. What do you need? Over."

He exhaled his relief. "The ship is fucking crawling with members of the Order," he said, fiddling with the two-way radio to improve the clarity of sound. "I need to get a message to my father, General Lucius Malfoy. Over."

"General, hm?" he heard a voice murmur above him, and Draco froze, looking up to find a shadow casting itself over him from beneath the flickering fluorescent lights. An Order member, their uniform marked with the symbol for Captain, bent down, the click of a blaster that Draco guessed had been loaded with a Confringo charm settling with ease at the back of his head. "Interesting."

"Lieutenant, the line is clear," said the voice on the other end of the radio. "Commence the message, over."

Draco opened his mouth to shout for help but went rigid, the blaster shoving itself further into his head in warning.
"Alright, now look," the Order member murmured to him, their voice obscured by the sound of their oxygen mask, "the thing is, I obviously can't let you go, can I? But also, I need a way off this ship myself. You feel me?"

Draco grimaced, furious. "Fucking die, rebel scum—"

"Sweet of you, darling, but no, not today, I have plans. Thanks for that, though," they said, adjusting the tuning on their mask and slipping the radio from his hand. "Tell my father," the Order member said, now mimicking Draco through what was obviously some sort of voice modulator he'd unwittingly given them the means to use, "I need a carrier ship to get off this station. Something big enough for a dozen people and weapons. We're commencing evacuation protocol, over."

"You fucking—" Draco broke off, the Order member pointedly tapping the trigger of their blaster.

"Quiet," they warned, and the radio issued a response.

"We're sending a carrier to the east transport immediately, Lieutenant. Over."

The Order member turned their head, eyeing him. "You wouldn't say thank you, would you?" they mused. "No, I doubt it."

"Get fucked and die," Draco suggested.

"Language," they murmured drily, "but fair enough. Alright," they said, using Draco's voice again to speak into the radio, "I'm pleased to be spared your usual ineptitude. The ship will blow in ten minutes—better that than falling into the hands of rebel scum, over."

"You got it, Lieutenant. Ship is apparating from hyperspeed now, over."

"Good. See you on the other side, over." The Order member glanced down at Draco, tucking the radio into the pocket of their worn uniform. "Well, this has been fun. Thanks a lot for your help, couldn't have done it without you—"

"You're just going to let me die?" Draco snapped.

To his surprise, the Order member sighed heavily, sounding momentarily distressed.

"No, I guess not," they muttered, removing their helmet. Draco blinked, startled, as a wave of curly brown hair tumbled free, revealing a young woman with fox-like features and overlarge brown eyes.

A smile pulled at the corners of her lips. "Here," she said, shoving the helmet onto his head and hitting a button, prompting him to gasp a lungful of charmed air. "You know," she added, blaster still aimed at him as she rose to her feet, "you're sort of cute when you're issuing death threats. If you live through this, definitely look me up."

"You're fucking insane," he spat at her as she took two steps back, laughing. "You think I'm going to survive you blowing up my ship?"

"Oh, is this your ship?" she asked, feigning lamentation. "Huh, bummer. Well, I liked it," she said, pausing in the threshold. "Clean lines, very orderly. A great ship, actually, before it started shooting at me and everyone I love... and, you know, the concept of freedom and also the autonomy of free will—"
"Salazar's balls, just kill me," he muttered, hoping to be spared the misfortune of two lectures, and she smiled broadly at him.

"I bet you look great naked," she remarked, and vanished through the portkey door.

Draco looked around, shaking his head.

And to think, he lamented internally, it was only Monday.

(2)

"Crookshanks," Hermione whispered to her droid, who made a low series of beeps in response. "What kind of establishment is this?"

Her single-occupant apparition pod had been knocked out of the sky before they'd made it back to The Phoenix, landing them both on a nearby seedy planet Hermione felt sure was full of vagrants and thieves. Luckily, Crookshanks had been built out of spare parts and certainly didn't look valuable, and neither did she. The pod she'd crashed, on the other hand, would be discovered very shortly if they didn't get out of here soon and back to her ship.

Crookshanks replied with a series of whirs and clicks.

"A tavern?" she echoed. "Well, bartenders do always seem to know where to get spare parts, don't they? Could be worse."

Crookshanks beeped its unwilling agreement, twitching with nerves.

"Oh, calm down," Hermione said, pushing the door open. "It's not like it could possibly be a—"

"Hello," came the voice of the smug blond lieutenant, the tavern falling silent as a blaster aimed itself at her temple. "Out," he commanded flatly to the other occupants, and they slowly made their way out the back entrance, leaving Hermione alone with what looked to be at least four other Death Eaters.

"—trap," she finished weakly, and Crookshanks made a high-pitched squeak of opposition. "I see you lived," she noted, turning her glance to the Death Eater who was holding a blaster to her head. "Lieutenant Malfoy, was it?"

"Yes. Very little thanks to you, but yes, I did happen to live—and what do we have here?" He reached over, pulling aside her cloak to read her badge. "Ah, Captain Granger," he said quietly to himself, half-smiling. "Enemy Number Three, what marvelous good fortune. I had no idea it was your pod that went down above Knockturn, but now that you're here, I accept—"

"I'm number three?" Hermione echoed, blisteringly furious. "Who's number two? If it's Ron, I swear to Merlin—just because I'm a girl," she half-shouted at him, "that does not mean I'm not the second most dangerous person in the cosmos!"

"Weird time for an ego trip, but okay," Malfoy said, sounding bored. "So, how would you like to die? Torture okay?" he asked spiritedly. "Or maybe you'd like to float out into space in a shoddy rebel helmet waiting for rescue while your ship explodes around you," he mused, giving her a pointed glance. "Just spitballing here, of course, because surely no one would do that, would they?"

"You know," she said hastily, "I'm sure we could strike a deal here, Malfoy. I'm a captain," she
reminded him, "which means I'm afforded some deference for my rank."

"We're not on the same team, Granger," he replied drily. "Your rank means literally nothing to me."

"Okay, sure, I'll give you that," she conceded, "but remember, I didn't actually let you die. In fact, I kind of saved your life, didn't I? Admit it," she said, trying not to wince as he dug the blaster deeper into her temple. "You wouldn't be alive at all if I hadn't put that shoddy helmet on your head."

She hadn't actually expected him to hesitate, but she felt his breath hitch, just for a moment. Aha, she thought triumphantly, turns out someone isn't pure evil after all, is he?

"Besides," she breathed in his hesitation, shifting towards him as much as she could without earning a blasting curse to the face, "I've been thinking about you, you know."

He stiffened. "Don't," he warned flatly.

"But I have," she said, turning her head and simpering just enough to let the words ghost across his throat. "Ever since I left you there I've been considering what it might be like to take that little skull and crossbones uniform off you. See what you've got underneath," she mused, letting her gaze drop below his waist.

"Like I'd let you touch me," he snarled, but she smiled.

He'd shivered. Perfect.

"Lieutenant," one of the Death Eaters said, gesturing with indiscreet repulsion at Crookshanks. "What do you want us to do with the droid?"

Her heart faltered. She needed more time.

"You know," she permitted, forcing a laughing whisper into Malfoy's ear, "just to be clear, when I was thinking about it, you were doing most of the touching. I bet you're very meticulous in bed, aren't you?" she asked him. "Not me, I'm afraid. I prefer things hard and—"

"THE DROID," Malfoy coughed up, his voice teetering on the edge of breaking as he gruffly addressed the other Death Eater. "Take it, to. Ah—"

"There's probably not too many girls on your evil little spaceship, I'll bet," Hermione whispered to him. "So I guess you're probably out of practice, aren't you? We'd have to try a couple of times, just to be sure." She let her fingers drop against the fabric of his trousers, delighting in the way he instantly went rigid. "How's your stamina, Malfoy?"

"Shut up. Stop it." He was squirming, much to her satisfaction. "Stop i- HEY," he barked to one of his Death Eaters, "get the droid out of here, check it for plans, and—"

"Yes, I agree, we should be alone," Hermione purred to him, stifling laughter. "Voyeurism has a time and place, obviously, but our first time should be special, don't you think?"

He shoved the blaster further into her temple, annoyed. "You really think this is going to work? You're trapped, Granger, and I'm not an idiot."

"No, I'm serious, Malfoy," she said, glancing down at Crookshanks. "All this time running around shooting each other, getting all sweaty and worked up..." She winked at him. "Nothing like a near-death experience to really whet the appetite, you know what I mean?"
"I," Malfoy said through his teeth, "am going to have so. Much. Fun. Murdering you."

"Well, everyone's got a kink," Hermione said, just before the roof of the tavern came crashing down, a shot from somewhere above sending Malfoy's blaster flying.

"GET IN," Harry shouted, and upon seeing his face, Hermione elbowed Malfoy in the abdomen, drawing her wand and apparating herself and Crookshanks into the cockpit of The Marauder II. "Welcome back, Captain," Harry said with a grin, removing himself from her seat and gesturing her into it. "Good thinking having Crookshanks remotely turn on the map," he added, shouting over the sound of Death Eaters blasting holes in her beloved ship.

"I just hope you didn't break anything," she told Harry, waving down to Malfoy as she prepared to make her escape. "CROOKSHANKS," she shouted to the droid, "SEND US TO HYPERSPEED!"

Just before they went, she saw Malfoy's face turn red with fury, his grey eyes widening with a glorious rage that looked, much to her displeasure, incredibly appealing on his sleekly elegant features. She didn't bother fighting the urge to visually undress him; the effort would have been wasted, and she shivered with promise in the aftermath.

"It's too bad we didn't work out," Hermione sighed, shaking her head. "He could've used the exercise."

"What?" Harry asked.

"Hm? Oh, nothing," Hermione said cheerily, gripping the controls and lurching back into open space.

Draco walked briskly through the corridor, the wards going off behind him. "Get the Dark Lord to the west transport," he said to Rosier. "Make sure he and the Chamber plans are off this ship and then evacuate the entire northwest quadrant. You know Potter and the rest of his rebel scum never hesitate to blow things up just for fun."

"Yes, Lieutenant," Rosier said, hurrying in the opposite direction as Draco walked into his quarters and stopped, waiting.

After a moment, he flicked his wand, shutting the door behind him.

"You can come out now," he said to empty air.

Slowly, Hermione Granger of the Order of the Phoenix, Enemy Number Three and captain of The Marauder II, warped into being where she stood in front of the door.

"How'd you know I was here?" she asked neutrally, and he turned to face her.

"Because you can't resist following me around," he said, and her mouth twisted into a grim smile. "I did some research on you," he commented, folding his arms over his chest.

"Did you? That's sweet," she said, stepping further into the room. They circled each other for a moment, keeping a wary distance. "I did some on you, too. You're the son of General Lucius Malfoy, notorious murderer and Lord Voldemort's second in command," she said, shaking her head disapprovingly. "Bet you've got some daddy problems, don't you, Lieutenant? Of course, that's just my presumption anytime someone's father is the right-hand man of a genocidal dictator," she
mused, "but that could just be me."

"You're nothing," he remarked nastily. "Potter and Weasley are certainly scum, but not like you. They plucked you off some garbage planet, didn't they?"

"Oh, dirty talk, nice," she replied drily. "And here I thought we were actually getting somewhere this time."

"Well, we do have a knack for finding each other," he said before asking, "Where's Potter?"

She looked intensely annoyed.

"That's what you want to talk about?" she asked crossly. "If I'm not mistaken you've trapped me in your quarters," she pointed out, gesturing to the wards around the room that had prevented her from disapparating the moment she'd entered, "and yet, stupidly, now you want to have a chat about what the Chosen One's gotten off to?"

"In case you've missed it, the Dark Lord does want Potter dead," Draco said, shrugging. "Believe it or not, my concern is hardly about whatever pretty perversities you so delight in whispering to me."

"Perversities, huh?" she asked, stepping close enough for him to identify the real reason he'd been certain she was in the room; her hair smelled like gardenias, and he would have recognized the scent of her anywhere. "You fucking love it, though, don't you? Bet you wish I'd touch you, Malfoy," she said with a laugh. "Exactly how many of your darkest fantasies involve being balls-deep in rebel scum?"

She was taunting him. In response, Draco reached out, brushing his thumb over her lip and smiling slightly as she narrowed her eyes at him, recoiling.

"What a filthy little mouth you have," he said, and she scowled, prompting him to laugh. "What, are we not bantering anymore? Pity," he sighed, "I was so looking forward to another round. Personally, I find it's much more fun when I'm the one winning."

"You're not winning," she told him, smirking slightly. "Lord Voldemort's not going to be able to leave this fucking ship. Harry's got the west transport surrounded."

"Ah yes, of course he does," Draco agreed, facetiously shaking his head, and then he leaned closer, catching the faltering of her breath between his lips from no more than an inch away. "I suppose it's not worth telling you the Dark Lord was never on this ship," Draco murmured, and she stiffened, angrily clenching a fist. "Nor is it worth mentioning you're trapped inside a blood ward I know for a fact you can't break."

Her mouth twisted, to his surprise, into a nasty smile.

"So, you actually managed to trick me for once," she noted. "Good for you, Malfoy. I was starting to worry I had overestimated you."

"Mm, no," he assured her, cupping her chin. "And I wish I had time to bask in my victory," he lamented, murmuring the words to her upturned mouth, "but unfortunately, this part of the ship is about to blow."

"Well, then at least something's getting off," Granger muttered, and he smiled broadly.

"It really is so unfortunate," he mused, letting his gaze flick over her. "I'd have liked to taste you once."
"Once? Please, Malfoy," she scoffed. "You'd have begged for more."

He leaned forward, brushing his lips against her cheek, and turned to speak in her ear.

"Don't die," he whispered to her, and she shivered, furious.

Then he disapparated away, her scream of frustration echoing in his ears.

"Did she buy it?" Rosier asked from the control room.

"Yes," Draco said, gesturing to the part of the ship Granger and Potter were currently on. "Light it up."

Rosier hesitated. "Lieutenant Malfoy, your father hasn't confirmed the ord."

"For fuck's sake," Draco said, shoving Rosier aside and hitting the controls himself. Three beeps, and then the ground beneath them shook, the lit-up portion of the ship gone dark.

"There," Draco said, something tightening to an ache inside his chest. "She's gone."

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"Hi," Hermione said, leaning over a sleeping Draco Malfoy and prompting him to bolt upright, panting; he smacked into the top of the ship's ceiling, growling his displeasure. "Yeesh," she commented, eyeing her fingernails as she leaned over the edge of his bunk. "Jumpy, much?"

"How," he began, staring at her. "What—"

"How did I get in here? Well, I'd rather not say," she said, blithely answering herself. "Tricks of the trade, Malfoy, not sharing. How'd I survive you blowing up your father's ship? Eh, I'll save it for my memoir. What am I doing here right now?"

She paused, waiting, and he stared vacantly at her.

"Oh, sorry, I thought you might try to guess. I'm here to kidnap you," she said spiritedly, and he reached for his wand, obviously realizing with a lurch that it wasn't there.

"Like hell you are," he retorted, backing away from her with a scowl. There had at one point been a blaster beneath his mattress; she watched him reach for it, fighting a laugh.

"I found that one, too," she said, and he scowled at her. "Oh, come on, Malfoy, it'll be fun," she told him. "No harm, no foul, we'll just ransom you and maybe cut off one or two your less-valuable body parts. We'll see where the night takes us."

"Aren't you a captain?" he hissed, furious. "What the fuck are you doing running around abducting people?"

"Oh, and here I thought you'd be happy to see me," she lamented with a sigh. "Besides, the Order's kind of an all-hands-on-deck brand of revolution," she said, leaping down and glancing at her droid. "Right, Crookshanks?"

The droid whistled its confirmation in response as Hermione flicked her wand, levitating Draco out from his bed and depositing him flat on his back on the floor. He was illustriously shirtless, a little sheen of sweat glinting from his chest, and she considered what a marvelously lucky person she was to have not only evaded his capture multiple times but also to have guessed correctly what his
pectoralis looked like.

"Don't bother," she said, bending over him as he glanced at a drawer that had once held a spare knife, "I've gotten rid of all your weapons. Checked out a few other things while you were sleeping, too," she added with a blatant glance at his thin cotton pants and a wink, and he gaped up at her. "Have to say, I'm not disappointed."

"I can't believe you're not dead," Draco groaned.

"Well, you specifically told me not to die," she reminded him, "so that's on you. I'm very good at following instructions."

"I'm pretty sure that's completely false," he said.

"Well, it's sweet we're still learning each other," she replied, just as a Death Eater walked in, swiping an access key to his room.

"Oh, thank god," Draco exhaled, scrambling to his feet. "Rosier, get word to my fath-"

He broke off as Ron cheerfully lifted the stolen helmet. "Hi, Mione," he said. "This the one, then?"

"Yep, this is the one," Hermione said, gesturing between them. "Draco Malfoy, Ron Weasley. Ron, Draco."

"For the utter love of fuck," Draco said, and Ron grabbed him briskly by the shoulder, yanking him to his feet.

"Should we get him dressed?" Ron asked her, and she shrugged.

"Nah," she said, stepping closer to Draco and flicking her gaze openly over his chest. "What, no threats, Malfoy?" she asked him, smiling darkly at his fuming silence. "Nothing about how your father's going to kill us all, or maybe how you'll get us and our little droids, too—"

"And give you the satisfaction? Not today, Granger," Draco seethed. "You play your little game however you want to, and we'll see what comes out of it."

She leaned forward, speaking in his ear as he'd once done to her. "A game," she murmured, stroking a finger down his stomach, "is precisely what I had in mind. Presuming you live through it."

He gave her a bitter scowl and she stepped back, satisfied, to smile at Ron. "All set?"

"All set," Ron confirmed. "Wards have been reversed. Everyone on the ship is now trapped in their own rooms, and we're free to walk right out of here."

"Hear that, Malfoy?" Hermione asked him, stifling a laugh at his look of unadulterated contempt. "It's our first romantic stroll. Hope you like long walks into captivity."

"I can't wait to kill you," he snapped.

Crookshanks made a series of high-sounding beeps.

"Yes," Hermione agreed, "he is a funny man, Crookshanks."
Draco stared up at the ceiling of his cell, not moving as a shadow fell across him.

"Three days," came Hermione's voice.

He shut his eyes. "Well, your fault for miscalculating," he said flatly. "If you'd done your research properly, you'd know my father has no problem with you killing me. Certainly not if your ransom is too high," he clarified, letting his head roll towards her, "which it is. He'd sooner die than betray the Dark Lord by sending you the Chamber plans, so killing me? Perfectly fine with him, which anyone would have told you if you'd bothered to ask."

She looked at him in silence for a second.

"What does the Chamber do?" Hermione asked.

He shrugged, turning back towards the ceiling. "Same thing everything does. It's a weapon, just like anything else. One you can't fight against."

"Nothing is invulnerable," Hermione argued, ever the idiotic optimist. "It's just a weapon."

"Just a weapon," Draco scoffed, closing his eyes again, and she stepped closer, wrapping one hand around one of the bars between them.

"You're boring like this," she said, with a hint of meanness. "I can hardly fantasize about you when you're basically comatose in a dungeon."

"Well, much as I hate to disappoint you," he said drily, "I don't really see how I can help the situation."

"Oh, come on." She sounded irritated, or at least agitated. "Get up, Malfoy."

He cracked one eye, lifting his head to look at her. "Bored, Granger?"

"Obviously," she told him gruffly, "and you're bumming me out. At this rate, it's not even going to be fun to kill you."

He lurched upright, looking up at her.

"You can't do it, can you?" he asked her, and she blinked.

"What?"

"You can't kill me," he said, rising to his feet and striding over to where she stood on the other side of the bars. "My father's calling your bluff," he remarked, leaning against the bars and looking down on her. "You're not going to kill me because you can't do it, and you can't use me to get what you want, either. Nice move, Captain," he said, shaking his head. "You miscalculated even worse than I thought."

She glared up at him, but said nothing.

"You've got to mean it, you know," he said in a low voice, curling his fingers around the bar where her hand rested. "When you're weighing someone's life against something you want, you've got to make good on your threats. Poor thing," he said, brushing her knuckles and feeling her stiffen beneath his touch. "You're failing hostage negotiation, you know, and once you realize you're not going to get what you want, your conscious will force you to let me go."

"I'm perfectly happy to let you die in this cell," she informed him, pulling away, and his hand shot
out, catching hers before she took a step back.

"Oh, but you hate me in chains, Granger," he whispered to her, wanting to laugh at the sight of her swallowing heavily, proving him right. "You thought you'd like it, didn't you? But you don't like power, not really. What you want," he murmured, tugging her closer through the bars, "is for someone to put you in your place."

"You think I like hearing you call me scum, Malfoy?" she asked, seething with contempt. "I don't need your… your bigoted condescension—"

"No, that's not what you want. You want an equal," he determined with a smile. "You want someone who can match you; who can go head to head with you, and who's capable of coming out on top. You want to lose as many times as you win," he informed her, "because it means you have a worthy adversary."

"I prefer winning, thanks," she said, tugging away, but he didn't release her.

"I want that, too," he said softly, permitting his gaze to turn ravenous, just once. "I don't want you to beg. I don't want you on your knees, begging me for mercy. I want your fire, Granger," he said. "Your spark. I want to have to chase you just to taste you—and I want you to want me," he clarified in a low voice, "as equally and as thoroughly as I want you."

She looked up at him, the motion of her hesitant swallow obvious from where they stood on opposite sides of metal bars.

"I'm not dumb enough to fall for this," she managed eventually. "If you think this is going to make me let you go, you're wrong."

He released her with a grimace, stepping back.

"Fine," he said. "Good. Glad to hear it, Captain," he added with a mocking snarl. "Glad you've got some sense, then, beneath all that unconvincing bravado."

Her eyes narrowed, mouth lined with anger.

"You could have kidnapped anyone on that ship," he reminded her with a darkened laugh, sliding down against the back wall to sit on the floor of his cell. "Why did you pick me?"

She stared at him.

Then she spun on her heel, stomping away from him and out of sight without answering.

(6)

"Are you sure about this?" Harry asked apprehensively, grimacing as she unlocked the prisoner's cell. "You're wagering quite a bit on him, you know."

"Not on him," she sniffed. "Just his sense of self-preservation."

She kicked at Draco's foot, startling him awake.

"Come on," she said.

He sat up slowly, glaring blearily at her. "Did my father arrange for my release?"
"Nope," she replied. "But we need those Chamber plans and you know a way in, so. You're coming."

"You're joking," Draco said flatly, glancing at Harry. "She's joking, isn't she?"

"Unfortunately, she doesn't joke," Harry replied grimly. "I don't like it either, but here we are."

"Listen," Hermione interrupted, crouching down to hold her blaster to Draco's chest. "You're worthless to us dead, Malfoy. Your father doesn't want you, but we need you. I do," she clarified, and the corners of his mouth quirked up, amused. "Not like that," she muttered, jamming her blaster deeper into his sternum until he coughed with displeasure, glaring. "Listen, I need these plans. I need to know what the Chamber is for, so you're getting me on board the Slytherin station whether you like it or not."

Draco clearly couldn't decide whether to be angry or annoyed. "Why would you possibly be stupid enough to trust me?" he demanded. "I could be leading you into a trap. I could get you—"

"Well, if I die, you die," she said flatly, grabbing his hand and magically cuffing it to hers, holding it up for his scrutiny. "Easy as that. You're still a prisoner," she informed him, gesturing around his cell, "but now you get a slightly bigger cage."

"I've seen that metal box you call a ship," he muttered to her, bristling. "It's not that much bigger than this."

She didn't have time to argue. "I think you're failing to grasp, Malfoy, that you don't have a choice."

"I could get us both killed, you know," he reminded her, half-spitting it out. "Maybe I prefer to die than to help your side win against mine."

"Funny thing about these sides," Hermione said, yanking a growling Draco this feet, "as far as I can see, one doesn't want you and the other does, so you really ought to reconsider your position on the matter. That," she added, leaning into speak into his ear, "and you and I both know you don't want to die. Not yet," she murmured, one hand unsubtly resting on his belt as Harry turned away, blatantly ignoring the exchange. "Not before you've had what you want."

"Is this supposed to be a threat," Draco muttered brusquely, "or a bribe?"

"Neither. Both." She yanked him after her, dragging him from the cell. "Crookshanks, ready the ship," she called to the droid from the corridor. "We're leaving immediately for the Slytherin space station."

The droid responded with a series of rapid beeps and whirs, scurrying off to the portkey.

"Captain Granger," Harry called after her, and she paused, pivoting around to face him while she jerked Draco alongside her, sending him half-stumbling over his own feet. "Be sure to get those plans," Harry said, half-smiling. "The fate of the Order is in your very capable hands."

"Touching," muttered Draco, repulsed, and Hermione elbowed him in the ribs, sending him doubling-over again with a groan.

"Myths never die," Hermione called to Harry, and in response, he tossed her a salute.

"We always rise," he called back, and she turned the corner with a smile, glancing down at her captive.
Even unwashed and rid of his possessions, captive Lieutenant Draco Malfoy still possessed a spoiled, silvery gleam. His hair fell into his face and his mouth, grim with determination, was as full and appealing as ever.

"We need to get you a shirt," Hermione said, casting a glance over the muscle of his shoulders and back. A pity he was so despicably appealing.

"Might as well continue enjoying the view," Draco said gruffly, "seeing as we're both about to be killed. Slytherin's impenetrable," he said with a skittish glance at her, "and all my codes will be disabled. I'm no help to you at all."

"You're still a set of eyes, aren't you? Still a functioning brain, or something close enough," she said, "and you know the layout of the station."

"They're going to kill you," he said under his breath.

"Us," she corrected spiritedly. "They're going to kill us," she clarified, "and do you really want those to be your dying words?"

He glared at her. "I fucking loathe you."

"Better," she agreed, giving him another shove and aiming them through the portkey wards to the ship portals. She headed over to her ship, the words *The Marauder II* gleaming proudly in the institutional lighting among the other junked-up apparition pods.

"What happened to the first Marauder?" Draco asked, making a face. "Or do you rebels only have enough creativity for one name?"

She gave him a shove, directing him into the cockpit.

"Lord Voldemort destroyed it," she said. "Along with everything else."

To her gratification, she could have sworn she saw him swallow hard.

"Oh," he said, permitting her to shove him into his seat as she prepared for take-off.

"Okay, we're in," Hermione whispered to her droid from her communication device, an earpiece she kept referring to as an extendable ear. She nudged Draco, gifting him another sharp elbow to the ribs. "It's your turn," she told him, pointedly raising her arm where it had been bound to his.

"Get us in or die, your call."

He rolled his eyes, ducking down as a Death Eater went past. "Get back here," he muttered to her, pulling her down with him. "The plans would be in the digital archives. We have to make our way to the center of the ship without someone blasting us first."

She nodded, waving him forward. "Go," she said.

He wondered why she was trusting him. Sure, she had a point that they were currently bound together, but it wouldn't take much to break it. The moment anyone knew she was on this spacecraft, they wouldn't do her the courtesy of taking her hostage and letting her live in a cell for a few days. She'd take her very last breaths on this ship, and it scarcely seemed to register with any reasonable amount of fear.
"This way," Draco said, leading her down the labyrinthine paths. She'd stolen some Death Eater uniforms for them to wear inside—probably the same ones they'd stolen in order to abduct him—and hers was too big for her, his too small for him. If anyone looked closely, they'd obviously be out of place, but that was the beauty of having too much power. Nobody looked closely at the details until it was too late.

He entered a passcode into the digital archives and the doors slid open, revealing a vast chamber filled with electronic records. It gleamed with metal and glass, blinding them temporarily.

"How do we know which one it is?" Hermione whispered.

Only a Death Eater with access would know.

"Ask your droid," he said, though he knew it wouldn't work.

She touched her hand to her ear, blinking. "Crookshanks?" she asked, and frowned. Poor thing, he thought. She'd underestimated the magical technology of a Death Eater space station, though depending how things went, it was the last time she'd commit that particular error. "Crookshanks, I need—"

The door slid open behind him, revealing two Death Eaters in the frame.

"Hello, Lieutenant Malfoy," said a grim Rabastan Lestrange. "I see you've managed to make it back." He turned, sliding a glance to Hermione. "Ah, and you've brought Captain Granger, too. Excellent."

Draco felt Hermione's breath catch next to him, her hand moving towards her blaster. He caught her arm and wrenched it back, shoving her in front of him as well as he could manage while still being attached to her.

"Lestrange," Draco said quickly, "she's here for the Chamber plans. Remove them from the archives and take them to my father immediately."

Hermione twisted to stare over her shoulder at him, gritting her teeth with fury. "What code did you use?"

"My father's," he replied coolly, "but he's not on this ship, which is presumably what raised some alarm. Lestrange, if you will?" he asked, gesturing, and then he wrested Hermione's blaster from her hand, angling the barrel into her back. She shoved him away, and he dug it into her vertebrae, turning to the other Death Eater. "Rowle, I need this binding undone," he said, referencing where he'd been forcibly cuffed to Hermione. "I'll happily kill Captain Granger myself," he added, turning to murmur in her ear as she struggled against his chest, "once I've finished with my… personal restitution."

Rowle nodded, removing the cuff with a flick of his wand, leaving Draco to yank Hermione's arm forcefully behind her back.

"Do you have the plans, Lestrange?" he asked the other Death Eater, who had swiped his access card, removing one of the digital files. "You'll have to get it to the Dark Lord. It seems the Order wants it badly enough to die for it, which is a wish I'm quite happy to grant."

"You motherfucker," Hermione rage-whispered, struggling to tear herself free from his grasp. "I thought you were different, I thought you were—"

"Lestrange?" Draco asked, ignoring her. "Recreational pursuits await, as you can see. Do you have
the plans?"

Lestrange took hold of them from where they'd been deposited by a robotic arm before tucking his identification away. "Yes, Lieutenant Malfoy. I'll bring them t-"

He broke off as Draco promptly released Hermione, aiming her blaster at Lestrange's head and pulling the trigger to send him dropping to the floor. Then Draco shifted, shooting the rifle out of Rowle's hand, and aimed the blaster at Rowle's temple, glancing over at Hermione as she stared numbly back at him in disbelief.

"Take the files and go," Draco told her flatly. "Take Lestrange's access card. I'll keep them both here long enough for you to get out."

Hermione stared at him. "You'll be killed!"

"Yes, probably," Draco agreed, shrugging, "but it doesn't matter. I owe you one, don't I? You could have killed me on my ship all those months ago," he reminded her, "and you could have killed me when you took me prisoner, but you didn't. So go," he said again. "I know what the Chamber is. I know what it does. You'll all be blown to bits if you don't get those plans back to Potter, believe me."

"Traitor," Rowle spat at him through his teeth.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Draco muttered, rolling his eyes and jamming the blaster further into Rowle's temple. "You seemed to be fine with leaving me to die on a rebel excuse for a ship, so forgive me if I'm not especially interested in your side of things. Go," he instructed Hermione curtly, gesturing to where the plans remained in Lestrange's lifeless hand.

She stared at the plans, first, and then at him.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked quietly.

He shrugged.

"Maybe you're right that my side doesn't want me," Draco said. "Maybe I don't want the deaths of rebel scum on my hands, or maybe I know my father and the Dark Lord will never really give a shit whether I live or die. Or, maybe it's because I'm a fucking idiot," he suggested blithely, "and I've decided to be slightly more proactive about making sure you don't wind up dead. You know, instead of our usual game," he reminded her, "which is waiting to see how you miraculously survive."

Slowly, her mouth twitched up in a smile.

Then Rowle lunged without warning, breaking Draco's nose in one sharp motion and scrambling for Lestrange's communication device. "THE CHAMBER HAS BEEN OPENED," Rowle shouted as Draco struggled to see through watering eyes, "REPEAT, THE DIGITAL ARCHIVES HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED, THE CHAMBER HAS BEEN OP-"

He broke off, going limp as Hermione aimed a shot from Rowle's discarded rifle.

"Let's go," she said briskly to Draco, yanking the plans from Lestrange's hand and pausing just before she crossed the archive's threshold, waiting for him. "Or do you want to die here?" she demanded brusquely.

Blood was dripping from his nose, his entire skull searing with pain. They were never going to
make it out alive. The whole of the Death Eater army would descend on them shortly, and they would surely go down via firing squad.

Still, he could see how the chance of survival with her was preferable.

"Here," he said, offering her the blaster and holding out his hand for the rifle, "give me that one and I'll—"

"No way, Malfoy," she said, hoisting the rifle in the air and smirking at him. "I get the big gun. That one looks super cute on you," she said, and jammed Lestrange's ID into the archive door, swiping it for access and stepping into the corridor.

Hermione and Draco had dispatched half a dozen Death Eaters each before she got them back into Crookshanks' communication range, shouting for the droid to hack into the space station's emergency system and lead them to the appropriate portkey. Draco had her back; Hermione concerned herself exclusively with forging ahead, the heavy Death Eater's weapon in her hands a more than ample substitute for her blaster.

Miraculously, they made it to the ships. She shoved the rifle into Draco's chest, leaving him to cover them as she sprinted onto The Marauder II and placed herself at the controls. Better to let him shoot down a few more Death Eaters while she and Crookshanks got the ship in motion; she had them hurtling through the air within seconds, seamlessly guiding them out through the rapidly closing portal of the Slytherin station.

Hermione let out a whoop, inserting the Chamber plans into the ship's database to send the details to Harry and Ron, and turned as Draco entered the control room. "You're not so bad with that thing, you know," she said approvingly, gesturing to the air rifle. "In fact," she mused, rising to her feet, "seeing how well you operate a gun makes me curious how you'd do with my—"

"Granger," Draco mumbled, his face ghostly pale, and then he dropped to the ground, unmoving.

She blinked.

Then she stumbled towards him, hurriedly checking him for damage. His chest had been singed by a blaster, and he'd clearly lost some blood from a deep wound in his arm. Narrow escapes, but he needed healing, badly.

"Crookshanks, take over the controls!" she yelled, and struggled to drag Draco to the back part of the ship, setting him down on a medic's cot and reaching hurriedly for her wand. "Come on, Malfoy," she seethed to him, incomprehensibly furious. She removed the too-small uniform, tearing open the shirt he wore underneath. "Honestly," she muttered as she healed the cuts and bruises and the broken nose, reaching for a salve to replenish the blood loss, "all those times you deserved to die and didn't, and now—"

He sat up with a gasp, panting, and caught her hand, startling her.

"Granger," he croaked.

"WHAT?" she demanded, irate once she'd recovered from her shock. "Don't talk to me right now, I'm upset," she grumbled, turning away to clean up the mess she'd made while hunting hysterically through salves, and he caught her arm, yanking her back.
"What are you possibly cross with me for?" he snapped, dragging her closer. He was staring at her with something very close to fury, though they looked at each other so few other ways she wasn't entirely sure she could tell the difference. "Did I not get you those plans, Granger? You shouldn't be shouting at me, you should be thanking me—"

"I was just healing you, you loathsome cockroach," she growled to him. "You nearly got yourself killed—which, by the way," she snapped, "was a THOUGHTLESS INCONVENIENCE—"

"Me? You nearly took a blast to the head, you reckless little cow," he gritted in reply, "and if I hadn't been there to cover you—"

"FINE, SO YOU SAVED MY LIFE," she hurled at him, helplessly infuriated. "WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?"

She was breathing hard, leaning into his bare chest; his hand remained curled around her forearm, locking her in place against him, and he was glaring down at her.

Or, possibly, staring.

"You realize I don't have a place in the entire universe anymore," he said, his voice suddenly low and hoarse. "I can never go back. I'm not a lieutenant, I'm not an officer—my father will have disowned me ten times over by now. I'm not a Death Eater, and I'm certainly not a rebel. I used to be one of the most powerful men in the cosmos, and now," he gritted out, swinging his legs around with a wince to yank her flush against him, "I am even less nothing than you have ever been. And still, with all that," he said helplessly, "do you know what I can't stop thinking about?"

She scowled at him. "What?"

To her surprise, he exhaled with a shake of his head, bending his forehead to hers.

"How fucking worth it it would be," he said, the words warm against the cool sweat that still clung to her cheek, "to die fighting for you, Captain."

He _would_, she thought crossly. He fucking _would_ do that while she was angry. Of course he'd confess something like that while she was furious that he'd come to mean something to her—to mean _everything_ to her—just when she was most hoping to deny it.

She looked up slowly, fixing him with her angry, embattled gaze.

"You were supposed to die," she said, "a long time ago."

"I know," he agreed. "You kept me from it. So I imagine that means my life is yours."

He pulled her up from the floor, guiding her legs around either side of his hips as he settled her on his lap, sitting astride him on the cot.

"Stop saying stupid things," she grumbled, annoyed. "We're going to fuck and that's it. This is sex only, do you understand me? I hate you," she mumbled, running her hands over his stomach and brushing over the lingering marks of his injuries.

"Did I stop at my life?" he mused, tugging at the zipper of her uniform and peeling it back from her shoulders, pressing his lips to the bare skin around the strap of her bra. "My loyalty, too. You wanted me to choose a side? Fine. I choose yours," he murmured, letting her dig her nails into slim, reddened crescents on his chest.
"Stop talking," she hissed, shutting her eyes and shivering. "I don't want your promises, Malfoy, I just want your—"

"Language," he tutted disapprovingly, catching her fumbling hands and twisting around to pin her on her back, positioning himself above her. "Surely this was different in your imagination, wasn't it?" he asked, stroking a line across her clavicle.

"When I imagined it, I was murdering you," she muttered. "You know, blaster to your temple, bending you over my ship's control panel—"

"Later," he suggested impassively, gripping her hips. "Right now, it's my turn."

She reached up with a sigh, taking a handful of the pale blond strands at the back of his head and wrenching his head up to look at her.

"And what do you have in mind?" she asked him, not quite giving in.

In answer, he dropped his lips to hers; something part kiss, part promise. He seemed to channel all the frustration they'd accumulated into one incomprehensibly thrilling motion, a simple brush of contact that was capable of bringing her to feverish, maddening satisfaction.

"Fine," she said, muttering it as she let her hands traverse the landscape of his torso. "Proceed."

"Captain's orders?" he asked.

"Call it an irrefutable request," she replied.

He smiled, then slid down her torso, kissing his way as he went. She shivered as he made his way lower, peeling away the falseness of the the Death Eater uniform and leaving them pressed together, skin to skin. It was impossible to think how she'd withstood the absence of him for so long; it seemed another life, light years away in some other time-space continuum.

It was also impossible to fathom how he could be moving so slowly, his tongue languidly tracing little patterns of nothing around the curves of her thighs, threading the lips of her cunt before darting up, down, and over. The orbit of his breath near her aching core was enough to drive her to insanity; to violence, in fact, kicking him away to send him stumbling to his feet from the edge of the cot, staggering backwards.

"What the—"

"If you're going to fuck me on my ship, Malfoy," Hermione said, sitting up to admonish him, "you're going to do it my way, do you understand? None of this teasing nonsense, just get to the p--"

He cut her off, throwing one arm around her ribcage and lurching her upwards to slam her against the wall of her ship, rendering her momentarily breathless once she'd yelped at the cold metal sensation against her skin.

"Are you done?" he demanded, locking one of her arms overhead. She was pleased to see she hadn't underestimated his upper-body strength; even injured, he was managing things quite impressively. She'd have to applaud him for it later, in her way.

"Better," she managed with a rasp of approval, and gratifyingly, he slid the tip of his cock to the slit of her cunt, lowering her onto him.

She returned his hiss of vindication with a lavish moan of relief, clutching him tightly. "Don't die,"
she advised, and he looked up at her, a helpless laugh escaping through gritted teeth as she yanked at the roots of his hair.

"I've had worse deaths," he said, and thrust firmly into her, both of them lost to the oblivion of satisfaction as they plunged headlong into space.

"Stop whining," Hermione said impatently, and Draco groaned.

"You've hardly thought this through," he insisted, following after her as she climbed up the ramp to The Marauder II. "This is madness. Even Potter and Weasley disagree," he added, making a face, "and loath as I am to bring them up as if they possess any sort of qualifications between them—"

"Malfoy," she said, pivoting so quickly he stumbled directly into her, "it's very bad for morale for you to contradict your captain."

"Whose morale?" he demanded. "This rebellion of yours is a sham—it's only you and me on this ship!"

"And Crookshanks," she reminded, to which he grunted his unwilling agreement, "and besides, between the two of us we've destroyed plenty of space stations. Or have you already forgotten the circumstances under which we met?" she prompted, batting her lashes. "If anyone can cause massive damage to the cosmos, surely it's us—now sit down," she commanded, impatiently shoving him into his chair at the weapons' control. "If we're going to destroy the Chamber, I'm going to need your entire focus."

"You're going to get us both killed," Draco informed her, but ultimately, he relented, resigning himself to the task at hand as she took her seat in the captain's chair. He'd long ago come to terms with the idea he'd probably die in her arms either way.

"Myths never die, Malfoy," she informed him, "and we always rise. Now, are you ready?"

"Fine," he said, pursing his lips and strapping himself in as she winked at him over her shoulder, turning back to the controls.

"CROOKSHANKS," Hermione shouted gleefully, "TAKE US INTO WARPSPEED!"

Draco, knowing there was no other choice than to exist at her side, closed his eyes with a sigh, letting himself be swallowed up by the freedom of open sky as he careened, yet again, to inevitable misadventure.
standalone piece, so please keep an eye out. See you soon!
Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Day 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche

*Pairing:* Ensemble pairings

*Universe:* Roaring Twenties AU; Lightning Era in Gatsby-esque New York

*Rating:* eventual M for sex

*Summary:* It's December 1st, which means… Welcome to the Olivie Advent! There will be an update every day until December 24th. Happy holiday season!

When an aimless Harry Potter is asked to retrieve Draco Malfoy from the sinful clutches of American high society, he gets unwillingly dragged into the opulent wizarding party scene of Prohibition-era New York City. Meanwhile, a string of grand thefts draws an investigative auror from the British Ministry to MACUSA, whose Department of Magical Law Enforcement recruits her for the protection of an American heiress who recently came into a vast inheritance.

1 December, 1925

It seemed, in Harry's opinion, that grandeur was just a cousin of boredom, only slightly better dressed. He wandered around his godfather's house in silence, fingertips trailing over dusty shelves as he listened to Sirius rant about his dead mother's hoarding compulsion.

Harry had offered to help clean out 12 Grimmauld Place for the day, a thankless but still preferable task to whatever else he would have been doing. Finding a job, he supposed, though that seemed intensely unlikely. If it hadn't already happened in the months since sitting for his N.E.W.T.s at Hogwarts University, it certainly wouldn't happen today.

"—ridiculous, honestly, who could have any possible need for this many shrunken heads?" Sirius was saying, which Harry hoped was a rhetorical question. "I swear, the woman's main motivation for dying was to continue the process of driving me to slow, creeping insanity- don't touch that," he warned sharply, hand shooting out to stop Harry from winding a small pocket watch. "Cursed," he panted in explanation, "much like myself."

"It's not so bad, is it?" Harry asked, gingerly replacing the watch where he'd found it and glancing over at Sirius. "Could be worse, anyway."

"True, she could be alive," Sirius agreed, shuddering. "There isn't a living member of the wretched House of Black who needn't be promptly done away with. Don't tell Bellatrix I said that," he hastily amended, angling a menacing crucifix in Harry's direction, "and certainly not Narcissa, either. Though you'll be hard-pressed to speak to Narcissa," he grumbled under his breath, "through her constant blubbering about her witless son."

"Draco?" Harry asked, frowning. They'd known each other from the inevitable consequence of attending wizarding primary school through university together, though they certainly hadn't been friends. They'd very much not been friends, in fact, as Harry had always found Draco Malfoy stuffy and irritating, and Draco seemed to find Harry equally distasteful—though, perhaps that was just
"Ah, that's right, I forgot you two were the same age," Sirius straightened, a curious look on his face as he eyed Harry. "Say, you're not particularly busy, are you?"

"Me? No." Obviously not, seeing as he was here. "Why?"

"Well, it's just that I'd hate to go through another dreadful Black family gathering with more of Narcissa's wretched whinging," Sirius said with an incongruously spirited smile. "If you needed something to do, perhaps you'd be willing to go to New York? Persuade Draco to come home?"

Sounded positively awful. "Why, again?"

"Because you'd be doing your godfather a favor, firstly," Sirius said, clasping a hand around Harry's shoulder, "and secondly, because you ought to see more of what's out there. You've been locked away at boarding school for the last however-many years, haven't you?" he prompted, and Harry shrugged in acknowledgment. "Time to have an extended visit with the world, young Harry," Sirius mused. "Spread your wings, et cetera. Besides, I hear New York's a riot these days—a less intellectual Paris," he clarified with a smirk, "and a proper filthy London."

"I'm not that into filth," Harry said with a grimace. "I assume, anyway."

"Well, never know until you try," Sirius countered, which Harry conceded with a shrug. "You've been bored out of your wits for months, Harry. I'm sure the Malfoys would be willing to pay you," he pointed out, which was certainly tempting. "Lucius won't stop babbling about how much Draco's allowance is costing him, so I'm sure he'd see it as a business expense. 'It's time that son of mine came home to join the family business,' he says at every opportunity," Sirius yowled in an unflattering imitation of Lucius Malfoy, "which is an enterprise of smarmy sauntering, I assume, or maybe investment in hair grease—"

"Well, hm." Harry self-consciously raked a hand through his own unruly hair, considering it. "I suppose I could use the money."

"Perfect, it's settled. You should take some clothes," Sirius added, giving Harry's loose-fitted shirt a swift, mildly disapproving once-over. Sirius, entirely overdressed for the task of sorting through his dead mother's junk, was a fashionable contrast in trousers, a waistcoat, and a single-breasted lapel jacket, his black hair slicked back and gleaming against his head. "You'll need a tuxedo, I suspect."

"I doubt I need one just to drag Draco home," Harry countered dismissively. "How long can that possibly take?"

"You think that smarmy little arsehole has any interest coming home? Believe me, he doesn't," Sirius said with a shake of his head, "rightfully, I imagine, and besides, don't discount the prospect of enjoying yourself while you're there. I hear there's a whole bunch of expats your age floating around Manhattan society," he said, appearing to think this would somehow interest Harry (who'd never taken any interest in society, Manhattan or otherwise). "Maybe you'll meet someone of interest, hm?"

"I doubt it," Harry said, but by then Sirius had already moved on, sifting through his mother's cupboard of shrieking china and resuming his ongoing tirade.

"I don't understand," Hermione said slowly, frowning at Minister Shacklebolt. "You want me to
"Well, of course we don't want you to," Shacklebolt corrected gently. "You're exceedingly valuable to us, Miss Granger, but as I've told you several times, there's just no room for any additional aurors in our department. Not that your clerical assistance on the Zabini case wasn't invaluable," he hastily added, "as it most certainly was. If anything, I suspect your insight on that case is the reason MACUSA's taken such a keen interest in you."

"No disrespect, Minister, but it really didn't take a genius to sort that case out," Hermione said, frowning. "The woman's first six wealthy husbands died mysteriously, so... it really wasn't a stretch to sort out what might have happened to the seventh. Really, the mystery was why people kept marrying her," she said, frowning, "so—"

"The point, Miss Granger," Shacklebolt cut in, "is that this is your..." He glanced down, skimming the page. "I believe it's your twentieth request to sit for auror examinations?"

"Twenty-third," corrected Hermione, who was a firm believer in accuracy. "I'm very proficient at tactical defense spells, as I've mentioned," she reminded him, "and I've asked several of my former professors to recommend my skills in various related subjects—"

"Yes, we received those, too," Shacklebolt said, shifting uncomfortably. "Unfortunately, we just don't have any open positions right now."

That, as Hermione was smart enough to know, wasn't remotely the issue. The issue, which Kingsley Shacklebolt would surely confess if he had ever shared her interest in accuracy, was that she was Miss Hermione Granger and not Mister... whatever the male equivalent of Hermione was. It certainly didn't help that she was muggleborn, but even then, if she'd been a wizard instead of a witch, they might have made an exception. She pursed her lips, crossing one ankle stubbornly behind the other.

"So you're sending me away," she summarized, displeased.

"You don't have to go," Shacklebolt hurried to assure her. "But MACUSA is rather desperate, as I understand it. A young heiress, Miss Daphne Greengrass, requires some sort of... protection," he determined, coughing slightly to obscure the obvious mundanity of the task. "She's recently come into a sizable fortune following the death of her parents, and aurors at MACUSA believe her to be the next target in a string of pureblood thefts."

"So they want someone to babysit her," Hermione said doubtfully, "is that it?" No wonder they'd wanted her. No male auror would want to chaperone some spoiled heiress; they'd find it demeaning, as they should. "You're sending me to be a grown woman's nanny?"

Shacklebolt looked away, obviously unsure what to say, and Hermione sighed. It was still better than paperwork, she grumbled internally. And an auror license, even a conditional one from MACUSA, was certainly closer to a real one than she was going to get sitting behind a Ministry desk.

"Fine," she said, and Shacklebolt glanced up, visibly relieved. "I'll go, then. But I want you to promise me something," she insisted, leaning forward. "If I solve this MACUSA case, you'll let me sit for auror exams. No more empty promises or countless owls of 'we'll see, Miss Granger,'—an actual guarantee." She rose to her feet, stretching a hand across the desk. "Are we agreed?"

Shacklebolt considered her hand briefly and then nodded, accepting it with every indication he didn't expect any such thing to happen.
"Agreed," he said, and Hermione nodded firmly, whirling out the door and heading straight home to pack.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Happy December 1st! Look for a post here every day until Christmas. Hope you enjoy!
Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Day 2

Summary: The advent, continued.

"So you're really going to New York, are you?" Ron asked, watching Harry pack his things (most of which had been borrowed from Sirius) and draping himself over the foot of Harry's bed. "We'll miss you at the Burrow for Christmas this year, mate. It won't be the same without you. Well, it'll be the same," he amended, grimacing, "but without you there for my mum to fuss over, ergo… worse."

"I don't think I'll be gone longer than a few days," Harry said. "Even internationally, apparition is somewhat, you know—" He shrugged. "Straightforward."

Ron scoffed, admonishing Harry with a pursed look of skepticism. "From what I've heard? You may as well move there. Haven't you kept up with any news recently?"

"Gossip isn't news," Harry said, cutting him a doubtful glance. "You sound like Lavender."

"Well, I would, wouldn't I?" Ron said, unfazed. "She's the one sharing the necessary research. Apparently Malf..."—a loathsome couple vying for rulers of the Underworld, or so Harry imagined—"were nearly engaged," Ron said in a hushed, sensationalized tone, "but Lav says there's been… a rift."

Harry frowned. "A rift?"

"A skirt-shaped rift," Ron clarified with a knavish glance, and then, "Have you heard of Daphne Greengrass?"

"No," Harry said. "Should I have?"

oOo

"Stop staring," Pansy grumbled, cutting a glare at Draco from where she sat sipping her cappuccino. American coffee was a travesty, but with enough foam, it was nearly palatable— unlike Draco's obviously wandering eye. "You're going to burn a hole through her."

Across the room, Daphne Greengrass was being seated for lunch with an older gentleman, probably someone from her recently-deceased father's estate. He had a lawyerly look to him; Daphne, on the other hand, had a look that would have made Paris of Troy think twice about Helen. Golden and lovely, her hair in a gleaming chignon and her petite curves draped in a pink silk that would make God Himself redefine complexion, Daphne looked as positively celestial as ever.

That heinous bitch.

"What?" Draco said, then dragged his gaze to Pansy. "Sorry, did you say something?"
To say it wasn't working out between them was an understatement. They'd gone to New York ages ago, jetting off at the first sign of trouble in their year-long process of courting, but a summer in Long Island followed by an autumn in their twin Woolworth hotel suites had done little to improve the state of things between them romantically. They'd agreed for a time to keep up appearances, sort of, but even their faux aesthetic was ostensibly unconvincing. Pansy's mother's owls typically detailed the gossip around London's wizarding society, most of which currently seemed to be that she—Pansy Parkinson, Slytherin sweetheart, President of the Young Witches of London who'd been elected Most Likely to Marry Well by her Hogwarts class—was about to be abandoned, heartbroken and with her reputation in disrepair, by the dapper Malfoy heir.

It was infuriating to think Draco's attention could be so easily disrupted, his need to establish their break-up far more sudden than she'd expected, but Pansy grudgingly supposed it made sense. Their chemistry had been atrocious, their temperaments too flighty to coexist, and besides, Daphne Greengrass was one of those Yankee darlings, all glitz and adornment (her father had magical factories for steel or something—or he'd owned a railroad? Who could keep track anymore) and Draco was as competitive as he was predictable. The moment Daphne stepped out from her family's mansion onto the New York City scene, every eligible bachelor (and the ineligible ones, too) had set out trying to win either her bed, her fortune, or her blood status.

Draco, Pansy suspected, was after all three; after all, she'd always admired him for his ambition, and he'd want nothing less than everything. Pansy's old money was all fine and good, it seemed, but not quite compelling enough to override the banality of their sex life. Daphne Greengrass may have been some bastardized cousin of the British Sacred Twenty-Eight line, but she was also rich and desirable.

And desired, too, if Draco's blatant staring was indication enough.

Pansy turned stiffly, watching Daphne laugh at something her father's lawyer said. What was so appealing about her, anyway? Her figure was enviable, certainly, but Pansy was no slouch. If anything, Pansy had the better set of breasts. Fuller, at least, though Daphne's were perfect, perky swells against that wretched silk. Her lips were a similar petal-pink, her cheeks rosy and flush; she was a damned rhapsody in peach. They'd only met once or twice in person, bumping into each other in shops or for drinks at the Harkaway, but each time, Daphne had been unmistakably charming and sweet. It was enough to make Pansy sick.

Across the table, Draco shifted without warning, crossing one leg over the other, and Pansy felt her eyes narrow, wondering what might have suddenly prompted him to adjust. Probably the thought of Daphne's lips wrapped around his cock, enthusiastic tits bouncing along as she joyfully put herself to task. She probably had no gag reflex, Pansy thought venomously, glancing at Daphne again and feeling a wave of shameful heat at the profanity of her thoughts.

Not that she thought about such things, usually. Or ever. Though, there was a certain degree of satisfaction to the thought of cornering Daphne Greengrass in a darkened room, dragging her perfect hair from its jeweled pins and tearing at the silk of her dress. Something about Daphne's perfection practically begged to be put to ruin; pleaded for it, long lashes fluttering from where she knelt at Pansy's feet. Pansy thought of sinking her teeth into that long, unblemished neck; a pair of shaking hands rising, trembling, over her bare breasts while her own fingers, restless and laden with destruction, raked up that delicate spine—

She shook herself, blinking, and glanced at Draco, whose brow had furrowed at something across the room.

"What is it?" Pansy asked with brisk impatience, locking her knees together and reaching
breathlessly for a glass of chilled water.

"Nothing," he muttered, but Pansy knew well enough what that meant.

Easy enough to tell, after all, seeing as she wasn't blind. Theo Nott had just entered the Harkaway Hotel, and by the looks of it, Daphne Greengrass certainly wasn't unhappy to see him.

Slowly, Pansy smiled into her glass. It seemed Draco wasn't winning, for once.

Theo Nott, a detestable (and detestably wealthy) member of the American nouveau riche, seemed to be Daphne's favorite suitor, or at least the boldest of them. That was always the way with those new money types, Pansy thought distastefully; they contained far more panache than class. Still, that sort of showy charm must have worked on Daphne, who went so far as to brush her lips against Theo's cheek—in full view of all the men she must have known were watching.

Them, and Pansy, of course, whose stomach clenched a little at precisely the same moment that Draco's hand tightened on his cup. Perhaps neither of them were winning, she thought with an inward wave of discomfort; then she turned away from Daphne's melodic laugh, staring at the lipstick stain on her glass as Draco sipped his cappuccino, silent.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Check out the D/Hr Advent here on AO3! My contribution, A Matter of Practicality, will be added to this collection on December 26, but if you'd like to read it now, it is available for your consumption.
"Miss Greengrass," Draco called, catching sight of her across the lobby of the Harkaway and aiming himself in her direction.

"Oh, Mr Malfoy, hello," she said brightly, turning to face him. He was relieved she didn't have that dreadful Nott buffoon hanging on her arm like usual; Theo Nott was the worst kind of rich, flagrantly showy and utterly without taste, and mostly known for his outrageous parties, none of which Draco had ever been invited to (not that he wanted to attend; after all, he hadn't come to New York to immerse himself in rubbish). "How are you?" she asked, accepting his arm as he offered it to her, falling in step with him. "I feel as if I haven't seen you in ages."

"Ah, only because you've been wasting your time on lesser pursuits," he said knowingly, sparing her a sidelong glance and observing with delight as her cheeks flushed from his attention. "Perhaps I could get you alone today, hm? We could take a walk if you like. Central Park is lovely this time of year, from what I hear."

"It's freezing," Daphne said with a laugh. "The whole thing is covered with snow!"

"Well," Draco said, pausing to face her, "I'm sure we could find a way to keep ourselves warm. If you wanted, of course," he murmured, permitting his thumb to brush lightly along the curve of her waist.

He felt her stuttered inhale, reveling in it. "But," she began, swallowing. "Aren't you… why, aren't you still going with Pansy Parkinson?" she asked, her dainty brow furrowed with apprehension. "I wouldn't… I mean, I'd hate to—"

"Pansy? No," Draco said with a laugh, "we're friends, that's all."

"Oh," Daphne said, her lashes fluttering as she glanced down, her gaze tracing the placement of his hand. She’d be the perfect image of innocence, Draco thought smugly, if she weren't reduced to breathlessness under his palms, hips obviously angled towards him. To his displeasure, though, she seemed to have noticed her indiscretion, quickly nudging him a safe distance away. "I have a meeting with someone this afternoon, and it simply can't wait."

Draco grimaced. So close. "Ah, I see."

"But perhaps I'll see you tomorrow evening?" Daphne said, surprising him.

"Tomorrow evening?" Draco asked, frowning. "Is there something going on I should know about?"

"Oh, don't you? I assumed… Well, in any case, Theo Nott is having a party," Daphne said, obviously dismayed at the awkwardness of him not knowing and hurrying to ease the situation. "Of course, if you won't be there, then perhaps the following afternoon? Oh, well, I do have to do some
shopping for the holidays," she said, frowning to herself. "Maybe Satur- no," she sighed, "not Saturday, either, and really, my whole weekend is a mess, so—"

"Oh, silly me," Draco cut in quickly, sparing a laugh. "Yes, of course I'm going to the party tomorrow. I wasn't entirely sure I'd be attending, given so many other social obligations," he lied smoothly as she nodded, wide-eyed, "but if you'll be there, then—"

"Wonderful." She was positively radiant at the thought, or so he smugly suspected. "I so look forward to seeing you. I was wondering if we'd ever find any time to be, you know—" That marvelous flush crept up in her cheeks again, flaming both her features and his increasingly unbearable need to see how they looked in the dark. "Alone."

He smiled. She smiled.

He had to find a way into that party. Sure, Theo Nott had inauspiciously 'not been home' the last time Draco had casually tried to see him, and okay, so the Malfoy fortune wasn't so much a fortune as a ticking clock (which no one, not even Pansy—especially not Pansy—knew about), but… he would make this happen. He would find a way even if it killed him.

Better dead than abstinent, and certainly better dead than bankrupt and publicly humiliated.

"Oh, we will," he assured her, taking her hand and brushing his lips over her knuckles. "Believe me, we will."

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Woolworth was an exceedingly confusing place—even for Harry, who typically navigated things with ease. He'd been a seeker and a quidditch captain twice over and possessed an innate sense of direction, but the flurry of activity in the Woolworth wizarding neighborhood was rapidly diminishing him to a base degree of ambulatory.

He bumped into someone, colliding with their shoulder, and gave a frustrated exhalation of apology. "So sorry," he muttered, jostled inelegantly to the side until a hand reached out, steadying him.

"You look lost," said a sharp, dry voice, which upon further inspection belonged to a wiry, well-dressed man with slicked-back dark hair. He was wearing a black suit that made him look exceedingly thin, and while at first glance he appeared quite a bit older, after a moment of closer inspection Harry realized that the man, whoever he was, was probably somewhere around his age.

"Is this your first time?" asked the stranger.

"Sorry?" Harry asked, blinking, and the man laughed.

"In Woolworth," he explained, and thrust out a hand. "I'm Theo Nott."

"Harry Potter," said Harry, accepting the proffered shake. "You wouldn't happen to know which way the Harkaway Hotel is, would you?"

"I would, in fact," Theo said unhelpfully, "though I don't recommend you going there. Nothing but snobs and fakes in that wretched circle of hell."

"Noted," Harry said, grimacing. "Unfortunately, I'm about to pick up one of those snobby fakes."

For whatever reason, Theo looked amused. "What a magnificent travesty," he said. "I have half a
mind to direct you somewhere fun instead. Have you at least imbibed in anything worthy while you've been here?"

"Imbibed," Harry echoed. "In alcohol, you mean?"

"Certainly not, young man," Theo said. "That's illegal."

Harry frowned, bemused. "Oh. Sorry, I thought—"

"My goodness," Theo cut in with a laugh, "you're really a lost cause, aren't you?" He surveyed Harry with a furrowed brow. "I take it you don't know who I am?"

"Should I?" Harry asked.

Theo considered him a moment, then shook his head.

"No, you shouldn't," he pronounced crisply, "though I must say, I do worry about this place swallowing you whole. What are you doing tomorrow evening?" he asked tangentially, and Harry blinked.

"Well, I expect to be gone by the morning," he said. "I'm really only here for a short errand."

"Hm. Pity," remarked Theo, shrugging briskly and reaching into his pocket for a small index card. "Well, take this anyway," he said, handing it to Harry. "If you happen to still be here, the card's a portkey."

Harry glanced over the card, frowning. "To what?"

"A party," Theo said simply, "which I'll be attending, and which is sure to be enormously unpleasant, though don't let that preclude you from considering it. I personally am never fully satisfied unless I'm being made to suffer in complete and total misery."

"Well… okay, I guess," Harry said doubtfully. "To tell you the truth, though, even if I still happened to be here, I'm really not a party person."

"I can tell," Theo said ambiguously, but before Harry could ask what he meant, he'd already added, "Well, in any case, I do have some good news." He gestured broadly to the building on his left. "You've managed to successfully locate the Harkaway Hotel."

Harry blinked, turning to look at the building they had inadvertently stopped in front of. "This, really? Well, I thought—"

He glanced back, finding that Theo Nott had already disappeared into the passing crowd.

"Huh," Harry said to himself, frowning, before spotting a pale blond head exiting the Harkaway's front doors. "Malfoy," he called, the name falling from his mouth before the rest of him had even registered it, and after a moment of confusion, Draco Malfoy's expression soured.

"Whatever it is, not now, Potter," Draco said, prepared to shove past him as he'd so often done while they were at Hogwarts. "I'm very busy," he muttered in concentration, leaving Harry to follow in something of an ungainly chase.

"Malfoy, would you hold on, please?" Harry growled, gripping Draco's arm and dragging him back, resulting in a violent look of displeasure which fitted itself quite naturally to his pointy features.
"Don't touch me, Potter—"

"Believe me," Harry said, holding firm as Draco attempted to wrench away. "I don't want to either, but seeing as your parents have given me a thousand galleons just to bring you home, I can't very well let you go, can I?"

Draco came to a comically sudden halt. "A thousand?"

"Yes. It seems your mother would pay just about any ludicrous amount to have you home immediately. God knows why," Harry said with a grimace, "as I'm sure she'd be better off with a cat, or perhaps a stuffed peacock—"

"Hilarious." Draco's mouth was lined thinly, his brow furrowed. "Well, this can wait," he said eventually, pivoting away. "Get yourself a room at the Harkaway, or do… whatever." He gave a brief, dismissive gesture, mumbling, "I, meanwhile, have got to find a way into Theo Nott's party tomorrow evening, which will surely be no pleasant task—"

"Theo Nott?" Harry echoed. "The party's his?"

"I—" Draco stopped, glaring at him. "You know him?"

"Well, he just invited me," Harry said, holding up the card. "I assumed he was just attending, I didn't think he was actually hosting—"

"Give me that," Draco said, snatching at it. "This is a portkey, isn't it? Unbelievable." He looked up, glaring at Harry. "He's invited you to this? It's the most exclusive party in New York. Even Pansy didn't know where to get an invitation," he grumbled, shoving the card back into Harry's chest.

Pansy Parkinson—ugh. Ron had said so, but still. "So that's still going, then?" Harry said, making a face. "You and Parkinson, that's still a thing?"

"Hm? No, but—" Draco was obviously distracted. "A thousand dollars, you said? Well, that's certainly enough for a better-fitting suit," he determined, shifting his attention to eye Harry's clothes. "We'd better get started now," he said with palpable distaste. "Could take all day to find something suitable."

"I have clothes," Harry said, distressed, "but Malfoy—"

"Look," Draco said, impatiently cutting him off. "My parents sent you here to help me, didn't they?"

"What?" Harry asked, frowning. "No. They only asked me t-"

"It's implied," Draco informed him, angling Harry into the crowded Woolworth streets, "so that's what you'll be doing, Potter. Otherwise, you're just wasting my family's fortune," he said, "and we simply can't permit that, can we?"

"But—" Harry sighed, permitting himself to be dragged. "Just until this party, though, right?" he asked hopefully. "And then we'll go back to London straightaway?"


Chapter End Notes
a/n: There's been a death in my family and I needed to go home. Will continue posting this in my spare moments, but I would expect the Commoner's Guide update to come late this week. Thank you for your patience!
"Right, okay, so," Hermione said, glancing up from her notes. "Do you have any questions?"

After a moment of strain, Daphne Greengrass' brow materialized from behind one of the towering piles of research in an artfully furrowed expression of bemusement.

"Sorry… Auror Granger, was it?" came her melodic voice of confusion, a glimpse of a floaty blue silk dress appearing as she leaned to the side. "I'm afraid I'm just having some trouble understanding," she offered apologetically. "You think someone might… steal from me?"

"Well, it's just—" Hermione attempted to shove aside the pile of notes and sighed, frustrated, as it immediately collapsed in a fluttered heap on the floor. "Sorry about the, um. Desk situation," she offered with a grimace, flicking her wand to clear away some of the mess within the (minimal) space she'd been allotted by MACUSA. "I'm still settling in. Oh, and there's no need to call me Auror Granger, either," she added hastily, catching the motion of Daphne's amused gaze as it followed her mostly-unsuccessful efforts to make room. "It's only a provisional title, so Hermione will be fine."

"Provisional?" Daphne echoed, tentatively clearing her throat. "Do you mean to say you've never done… this," she said, daintily charming a pile of notes and shifting it aside to the teetering edge of Hermione's temporary desk, "before?"

"Well—" Hermione hesitated. Despite having managed a sufficient window to face each other across her desk, communicating the reality of the situation hadn't much improved. "This is my first hands-on case, I'll admit, but I've solved many just like it," she hurried to say. "I've handled the paperwork for the British DMLE for over half a year now, so—"

"Paperwork," Daphne noted with obvious reluctance, looking vaguely concerned. "So you don't have any field experience, then?"

"I've been… getting my bearings," Hermione lied, leaving out the bit about having been repeatedly denied an auror exam only to be shipped off for the benefit of some spoiled rich woman, however perfectly nice she happened to be. "I assure you, Miss Greengrass, you're in good hands. If there is indeed someone out there looking to exploit your fortune, I will find them well before they have a chance."

"Well, that's reassuring," said Daphne, who was at least more gracious than Hermione had anticipated. "I certainly appreciate your help. Though," she sighed, "I do hate to think anyone would have such unsavory motives."

Hermione bit back a reflexive retort that the world must be quite marvelous indeed when one was beautiful, blonde, and the inheritor of a massive fortune. "True as that may be," she said slowly, "there's been a variety of thefts reported over the last five months, all against wealthy women in the state of New York. It seems that the thief—whoever he is," she said with a grim sweep of her
towering notes, "is escalating quite a bit. I personally think we're all better safe than sorry."

"Oh, of course," Daphne said, looking relieved enough. "Well, how would you like to go about this, then? Weekly reports, perhaps?"

"Actually," Hermione said, "I think it'd be better if I accompanied you. At least for the time being," she said, shifting her attention to the pile of scrawling notes on chronology. "By the pattern established thus far, I would expect the thief to strike sometime before the end of the year."

"Oh, but how dreadful," Daphne said, looking wistfully inconvenienced. "But yes, of course, Hermione. Whatever you need. Though," she began, and then paused, cheeks turning faintly pink. "In terms of my, ah. With things being as they are, I—" She broke off, toying guiltily with her gloves. "Well," she eventually sighed, "let's just say I'm afraid I have social obligations which are perhaps not in accordance with No-Maj law."

"Prohibition laws, you mean?" Hermione asked, and Daphne winced, sparing a radiantly troubled nod. "I see. Well…"

Hermione paused, considering it. That was certainly a conundrum. On the one hand, MACUSA had no such codified restrictions, but on the other, wizards were highly discouraged from imbibing around muggles—No-Majs, she corrected internally. Though, how would she possibly earn her right to sit for her auror exams if she wasn't there when Daphne was most likely to be preyed upon?

"My job is to investigate your case," Hermione said slowly, "not to interfere with No-Maj law, so that's… fine."

"Well, that's a relief," Daphne breathed, satisfied. "And in that case, I should tell you that you'll need a dress for this evening—"

"I'm sure this will be fine," Hermione said vacantly, gesturing to her practical skirt suit (a flattering cut, and a lovely beige) as Daphne cleared her throat in tentative opposition.

"Hermione," she said carefully. "I have to imagine you don't wish others to be aware they're being investigated. Am I correct?"

"Of course," Hermione said, frowning. "If they knew, I could hardly do my job very well, could I?"

"Well, exactly," Daphne said, giving her a saintly look of relief. "Seeing as the culprit might find your sudden presence a bit suspicious, it's rather important that you… blend. I imagine." She smiled brilliantly. "Though I am, of course, no expert on auror practices."

Hermione looked down at her clothes, scrutinizing the sensibility of her outfit, and then up at Daphne, whose blue silk seemed to have magnified in luxury even beneath the harsh light of the auror office.

"I should get a dress," Hermione noted glumly, and Daphne's smile broadened.

"That sounds like a lovely idea," she said, preening with approval.

"I got your owl," Pansy said without preamble, opening the door to her hotel suite for Draco to pass. "Potter's here? How positively dull."

She tried to shut the door and felt it catch, stuck on something.
"Nice to see you, too, Parkinson," said the obstacle in the doorframe, and Pansy scowled.

"You again," she said, and Harry Potter shrugged.

"Not willingly, believe me."

"Oh, do shut up," Draco said, falling exhaustedly across Pansy's sofa. "You agreed, didn't you? Not to mention you're the one who decided to take on this demeaning little errand."

"Things are going well, I take it," Pansy remarked, and Draco cracked one eye.

"Potter's got an invitation to Nott's party," he offered in explanation, and she glanced at Harry with grudging interest, which seemed to repulse him as much as it infuriated her.

"How?" she demanded, and he shrugged.

"I ran into Theo Nott. What's his deal, anyway?" he asked, setting his hat on the table beside the door. "He acted like I was supposed to know who he was."

"Well, if you'd opened your ears for one buggering second, Potter, you would know who he was," Draco said lazily, "but you're still just as unbearably oblivious as you were at school, aren't you?"

Harry turned to the door without a word, reaching for his hat, and Draco launched upright, clearly about to chase him. "Would you desist—"

"As I've mentioned, Malfoy, if you want my invitation, then you'll have to be nice," Harry said, and Pansy stifled a laugh; obviously this was a game they'd played a few times already. "Otherwise, I'll simply head off back to London and tell your desperate, doting parents their son is dead and requiring no further allowance."

"Well, you're still unbearable," Draco muttered, though at the renewed motion of Harry's hand towards his hat, he sighed loudly. "Fine, fine. The point, Parkinson, is I'm going to Nott's party this evening," he informed her, "so you'll have to do without me tonight."

She'd done without him plenty of nights, which he seemed to have conveniently forgotten.

"I want to come," she said, and Draco fixed her with a piteous look that said, quite plainly, We've talked about this, we're done. "Not for you, you smug little idiot," she told him sharply. "Just because I haven't been to a party in ages. Besides, I presume you're going for Daphne Greengrass?" she asked, and Draco stiffened, which was a stinging confirmation. "Then I'll go with Potter."

Harry blanched, looking as opposed as Pansy felt, but Draco looked as if she'd recently invented apparition.

"Now that's a thought," he agreed, eagerly sitting upright. "Daphne did mention she was concerned you and I were still together. Better you do take someone else, then."

It wasn't the best thing, but perhaps if Pansy looked well enough this evening, the gossip would be less about her being abandoned by Draco Malfoy and more about how fabulous she seemed without him.

Pansy wondered, briefly, what Daphne would wear. She would have to look better, of course, or at least try to. Perhaps this evening called for her emerald green evening gown, which was a color she doubted Daphne could pull off quite so well. A girl that golden and innocent would never dare wear something so eye-catching—nor something so boldly revealing.
Pansy smiled, satisfied with the thought.

"Seems a bit inconsiderate on my part," Harry said, interrupting her wandering thoughts. "Theo didn't say I could bring anyone, much less two someones."

Pansy and Draco cut him matching glares.

"Fine," Harry conceded, shrugging. "Whatever it takes to get out of here."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Thank you for your support. Chag same'ach to those of you celebrating Hanukkah!
Well, there was Pansy Parkinson, that snotty little tart, looking her usual moneyed self in a backless green gown with pearls spilling down her spine, the strands tied up and resting between her scapulae. A shiny blond head that meant Draco Malfoy was present (despite his very intentional lack of invitation) gleamed in her proximity, and Theo turned away from his hiding spot at the top of the stairs, already bored to tears.

This party, like all his parties, was an utter fucking sham.

He took a sip from his champagne, eyeing it. Being rich wasn't nearly as wonderful as it had once appeared to be. After a while, it became grotesquely dull. Redundant, even. Week after week he threw these parties, pretending to enjoy the crowds, and for what? It was lonelier than ever from his place on high—though he preferred to be aloft in authentic silence than among the throngs of pretentious madness.

He took another sip, letting it settle, and turned to eye the crowd again. This time, he saw something more promising than the usual mundanity of gold and jewels; it was a little flash of silver spectacles, attached to a head of unruly black hair and a tuxedo that was clearly ill-fitted. Borrowed, if Theo had to guess, and currently fitted without much skill to a man who'd clearly never known a taste of luxury in his entire life. After so many nights of bespoke suits and arrogant laughter, that degree of genuine discomfort stuck out like a sore thumb, which meant there was only one person that could be.

Theo drained his glass and smiled to himself, pleased.

Harry Potter was here.

Excellent.

"Ah, Daphne!" said a man with pale blond hair, and Hermione fought a grimace, recognizing Draco Malfoy from her years at Hogwarts and wishing desperately that this party had been a masquerade. "What a pleasure, and you've brought… oh," Draco said dully, catching sight of Hermione's woefully unobscured face and faltering. "You know Granger?"

"Oh that's right, you're both English!" Daphne said spiritedly, accepting the arm Draco offered her. "Do the two of you know each other?"

"No," Draco and Hermione said in unison, which was true. Mostly. After all, he'd hardly deigned to speak to her during the entirety of their schooling. They'd had one little episode of maybe-something right before their final year, but…

She shuddered. That had obviously been a mistake.

"I thought you were supposed to be working some sort of desk job for the Ministry," Draco remarked to Hermione, and she dug her nails into her palm, annoyed. Only he could make
something purely factual sound so outrageously derisive.

"I'm here to spend the holidays with Daphne," she replied tightly, and then, with a bit of haste, "We're old friends," sticking to the cover story she and Daphne had crafted (prior to her knowing they'd be accosted by idiots with more arrogance and hair pomade than sense, of course) and Draco let out a bursting, obnoxious laugh, patting Daphne's hand.

"In what universe would you and Granger here ever be friends?" he remarked, chuckling. "I couldn't imagine two people more different. Care for a drink?" he asked Daphne, who glanced apprehensively at Hermione.

"Oh, I don't want to leave Hermione—"

"No, no, go ahead," Hermione said firmly. "I'll just... have a look around," she said, hoping the 'investigatory' bit of Investigatory Auror was enough to clue Daphne in to what she was doing, and Daphne nodded. She wasn't a total idiot, Daphne Greengrass, even if her taste in men was obviously suspect.

"Well, alright," Daphne said uncertainly, though within moments she was well and helplessly distracted by Draco's attention, letting him slide his arm around her waist. Clearly he'd given up on Pansy Parkinson, whom Hermione spotted staring darkly at the pair from afar. True, Daphne was richer, more beautiful, and infinitely more tolerable, but still, everyone in London believed the Parkinson and Malfoy union to be so well-matched it was inevitable. Or they had believed it, anyway, though it had always been mostly assumed, as nobody had seen either party since...

Hm.

Hermione frowned, filled with a sudden suspicion about why Draco Malfoy, heir to the Malfoy Enterprises throne, had been away from London for precisely the same amount of time as the string of thefts in New York.

"Well, well, Draco Malfoy," Hermione murmured to herself, "you've just added yourself to my list of suspects."

oOo

It was impossibly crowded inside what Harry assumed to be a basement of some kind, though there was no telling in this degree of darkness. They'd simply taken the portkey and arrived here, at which point Pansy had commenced chattering nonstop about this person or that person, or what he was doing or what she was wearing. The whole thing was exhausting, and when Pansy turned away to get more whisky, Harry slipped away from the crowd, darting along the periphery and opening a door that he hoped would lead to somewhere quiet.

He blinked upon entry, realizing he was in some sort of office. The walls were a dark green textured pattern of interwoven snakes and ivy that twisted in ceaseless motion towards gilded copper moldings, gradually disappearing into the gleaming mahogany of the floors. He let his gaze sweep over the furnishings, taking it in; a Greco-Roman bust perched atop a marble pillar beside a velvet tufted sofa. A low table sat in the corner, an organically crafted wave of glass that sat in front of a bronze sideboard. Upon first glance, most of the furniture was either gleaming mahogany, polished brass, or ebony encrusted with mother of pearl.

In a word: expensive. This was no 12 Grimmauld Place, that much was obvious, but it was certainly its own kind of opulent boredom.
"You're still here," came a familiar voice as Harry surveyed the room. "Interesting."

Harry glanced askance, catching the slender silhouette of Theo Nott, who rose slowly to his feet from an oversized clawfoot chair. "Sorry," Harry said, startled, "I was just—"

"Looking for someplace quiet?" Theo prompted. "I know the feeling." He tucked one hand into his trouser pocket, the other curled around a glass of something caramel-colored and crisp. "You stayed," he noted.

"Not for long," Harry said, and then gestured to the glass. "Thought that was illegal."

"It is," Theo said, taking a sip. "But illegal and impossible to get are hardly the same thing." He beckoned Harry into one of the armchairs. "Sit."

Obediently, Harry sat.

"Would you like a glass?" Theo asked neutrally, pouring one before Harry could answer.

"No, I'm—" Harry broke off, the glass charming itself into his hand with a supple zing of motion. "Fine," he finished, but shrugged, sniffing at the liquid in the glass. "Or I'll have one, I guess."

"It appears you will," Theo agreed, falling back into the seat beside Harry. "Enjoying the party?"

"Honestly?" Harry asked, making a face. "No. Not really."

"Mm." Theo shook his head. "They're terrible. I told you you'd hate them." He took a long sip, then turned back to Harry. "What made you decide to come?"

"Remember the errand I had to run?" Harry asked, and Theo nodded. "The errand wanted to run here."

"Draco Malfoy," Theo said knowingly, and Harry looked up, surprised. "What? I can piece things together. I saw you come in with him and that dreadful Pansy Parkinson— who certainly isn't fooling anyone," he added, glancing with a silent laugh at Harry. "A woman with her degree of vanity wouldn't touch you unless she had no other choice."

"I'm insulted, I think," Harry said, taking a sip. This whisky, whatever it was, was inconveniently strong, and he didn't drink much. He coughed, sputtering up, "In any case, no, we're not together."

"Obvious enough. You're too good for that crowd," Theo said slowly, "particularly Malfoy."

Harry coughed again. "You don't like him?"

For a moment, Theo didn't say anything; merely ran a hand over the clean-shaven angle of his cheeks. "He wants something that belongs to me."

"Ah," Harry said, half-laughing into his whisky. "Daphne Greengrass," he said, and then, to Theo's arched look of surprise, "What? I can piece things together."

"You certainly can," Theo agreed, then glanced down at his glass. "We're old friends, she and I. Though," he murmured, "I was always considerably less than she was."

"Not anymore," Harry noted, gesturing around the office. "If you're trying to prove something, you've certainly proved it."

Theo swirled the liquid in his glass, considering it. "Maybe." He drained the contents, shaking his
head, and then set the glass down on the table, eyeing Harry as he straightened. "You should stay," he said neutrally, rising to his feet, and Harry blinked.

"What?"

"Stay in New York," Theo clarified. "For the holidays, at least. It's a wonderful time," he said drily, "as all the falsities are especially festive."

"I can't," Harry reminded him. "I have to go home."

Theo shrugged. "Just a suggestion."

He put his hand on the door, preparing to leave, and Harry hastily came to his feet to follow, hesitant to set his drink down on one of the glassy mahogany surfaces. "Use my office as long as you'd like," Theo assured him, pausing Harry with a single motion of his hand. "Quiet in here," he murmured, "with all the fakes and liars on the other side of this door."

Then, with an impossibly quick motion, Theo was gone, disappearing once again into the crowd as Harry remained behind, fingers clasped tight around his glass.
Was it irritating that Hermione Granger was here? Yes. Did he wish she would desist her incessant staring at him from across the room? Also yes. Had she given him a needlessly accusatory glance of suspicion? Maybe. Hard to tell. Draco was seeing suspicion on everyone's faces these days; he was constantly watching his step, wondering if this person or that one would see through him. It used to be that he'd owned the privilege of seeing nothing and nobody, Hermione Granger included (sort of). Now, though, that oh-so-exclusive social blindness might be gone by the first of January—much like everything else he owned—if everything failed to go precisely as planned.

"Let's go somewhere," Draco murmured in Daphne's ear, saying it as quickly as he could before she, ever the coquette, would inevitably pull from his reach. "Somewhere alone, just you and me."

He caught the satin of her gloved hand, drawing it towards his chest, and she gave him a breathless little giggle. "Really?"

God, he longed to kiss her. Her lips were so supple and full of sweetness, unlike Pansy's tiresome charade of elegance. Sure, he needed Daphne for a variety of reasons no one else could ever know about, but it wasn't as if he couldn't indulge in a bit of good old-fashioned wanting, too. He would've kissed her right then, propriety be damned, if it weren't for Hermione Granger staring unrepentantly at his back. She didn't look half bad, really—all done up in some frothy blue frock that made her look very nearly like a human woman instead of a pile of books under some blandly colored skirt suit—but he'd certainly known her long enough to know better.

Minus one… incident, one might say, which Draco did not presently have the time to consider.

"We could take a walk," he said in Daphne's ear, tucking a hand under her chin. "Get away from the noise."

She smiled up at him. "And what would we do there, Mr Malfoy?"

He thanked his stars she couldn't see what floated through his mind in answer. "Well," he said, "for starters—"

"Miss Greengrass," came a voice behind them, and Draco grimaced, recognizing the dry voice belonging to Theo Nott. "I do hope you've saved me a dance."

Balls, balls, motherfuckery-taint-snatched balls.

"Theo," Daphne gushed, releasing Draco to take Theo's outstretched hand. "You know Draco Malfoy, don't you?"

"I know everyone," Theo remarked neutrally, though he gave Draco a glance that read, unambiguously, that the forgone invitation had not been an accidental oversight. "Malfoy," he said with a nod, "surely you don't mind if I dance with the guest of honor, do you?"

"Oh, Theo, stop," Daphne said, playfully swatting at his arm in a motion of flirtation that Draco catalogued with a furtive scowl. "Flattery will get you everywhere, you know."
"I certainly hope so," Theo replied, and Daphne laughed, reaching up to curl her palm around his cheek with obvious affection.

"You don't mind, do you, Draco?" she asked, glancing back at him, and he forced a smile. "Well, wonderful, I'll have a dance with Theo and then we can all mingle, can't we? Oh, but just a moment," she said with a sigh, shaking her head at Theo. "You wait right here—I've just got to powder my nose."

"M'lady," he said, gesturing her to the bathroom, and she flitted off, leaving Draco and Theo standing together amid the crowd.

"You know," Draco said testily, turning to Theo, "you can't win her over purely by hosting elaborate parties every chance you get."

For a moment, Theo merely glanced at him, expressionless.

Then, abruptly, "Do you have any secrets, Malfoy?"

Draco blinked, taken aback. "I beg your pardon?"

"Because I really only like people who have something to hide," Theo continued, shrugging. "Otherwise, you're just... well, you're just an empty pile of money, aren't you?" he said with a hollow laugh, and Draco felt his eyes narrow. "Oh, come now," Theo sighed. "Don't all your breed of pureblood have some lurking disdain for your own wealth?"

Speaking of lurking. Draco caught Hermione's curls from the corner of his eye, then grimaced as she hurriedly moved elsewhere. She was always flitting in and out, hovering unhelpfully in his periphery; not exactly the setting he'd hoped for, and certainly not conducive to the rest of the evening's activities.

"Everyone's hiding something," Draco said, turning away from where Hermione had been to focus on Theo, who was waiting with a smug look on his face. "The richer you are," he added pointedly, "the more dastardly the secrets."

Theo eyed him for a moment, then smiled slowly.

"Perhaps you're not quite as bad as I thought," he conceded wryly, "but still, she won't choose you, you know. She's much too good for you."

That she almost certainly was, but it made no difference.

"We'll see," Draco murmured, and caught yet another glimpse of curly brown hair.

Hermione Granger did look better, he thought grudgingly, skirting eye contact with her and turning his attention to the drinks placed temptingly atop a floating tray. Granger was the studious, unmarriable type, having always avoided social gatherings while they were in school together. Draco had never seen her done up like this, nor in any place where her figure (also surprisingly pleasant, he noted with displeasure) wasn't obscured by a desk or a pile of books.

Not that he hadn't looked once. Or twice.

Which was irrelevant, he reminded himself, and certainly in the past.

At the thought, Draco promptly angled himself towards the bathroom, waiting for Daphne to return. Huffing into his glass of whisky, he longed once again for a simpler time when he might
simply snapped his fingers, removing Theo Nott and all the other objectionable distractions from his sight and thinking positively nothing of it.

oOo

"Oh," came Daphne Greengrass' voice as Pansy looked up from the mirror, turning at the sound of the bathroom door. "Hello," Daphne said, looking flushed. She'd obviously been dancing, her hair in a perfectly lovely state of disarray, and there was the faintest sheen of perspiration on her cheeks. "Awfully hot in there, isn't it?"

Pansy, of course, wouldn't have known. Her date had mysteriously disappeared, which was why she was here, fixing her mother's strand of pearls for the eighteenth time. She said nothing in reply, though that didn't stop Daphne from wandering over to pause beside her, eyeing her reflection in the mirror.

"Good heavens, I look a fright," Daphne said, continuing to talk to herself as she sorted through her clutch. "And the lipstick I bought is no help, honestly. You should take it," she suggested, holding it out to Pansy. "Suits your coloring much more than mine. That's a lovely dress, by the way," she added, lipstick still extended, and Pansy glanced down at the little gold cylinder.

She thought, unhelpfully, of Daphne putting the color to her lips, stroking along the bow of them; she pictured Daphne pursing the swells of them together, blotting them lightly, eyeing the finished product in the intimacy of her vanity.

"I'm also quite sorry to hear things didn't work out with Draco," Daphne said, obviously attempting to cover her discomfort with the topic as her fingers continued to clutch the little tube of lipstick. "If you'd like me to keep my distance, I would, of course, I just… Well," she sighed heavily, "I haven't had the chance to speak to you about it. And really, I don't even know how appropriate that is, to be honest, but I simply thought—"

Pansy stepped forward, watching Daphne's breath promptly falter at the motion. She reached for the lipstick, letting her fingers flutter above Daphne's hand, and then let her gaze rise to Daphne's face, watching her apprehensively moisten her lips.

"Thanks," Pansy said, her fingers closing around Daphne's. For a moment, she let her hand linger there, her gaze floating wherever it liked—from Daphne's lips, parted and breathless, to the neckline of her gown, down to the dropped-waist silhouette and back up—before taking the lipstick from her, stepping away.

"Don't mention it," Daphne said with a heavy swallow, all the brightness dulled to breathy confusion.

Then Pansy swept past her and pushed open the door, the tiny gold tube pressed tightly into her palm.
"Well, that was utterly hopeless," Draco said, half-tossing his fork down on his plate over breakfast. "Obviously I can't go home yet. We're going to have to stay a few more days."

Harry gritted his teeth. "You can't be serious, Malfoy. It's nearly Christmas, and—"

"You were there, weren't you?" Draco demanded in his sulky, pampered way. "She spent nearly the whole night dancing with that Nott lunatic. I can't possibly leave now," he sniffed, sinking back against the chair. "I'd lose her, and that simply can't happen."

"Have you considered that perhaps you can't actually trick her into falling in love with you?" Harry said, shoving his plate away from him. "Maybe she's already seen who you are," he suggested irritably, "and decided she doesn't care for it."

"Oh, shut up," Draco snapped, fussing with his food. "Nott's having another party and he's actually invited us to this one, so we're going to have to stay at least another couple of days. During which time you should really have your clothes altered," he added, sparing Harry a look of contempt. "I can't continue being seen with you like this, it's revolting. I can't even eat," he muttered, rising to his feet and tossing his napkin down. "I'm distraught, Potter. I can't possibly come home now!"

"Another party?" Harry asked, immediately suffering a wave of near-sickness. The alcohol he'd drunk the night before bubbled promptly in his chest, returning him to a shudder of repulsion. He hadn't cared for the noise or the drinking, and nor had he much liked the way Theo Nott looked at him; like he'd been peeling away the layers of him, one by one. "I'd really rather not—"

"Nott insisted you be there," Draco cut in firmly, and Harry grimaced. "Hell if I know why, but he specifically mentioned you by name. You'll have to come, or I won't come home at all," he warned, and Harry, really quite sick of the ongoing tantrum, rose to his feet, preparing to exit the hotel suite. "Where the devil are you going?"

"Out," Harry said flatly, and reached for the Harkaway's apparition portkey, transporting himself into Woolworth market just outside the hotel for a much-needed breath of air.

"Harry?" someone asked, startled, and Harry glanced up, spotting the source of the voice after a moment of trying to place it. "Harry, hi—it's Hermione Granger," said Hermione Granger, heading excitedly towards him and sounding as if she thought (incorrectly) that perhaps he didn't remember her from school.

"Hermione, of course," he said. "I thought I'd seen you last night, but then I just assumed—" He broke off, not needing to get into the many ways he'd been questioning his sanity over the previous evening, which had certainly not been limited to the brief motion of curly brown hair he'd assumed was some sort of stress-induced phantom. "What are you doing in Woolworth?"

"Oh, um… visiting a friend," Hermione said brightly. "Do you know Daphne Greengrass?"

Harry was beginning to think if he heard the name Daphne Greengrass come from anyone else's mouth, he might start to lose his wits.
"I do," he said slowly, and upon further consideration, wondered if maybe this might not solve his
problems. "You know, I'm here with a friend, too," he told her, hoping to make the misnomer of
'friend' sound even remotely true. "Draco Malfoy, actually, if you remember him—"

"Oh, are you?" Hermione asked, sounding curious. "My goodness, I haven't heard heads or tails
about him since we left Hogwarts. How is he?"

"Well, perhaps you could ask him yourself," Harry suggested, quite certain this was the inception
of a brilliant plan. "We could get dinner, the four of us? Might be nice to all catch up, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, but that'd be wonderful," Hermione exclaimed. "I'm sure Daphne would love that!"

"Excellent," Harry judged, mentally upgrading the plan from 'brilliant' to 'impending success.'
"Tonight, then? At the Harkaway?"

"Yes, sounds perfect," Hermione replied brightly. "I'll just go tell Daphne, then!"

There, Harry thought, smugly conclusive. Now they wouldn't have to wait for another of those
wretched parties, and if all went well—that is, if Draco was remotely as persuasive as he claimed
to be—they could head home. He wouldn't even have to see Theo Nott again.

Which, Harry reminded himself, was a good thing.

Probably.

A brief spark of opposition caught somewhere in the joints of his limbs, but he nudged it aside.
"See you tonight," Harry said cheerfully, waving farewell as Hermione ventured off in search of
Daphne. He, meanwhile, decided he should probably tell Ron's mother to make that treacle tart
he'd always loved, as he would surely make it home in time for Christmas.

OODOO

Draco Malfoy almost certainly had a secret, and Hermione was going to sort it out, whatever it
took. Even if that meant having dinner with him, though she doubted she'd stomach much in his
presence. Even if it meant dressing up like a silly little socialite doll to sit silently next to Daphne.
Even if it meant staying up all night poring over his financial records, which she'd definitely
already done—and which she now regretted, finding it immensely difficult to keep her eyes open.

Daphne was carefully fluffing her golden curls, eyeing herself in the vanity as Hermione struggled
to remain upright. "You don't really think it's Draco Malfoy, do you?"

Oh, she most certainly did. He'd proven well enough he didn't have a well-meaning bone in his
body, though she hadn't the faintest idea what he'd need Daphne's money for. A thrill, maybe?
Hermione had never understood rich people or purebloods, and Malfoy was both. However, as she
was a professional, she kept that to herself.

"I just think we should approach every angle," she said, and Daphne gave her a grateful nod.

"I have to say, it's nice having you around," Daphne mused, spritzing on some perfume and
adjusting the butter yellow evening gown that shouldn't have looked good on her, but somehow—
whether magically or via petitioning the devil, Hermione couldn't say—was absolutely perfect. "I
was getting a bit lonely with only boys for company."

"Don't you have a sister?" Hermione asked, and Daphne turned to her with a smile.
"You really did your research, didn't you? Yes, I have a younger sister," she confirmed. "She married her childhood sweetheart a couple of years ago and used her portion of our inheritance to buy a quiet little farm upstate. She never was one for excitement," Daphne said with a wistful sigh. "Sometimes I'm quite lonely without her."

"Don't you have friends here?" Hermione asked, frowning. "Surely a girl like you would be popular in the city."

"Oh, I don't know," Daphne demurred with an airy shrug. "The men are quite friendly, but the women seem a bit resistant to invite me places. I suppose I just haven't made a very good first impression," she sighed. "Pansy Parkinson seems to hate me most out of everyone, though I suppose I can't blame her."

"That's just what Pansy's face looks like," Hermione assured her, dismissing Daphne's jarring lack of self-awareness in favor conspiring briefly on the subject of the only person she detested more than Draco Malfoy. "Don't take it personally."

Daphne gave Hermione a warm look of gratitude. "What about this Harry person you mentioned? Is he a friend of yours?"

"Well—" They weren't *not* friends, though Harry had mostly kept to himself, and so had she. "Yes," she said, figuring that was the easiest response. "Yes, we knew each other at university."

"And Draco, did you know him as well?"

"A… bit," Hermione said faintly. "Enough to have questions about his interest in you," she determined, and Daphne rose to her feet, frowning slightly into empty air.

"I do hope he's not up to anything," she lamented. "He's very handsome, isn't he? And charming."

Yes, Hermione thought. When he's looking at you, it's like the sun is shining, but then he looks away and you realize it was never really there. It was only ever an illusion, and then, right when you thought you were seeing him clearly, he was gone.

"Well, we'll see, won't we?" Hermione said with a false brightness, gesturing Daphne to the door.
Harry may have been an annoying little pest, but damn if he wasn't useful. Draco fussed with his waistcoat, checking his watch twice until Daphne and (unfortunately) Hermione arrived, Draco's hand smacking into Harry's unsuspecting torso to prompt him inelegantly to his feet.

"Miss Greengrass," Draco offered warmly, sparing Hermione the least acknowledging glance he could summon. "Miss Granger, hello."

"Hi, Harry—and Malfoy," Hermione said rudely, blatantly dismissing Draco (who couldn't possibly have cared less) before taking a seat beside Harry. "Thank you so much for the invitation."

Invitation. Drat. Perilously straddling the line between having everything and losing everything meant that Draco often forgot the issue of being expected to pay. Draco glanced at Harry, remembering that he, at least, had a thousand galleons expressly for the occasion, and let out a furtive breath of relief. This had been Harry's stupid idea, anyway. He could cover the cost of dinner—which was going to be exorbitant, if Daphne's choice of starter was any indication. Oysters at this price had better contain pearls.

Still, Draco lamented internally, it was always going to have to be done, as the only thing that attracted money was money. It was the same principle as attracting flies to honey, though that had never made any sense to Draco. He'd certainly seen plenty of flies on manure.

"So, how long are you here?" Hermione was asking Harry, jolting Draco back to the conversation.

"Not long," Harry said. "Malfoy and I are heading back soon, actually, just until—"

"The end of the month," Draco cut in firmly, slicing Harry a glare as Daphne blinked, surprised. "I hope you don't have any plans for New Year's Eve," he told her with as suave a smile as he could manage, though the effect was swiftly diminished by further idiocy from Harry.

"But I thought you said—"

"Not now," Draco hissed to Harry, glancing back at Daphne. "Through the holidays, as I said. Anyway, what were we saying?" he mused, attempting to change the subject. "Ah yes, oysters—"

"That's a very specific timeline you have," Hermione noted, prompting Draco to bristle with annoyance. There was nothing worse than how positively little she missed, and while it was probably nothing more than some retaliatory method of punishing him via irritation, it certainly wasn't helping his growing paranoia. "Gone by the first of January, Malfoy? And here all of London's been saying you've no intention to return."

"Well, I do," Draco said impatiently. "Just not quite yet. Anyway, as for the oysters—"
"How long has it been since you've been home?" Hermione asked, pointedly batting her lashes at him. "I'm surprised your parents haven't summoned you back—aren't you expected to take over your father's business quite soon?"

"What an interesting theory," Harry muttered, and Draco kicked his shin, silencing him (sort of) as he let out a loud groan of pain.

"My goodness, are you alright?" Daphne asked Harry, who shot Draco a grimace.

"You know, I'd heard Malfoy Enterprises wasn't recovering quite so well from the war," Hermione continued, tapping her mouth. "Though… obviously that can't be true, can it? After all, look at you," she said with the falsest smile Draco had ever seen her produce, and he promptly rose to his feet, seconds away from losing his temper.

"Bathroom," he said flatly, and stalked away, stopping only once he was out of sight.

Damn her.

Damn her.

How could she possibly have heard anything? There were no rumors, he'd made sure of it. What could she know? They couldn't possibly be innocent comments… could they?

He flinched as he heard her voice behind him. "Malfoy—"

"What are you doing?" he growled, rounding on her. One of the waiters passing by paused to frown at them, and Draco took Hermione's arm, pulling her behind the velvet curtain of the kitchens.

"What are you playing at, interrogating me like that?"

"It's called conversation, Malfoy," Hermione snapped, "and don't manhandle me. I know you're up to something," she warned, her brown eyes narrowing. "Something's not right, and believe me, I do plan to get to the bottom of it."

"You. Are. Impossible," he hissed at her. "You're doing this on purpose, aren't you? You're out for revenge now, is that it?"

"Revenge, really?" She scowled at him. "Have you completely lost your mind?"

His temper was boiling over, no less heated than the kitchens themselves. He swiped at a bead of sweat on his forehead, advancing to press her against the beams of the threshold.

"Stay away from me," he warned in the most quietly dangerous voice he could summon. "Do you understand me? Don't go shoving your bushy little head into my affairs, Hermione Granger, or there'll be hell to pay."

"I'm not afraid of you, Malfoy," she spat, staring defiantly up at him. "Whatever you're hiding, I'm going to find it."

God, she was infuriating.

"You're a spiteful little shrew, you know that?" he said through his teeth.

"And you're a bloody pompous toadstool," she shot back with a scowl.

From this angle, he was uncomfortably conscious of her breath rising and falling, their chests inches from each other as he leaned heavily on the hand he'd rested behind her head.
"Stay away from me," he repeated, his voice an uncomfortable rasp.

"Not. A. Chance," she said hoarsely, slicing it out like a knife.

Fine. He could win Daphne Greengrass with or without her watching. He'd done just fine before, and it certainly made no difference now whether Hermione Granger was there or not.

Probably.

oOo

"Well," Daphne said, glancing up at Harry with a smile. "What's your story, then?"

"No real story," Harry replied absently, glancing around for Draco and Hermione. "Just here for a visit with Draco. By the way," he added, determining he could certainly hurry this whole charade along if he put his mind to it, "he seems quite fond of you. If you wanted, I could—"

"Well, hello," came a dry, cheery voice, the narrow figure of Theo Nott falling into Draco's seat between Harry and Daphne. "Marvelous I caught you both."

Immediately, Harry experienced a series of unpleasant sensations; something vaguely tight in his chest, followed by something close to indigestion near his stomach.

Rats, he thought.

"Theodore, you rascal," Daphne said fondly. "What fresh chaos have you brought, hm?"

"Oh, very nearly none," Theo said, though he had already removed two champagne glasses from the enchanted pocket of his waistcoat before shifting, upon further consideration, to pull out a third. He conjured a bottle from one of his other pockets, charming it to pour itself as he winked at Daphne and turned towards Harry. "You're still here, I see."

"For the time being, yes," Harry managed to say, recalling Draco saying they'd been invited to something and opting not to mention it. Theo raised a brow, sliding a glass his way, and Harry permitted a glance, but didn't drink. "Is this your business, then?" he asked, gesturing to it.

"What," Theo said innocently, "luxury? Finery?"

"Havoc," Daphne corrected, resting her hand on his arm as she picked up her glass for a sip.

"That's the one," Theo agreed, sparing her an indulgent look. "Well, I won't keep you," he said, interrupting before Harry could assert that no, he'd meant alcohol, but fine. "Do join me tomorrow for a swim, won't you?" Theo asked Daphne, and she hurried to nod her enthusiastic assent. "Bring whoever you like, we'll make a day of it. This one, even," he said with a laughing glance at Harry, "if he's still here tomorrow, that is."

"A swim?" Harry asked, utterly bemused. "But it's freezing outside."

"Oh, Theo's got a marvelous pool," Daphne said with delight. "Really, it's a treat, you'll have to come."

"Yes. Have to wow you with something, otherwise what's all the money for?" Theo said drily, rising to his feet as Draco and Hermione reappeared. "Ah, I see your companions have returned. Tomorrow?" he asked Daphne, who smiled in confirmation. "Wonderful. Tomorrow, then."

Theo tipped his hat at Harry, sparing him a glance beneath the brim of his hat and prompting him
to another shudder of uncertainty. Theo Nott, whatever else he was, had a sort of quiet violence around the eyes; a sense of something hardened over time. He also seemed to know the value of only letting them land from time to time.

Then, of course, he was gone.

"Sorry, sorry." Hermione said, looking slightly flushed and out of breath. "Would you believe there was a line?"

Draco gave a grunt of something similar, watching Theo go. "What did Nott want?"

"I have no idea," Harry said, and he didn't.

Though, as it happened, he suffered an uncomfortable compulsion to find out.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: finally headed home today, so will hopefully be back on track by monday. grieving is hard. see you tomorrow!
Harry Potter must have been preternaturally lucky. How else was he getting all these lavish invitations? Pansy made a mental note to lend him some serious consideration. Maybe he wasn't all that much to look at, but there was something to be said about a man who opened doors—even if those doors led, yet again, to an extravagant Theo Nott party. This time, an enormous swimming pool was the central feature inside of a glass atrium lined with private cabanas, a live band playing in the corner and drinks flowing freely from spouts along the walls.

Draco had insisted she join them again—a seemingly unnecessary request that Pansy intuitively understood, much to her chagrin. Draco was old money, a polished jewel who looked best against a vintage setting. Against all the flash of Theo Nott's wealth, by contrast, he tended to look stuffy and conservative. Standing with Pansy and Harry meant that Draco would outshine them both, ever the life of the party.

To her surprise, however, Draco's shimmer dimmed upon spotting someone in the crowd. "Damnit," he seethed, "Granger's here again." His hand shot out for a drink, downing it in one go, and then he thrust the empty glass into an unsuspecting Harry's hand. "Must go. See you later," he said, running a hand over his slicked-back hair and painting an elaborate smile on his face before heading into the crowd.

"Well, this is terrible," Harry said, glancing uncomfortably around at the blinding jewels and scantily-clad women being chased by ludicrously delighted men. "I've changed my mind, I'm going home."

"Oh, don't be such a ninny, Potter," Pansy sniffed, making her way towards one of the champagne spouts and gesturing impatiently for him to follow. "You'll have to get used to it, you know."

"I certainly will not," Harry mumbled to his shoes. He hadn't even worn a bathing costume, which was ridiculous. Pansy was going to require alcohol just to look at him. "I don't see why Draco doesn't just propose already, if that's what he wants."

Pansy's mouth tightened. "I suppose he wants to be certain, Potter. It's not unreasonable."

Unlike everything else Draco had done that year, she amended internally, which continued to be mystifying. Sure, the sex had never been particularly good and they'd really only got on from time to time, but still. It had been abrupt, to say the least.

"Why can't he just invite Daphne to London?" Harry continued to complain, dodging out of the way as a gaggle of squawking girls darted past. "He's plenty influential there. Does he have to try to win her affections here, of all places?"

Never mind her initial approval, Pansy sighed to herself. Harry Potter was an infernal menace.

"Just drink this and be quiet," Pansy said, thrusting a glass of champagne into his hand and turning
towards the pool. It was charmed, clearly, the water probably perfectly warm. This would have cost a fortune; one that Pansy certainly had herself, though her allowance was controlled by her father, and it had already been restricted twice this month. He was the conservative type, as bankers usually were. Unfortunately, that meant no purchasing of her own swimming pools.

Harry took a sip of his champagne, considering it. "Huh. That's good."

Good. That would keep him quiet for a bit. She only needed him as a silent fixture at her side, anyway. The more people saw her with him, the better.

That is, until something across the room caught her eye.

"Wait here," Pansy said, shoving her glass into his chest, and Harry frowned down at it.

"Where are you going?"

"To fix my lipstick," she murmured, watching a certain petite blonde hurrying to slip inside the privacy curtains of one of the cabanas.

Daphne couldn't help a gasp, suffering a wave of relief as it was only Pansy Parkinson who'd entered and not Draco or Theo, who might've caught her in quite a compromising position. "Oh," she exhaled, relieved, "good, it's just you. Can you help me?" she asked, gesturing behind her. "I think the material caught on something, the strap's just torn. I was trying to repair it, but I can't quite see it—"

"Of course," Pansy cut in, stepping forward. She smoothed a hand over the strap, stroking lightly, and Daphne shivered. "Are my hands cold?"

"No," Daphne said, hoping to keep her voice steady. There was something very odd about Pansy Parkinson; something that made her feel unnervingly unmasked. "Thank you," she said gratefully, turning around once Pansy had murmured a charm to fix it.

Pansy looked fashionable as ever, this time in a suit of kelly green. She really did have the most flattering figure, Daphne thought. It was truly a wonder Draco had ever tired of her; it was, truth be told, the only thing about him that was giving her pause.

"Oh," she noticed, recognizing the shade of crimson on Pansy's mouth, "you're wearing the lipstick, aren't you?"

Pansy's lips curled up, pleased. "You noticed."

"Well, how could I not?" Daphne asked, employing a little half-laugh. After all, she wouldn't miss that sort of thing. "It looks absolutely stunning on you. In fact, I—"

She broke off, startled, as Pansy stepped forward, coming so close to Daphne she felt quite certain she might fall. "Oh," she said helplessly, her breath quickening. "Sorry, I. What was I saying? I was just..."

She trailed off as Pansy's fingers drifted out to her collarbone, tracing the line of her clavicle, and rose to her jaw. She was quite certain she ought to run, or possibly to scream, but her voice seemed to be momentarily trapped somewhere behind her tongue, which tentatively slipped out to moisten her lips. Maybe this was just how English girlfriends behaved.
"Pansy, I was thinking," Daphne attempted to say, Pansy's fingers curling under her jaw, "it's really quite silly we aren't friends. It can be so lonely in the city, really, and if you could find it in you to give me a chance, perhaps I could—"

"Be quiet," Pansy interrupted, her gaze falling to Daphne's mouth, and Daphne blinked. "Don't say a word," Pansy murmured, and then she leaned forward, enveloping Daphne in the scent of honeyed flowers as her lips brushed Daphne's, delivering her to a shiver. It should have been strange, Daphne thought, or perhaps invasive, but it wasn't. She felt her sensations wander from Pansy's lips, supple and sweet from champagne, to her touch, tentative at first, before settling comfortably into the kiss.

Pansy's tongue darted out, delicate and soft, her lips continuing to pulse against Daphne's. When Daphne shivered, returning the motion with an experimental slip against Pansy's lower lip, the kiss grew insistent; almost desperate, with Pansy's hands digging tightly into Daphne's waist before rising, finding her breasts. Pansy's fingers pinched lightly through the fabric, toying with her, and a rush of excitement paired with the quickening of their heated breaths, the pace of Pansy's kiss suddenly feverish and unrelenting.

Daphne felt a gasp escape her, startled by the heat of a sudden, forceful ache from somewhere at her core, and that was enough to wake her to astonishment. She tore abruptly out of Pansy's grip, backing away. "I… I can't, I don't…" She sputtered, "Pansy, I—"

"Don't tell anyone," Pansy warned sharply, taking a step back. She was gloriously threatening, and in response, Daphne's pulse hadn't stopped racing. "Not a soul."

"I won't," Daphne said, the words leaving her in a helpless whisper, and Pansy turned and left.

Then Daphne lifted a hand to her mouth, pressing her fingers to her swollen lips and sinking, weak-kneed, into the chair behind her.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: the portmanteau you're looking for is 'parkgrass.' thank you again, so much, for your support. I really appreciate the kind messages you've left for me!
"Alone?" Theo asked, and the unmissable head of unruly dark hair turned to reveal precisely the man he'd guessed it had been. "Pity, that," he said into his glass, and Harry's eyes narrowed, caught somewhere between suspicion and curiosity. Good, Theo thought. So he wasn't an idiot, then. "Walk with me."

Harry glanced around. "Where?"

"Elsewhere." Theo ventured away without waiting, dismissing Harry's hesitation and setting off briskly down a side corridor. He smiled to himself, obscuring the motion into the curve of his palm, as he heard the telling sound of reticent footsteps shuffling after him, followed by a stifled groan.

"I see you're not dressed for the occasion," Theo noted, discarding his amusement and glancing at where Harry's loose-fitting shirt had been tucked into practical trousers.

"Nor are you," Harry noted, skeptically eyeing Theo's usual waistcoat, which today had been paired with a double-breasted dinner jacket. "Unless that jacket's also a floatation device."

Theo chuckled, draining his glass and tossing it aside. Harry stared after it, obviously expecting it to break, but it wouldn't. Not here. At parties like this, Theo always used unbreakable glass. Otherwise things got messy.

Messier, anyway.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked.

"My office," Theo said with a sidelong glance.

"Why?"

"You have questions, don't you? Too loud up here for conversation."

Even from Theo's periphery, he could see Harry's frown; the man had intensely expressive brows. "What makes you think I have anything to ask you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Everyone does." Theo walked briskly to the lifts, gesturing Harry inside, and then slid down the portkey lever, transferring them to the floor below. It was significantly quieter there, and Theo led Harry down the corridor to his study, waving a hand to beckon a pair of cigars that followed after him. "Do you like jazz?" he asked tangentially, handing one to Harry.

Harry took it with several degrees of confusion, staring down at it. "Jazz?"

"Yes, jazz. Music." Theo snapped his fingers twice, once for the gramophone to commence quietly from elsewhere in the house and a second time for the benefit of his cigar, lighting it with a spark. "Doesn't matter," he ruled in lieu of Harry's answer, taking a series of quick puffs and exhaling slowly. "I've decided for you."
Harry paused, training his ear on the sound. "I like it," he said after a moment. "It's very… frantic."

"Nobody likes frantic," Theo said with a laugh, glancing at him.

"I do." Harry shrugged. "I find it relatable, anyway."

"Unsurprising," Theo said, which was something he found he meant, despite also believing precisely the opposite. He paused beside the door, prompting Harry over the threshold upon unlocking the handle. "Want me to light that?" he asked, noting Harry was still holding the cigar gingerly between his fingers. "Easier to smoke it when it's lit," he advised, and then opted to go ahead with a spark, jarring Harry a step backwards. "Magic only goes so far."

By the time Harry had recovered his footing, the cigar's tip had already begun to emit a thin wisp of smoke; Harry glanced questioningly down at it, and then back at Theo. "What exactly are you?" he asked, which wasn't at all a relevant topic of conversation, though Theo supposed it wasn't ever not, either.

"Just an interesting surface, I assure you." Theo took another drag from his cigar, blowing out a series of smoke rings that dissipated into the air of his study. "In need of a friend, as it were."

"I don't think you want me for that," Harry remarked, sniffing at the cigar's general area and then leaping back a second time as some ash drifted out from the end of it, nearly landing on his pants. "As it turns out, this really isn't my expertise," he pointed out with a grimace, and Theo took the cigar from Harry's fingers with a roll of his eyes, holding it up in the air between them.

"Here," Theo offered. "I'll hold. You smoke."

Harry flashed him a doubtful glance.

"Charmed them myself," Theo said, wiggling the cigar with his right hand and pointedly taking a puff from his own with his left. "Would be rude to refuse," he remarked to the air, smoke unfurling gradually from his lips, and Harry gave a somewhat petulant sigh, ultimately conceding to lean forward.

Harry curled his lips around the cigar, saturating the tobacco paper slightly with his lips inches from Theo's steady fingers and then inhaling with a sudden lurch of get it over with-esque fortitude, coughing it out. Smoke hovered thinly as he choked up a cloud of tobacco-tainted respiration, eyes watering, and gave Theo a sullen look of opposition.

"Good, right?" Theo said, grinning, and Harry waved a hand, cough-mumbling his opposition as he backed away. "Yeah, I know." He put Harry's cigar out on the ashtray on the coffee table, rising again to look at him. "So. Are we friends yet?"

"What do you need friends for?" Harry muttered, making a face at what was probably the ash still coating his tongue until Theo summoned a glass and placed it indelicately in his hand, permitting him to wash it down. "Thanks," Harry said, shuddering.

My god, Theo thought with relish. He was gloriously unrefined.

"Call it boredom, if you like. Call it unpopularity." Theo took another drag from the cigar, shaking his head and rounding the subsequent smoke ring into a sphere. He tapped the bubble lightly with a finger, bouncing it in Harry's direction, and suppressed yet another laugh as Harry dodged it, grimacing.

"You've got all these people upstairs," Harry said, watching the little orb of smoke dissipate above
his head. "Aren't they your friends?"

An idiotic question, really, considering the man had eyes. "Certainly not," Theo said, sparing a glare of reproach.

"Then what are they?"


"On a good day?"

"Their good days, not mine." Another slow exhalation of smoke. The air of his study was thick with it now, and Theo noted the little cough Harry had tried unsuccessfully to hide, opting to casually lean over to put out his cigar. "Sometimes they get their acts together long enough to truly disappoint me," Theo noted, "at which point I have no choice but to reward them with genuine enmity. Otherwise, they're merely faceless inconveniences."

"One might consider that a preferable alternative," Harry suggested.

"One might," Theo permitted simply, and watched Harry's mouth quirk slightly, one corner lilting up.

"So," Harry said after a moment. "You want a friend?"

"Yes," Theo confirmed.

"But not just any friend?"

"Certainly not."

"Me?"

His eyes were green. The enormity of knowing it was momentarily overwhelming.

"Perhaps," Theo said. "Perhaps not."

"And it depends on...?"

"You," Theo said, reaching for a glass and filling it slowly. "What's your story?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

Harry shrugged. "Not a very interesting one."

"No enemies?" Theo asked. "No tireless vendettas? A grudge or two to keep you warm?"

"Not really," Harry said, and added, "I suppose I'm really quite boring."

I doubt that, Theo didn't say.

"Appears so," he agreed instead, "but then, so am I." He waved a hand around as he sipped from his glass. "I do, after all, have my moments of crushing mundanity."

"Is that what this is?" Harry asked.

Theo opened his mouth to answer—of course it is, and isn't it such a privilege, really, being so
frightfully dull?—only Harry had stepped forward before he could, taking the glass from his hand and raising it to his lips. Harry took a long sip, managing (miraculously) not to cough anything up this time, and then he eyed it in the light, letting his gaze travel slowly from the caramel translucency of the liquid back to Theo's face.

"I'd hate to bore you," Harry said, voice neutrally quiet, and Theo suppressed a shudder.

"Then don't," he advised.

Harry set the glass down on the table, eyeing it. "The thing is, I'm afraid we have competing interests," he remarked, not looking up, "as one of your sometimes-nemeses is the reason I'm here."

Theo arched a brow. "You think Malfoy's one of my nemeses?"

Harry's attention slid up from the glass.

"You said yourself," he remarked, "he wants something from you. Doesn't he?"

"Everyone does," Theo said.

Harry's mouth twitched again. "Not me."

No, Theo thought, not you.

"Care to make a wager?" he asked, and Harry gave a small indication of not-disinterest. "Stay another day," Theo advised. "See if you don't want something from me by the end of it."

"I'm busy," Harry said.

Theo shook his head. "You're not."

"I don't want to stay."

"And yet you have so far."

"Only because I have to."

"Seems to me a man like you doesn't do things unless he wants to."

Harry eyed him for a moment. "You think you know me?"

"Of course not. You said yourself there's nothing to know," Theo said.

"There isn't," Harry replied.

"Good," Theo said, "then this friendship will be quite easy indeed."

"I never said we were friends."

Theo waved a hand, dismissive. "Do you accept the terms of the wager or not?"

"You never specified terms."

"Fine. Tomorrow, come here. If you see no reason to return, then don't."

"Those are parameters, not terms. Who wins or loses?"
Wasn't it obvious?

"Either we both win," Theo said, "or we both lose."

Harry blinked.

"Not really how wagers work," he commented after a moment, though he didn't sound particularly corrective.

"So you agree?" Theo asked.

Harry considered it, turning it over for a bit in his head, and held out a hand.

"Tomorrow," he confirmed, but before Theo could accept, he retracted the offering slightly. "If," Harry amended, "you tell me something. A secret. One secret of yours," he clarified, "for one day of mine."

Theo did the math, calculating the proposed values. On the one hand, his secrets were highly valuable. Probably more so than Harry could ever guess.

On the other hand, he had so very many of them that concern hardly seemed relevant.

"One secret," Theo agreed, nodding, and Harry presented his hand a second time, this time holding it steadily between them. Theo reached out, accepting his proffered grip, and closed his hand briefly around Harry's knuckles, carefully calibrating the pressure.

"See you tomorrow, then," Harry said, and Theo nodded, releasing him without pause or hesitation. He'd always been proficient at endings; he knew, faultlessly, when to let something go.

"The flat will see you to the door," Theo replied, gesturing into the self-adjusting corridor before wandering towards his desk, taking a seat behind it.

It should have been dismissal enough for someone trained to recognize the obvious, but Harry paused for a moment in the doorway, hesitating. "Aren't you coming?"

Theo glanced up from his papers. "Whatever for?"

"It's your party," Harry pointed out, and Theo let out a hard scoff of a laugh, returning his attention to the banality littering the surface of his desk.

"They all are," he said, not looking up until the echo of Harry's footsteps had gradually faded into nothing, disappearing down the hall.
"Looking for someone?"

Draco spun, irritated, and glared down at the apparently unceasing presence of Hermione Granger, whose hands sat smugly where her pale pink swimming costume was stretched luridly across her hips. The garment was cinched around the waist to accentuate her shape, the neckline a fashionable v-shaped dip against the slopes of her breasts; all of which was Daphne Greengrass' influence, surely. Draco had never seen proof of Hermione's knees, much less any curving evidence of her thighs, and was momentarily disarmed by their presence.

More distracting than the mold she'd poured herself into, however, was the expression of triumph on her lips, which was positively abhorrent.

"What do you want?" he hissed, and her smile only broadened.

"I told you," she said, "I'm going to be everywhere you are, Malfoy. Looking for Daphne?" she asked again, less subtly this time, and he dug the crescents of his nails into his palm, stifling an unpolished growl of opposition.

"That's none of your business," he informed her, motioning dismissively with his head and angling himself into a crowd of intoxicated non-Daphnes (and therefore, people of complete and utter unimportance). "Now," he said, sauntering forward, "if you'll excuse me—"

"You know, fascinating thing," Hermione cut in, darting after him as he began winding his way through the crowd. "Do you know much about Pansy Parkinson's family?"

"Of course I do," Draco muttered, trying to flick her away like a fly, but unfortunately, she was far too persistent to shoo. "I nearly married her, didn't I?"

"Yes, that's what got me interested in the first place," Hermione said, colliding briefly with a tray of champagne glasses and prompting Draco to suppress a snort of laughter as she doggedly caught his heels. "Obviously I have no interest in Pansy, seeing as she's completely intolerable—"

"Interesting assertion, coming from you," Draco said, purposely dodging a pillar only at the last possible moment, leaving Hermione to clip her shoulder on the marble.

"—but I thought to myself, why would you end your courtship so abruptly? It's not as if it would have been a surprise to you what her personality was like, and anyway, you hardly strike me as someone looking to marry for some cause as paltry as affection—"

Draco glanced at the pool, contemplating jumping in. Or drowning. Whatever it took to escape her.

"—I mean, if you'd been looking for any sort of connection, I hardly think Pansy would have been your choice. Though, clearly I was wrong about you, wasn't I? Which is another thing. You're
obviously excellent at concealing your motives, so—"

"Granger," Draco slid through his teeth, pivoting sharply to face her. "If there's a point, just make it, would you? Spare me the theatrics and just get it out!"

To his dismay, she continued to look beatifically amused.

"Fine. You want the point? Pansy Parkinson's father is notoriously tight with money," Hermione said, knowingly raising a brow. "It took very little research to discover that particular detail, you know. In fact, it's fairly public knowledge that he's already stipulated Pansy will have a carefully measured allowance, overseen by him, with no access to her inheritance until her twenty-third birthday—which," Hermione clarified with triumph, "is next October."

Draco felt his shoulders grow rigid. "So?"

"So," Hermione said with a slow smile, "that's not soon enough, is it? Not for you."

Abruptly, Draco's pulse raced.

This was a problem. And not a problem the way Hermione Granger had always been a problem. This was a new problem, and a big problem, and furthermore, it was a problem he could not presently stand to have.

"You're jealous," he spat instinctively, and Hermione blinked, startled.

"What?"

"You're jealous," he repeated nastily, watching her face contort with indignation. "I chose Pansy over you and you're looking for any reason to justify it, aren't you?" he asked, and felt a surge of satisfaction as her eyes widened in recognition, lips pressing thin. "You think it's me who's done something wrong, Granger," he murmured, leaning towards her, "but the truth is you simply can't admit to yourself that I felt nothing for you, can you?"

When her jaw dropped, he was flooded with a bitter relief, bile flooding his tongue as her knuckles grew white with rage.

"You asked me to meet you," she said, her voice a dangerous near-whisper. "You came after me, Malfoy. I told you I had no interest in you, didn't I? And you insisted."

"It was all for a laugh," he told her, the words twisting sharply in his chest. "Nothing more."

He wondered if she would believe him. She'd be a fool to do it—she was there, after all—but then again, she'd always had her own version of his irredeemable pride.

"It was nothing, period," she snapped, glowering defiantly up at him and proving him right, at best, and crushingly terrible, at worst. "I haven't thought of you at all since that night."

Leave it alone, he thought. After all, he would get away with it if he simply said nothing.

But then—

"Liar," he said, his lips and his brain in total disagreement, and her eyes narrowed, jaw going rigid as he leaned towards her. "You haven't forgotten, have you?" he said quietly, tilting his head with mockery, and she glared up at him, gaze going mean beneath her furrowed brow. "You waited for me, Granger. No point denying it."
He may not have met her that night, but he'd watched her arrive. He'd known. She'd gone to meet him in their place outside the library, all dressed in red with her hair swept back, and he'd torn himself away without a word.

Now, of course, her cheeks were as flushed as that dress, crimson with a mix of humiliation and rage, and he probably should have seen it coming, but he didn't.

He only noticed her small hands resting flat against his chest after he'd already been sent flying into the pool, careening backwards and breaking the stillness of the water's surface to watch her pale pink figure disappear from sight, arms braced tightly at her sides.

oOo

Hermione turned, face still hot with anger, to collide with Harry, who was adjusting his glasses and staring at his feet as he walked.

"Oh, sorry," he said distractedly, pausing as he registered her presence. "Is that," he began, and then frowned, glancing over her shoulder and rephrasing, "What happened to Malfoy?"

"I pushed him in the pool," Hermione said tightly, and Harry considered that information for a moment before ultimately shrugging, satisfied.

"Any reason why?" he asked. "Or just, you know. The usual?"

He was there. He was there. She wanted to say it, to shout it, to scream it; she wanted to drag Draco from the pool and then shove him under again, holding his head beneath the surface until he gurgled up an explanation, and then she wanted to do it again, that time for an apology. Then one more time, again, for fun.

"You don't like him," Hermione remembered abruptly, watching Harry glance with something that was either impassivity or amusement at where Draco was now climbing irritably out of the pool, shoving away the elf who offered him a towel. "Why come here, then?" she asked Harry, gesturing for him to follow her to the door. He conceded, letting her take the lead.

"He's a job at present," Harry said, shoving one hand in his pocket and returning to his shuffling walk. He'd always been somewhat lanky, perpetually slouched. She wasn't dissimilar herself, posture-wise, though that had been the result of heavy books. "His parents want him home," he explained, "and his mother is my godfather's cousin, so—"

"They sent you to bring him home?" Hermione said, finding it odd, though before Harry could answer, they were interrupted by the agitated presence of Pansy Parkinson. She had barreled in from nowhere, taking hold of Harry with a slightly too-familiar hand on his forearm that paused Hermione with a frown.

"Take me home," Pansy said instantly, dark brow furrowed, and Harry gave an exhausted sigh.

"First you want to come to the party, then you want t-"

"Potter," Pansy warned with thin-lipped disapproval, "this isn't the time." She glanced pointedly at Hermione, slowly manufacturing the grim arch of a falsely interested smile. "Granger," she said, looking as if she might have preferred to choke on the name. "Wonderful to see you."

Hermione raised a brow to Harry in something of a What's this?
He replied with an exhausted look of *I couldn't tell you if I tried*, and she gave a tiny shrug, about to leave them to it when Pansy's attention slid hurriedly around the room, looking for something unidentifiable.

"Is that Draco in the pool? He hates water," she noted to herself with a frown, before adding, "I suppose we see Nott before we go. Rude not to bid farewell to the host, after all—"

"He's not here," Harry said. "He's in his office."

"Nonsense, Potter, he's right there," Pansy said, gesturing stiffly, and Hermione noted with interest that Harry's expression morphed to confusion, locating Theo wandering towards a still-sodden Draco with a laughing Daphne on his arm. "With *her*, per usual," Pansy muttered with palpable venom, and to Hermione's dismay, she felt a wave of displeasure that seemed to match precisely with Pansy's tone, and Harry didn't look dissimilar.

Well, that was disappointingly inevitable, Hermione thought, watching Harry tear his gaze away from Theo and Daphne and back to his feet. Harry had always seemed pleasant enough, but he was a man nonetheless, and probably not entirely unaffected by Daphne's undeniable beauty. Hermione tucked that observation away, determining it best to head home sooner rather than later.

After all, she had research to finish. Draco Malfoy alone would take all night.

Exposing him, that is, she corrected herself with a shudder, and then she hurried away without another word, waving awkwardly to Harry and directing herself through the double doors of Theo's penthouse without even remembering her coat.

Chapter End Notes

*a/n:* and back to Commoner's Guide I go! See you late tonight with an update, hopefully.
Summary: The advent, continued.

There was nothing Hermione hated more than when pieces of logic didn't quite fit together, and this, unfortunately, was a case full of pieces that wouldn't fit. She took a sip of her disgusting Keep-Awake potion, shuddering as it went down, and sorted through the persons of interest again.

The first was Harry Potter. On the surface he was the simplest, of course, being mostly an open book, but given his proximity to the others, he couldn't be dismissed. He and Draco Malfoy had been rivals in school, so his presence here, ostensibly for Draco's benefit, was... questionable. Why would the Malfoys pay him, of all people? And if money was persuasive to Harry, might that include theft?

Hermione frowned at his portrait. "Tell me, Harry Potter," she mused quietly to herself, "what are you really doing in New York?"

"Walk with me," Theo said without preamble, disappearing from the threshold before Harry had even knocked on the door. He glanced at his raised hand, a little disarmed by the interrupted sequence, but consented to follow the sound of Theo's footsteps.

"Where are we walking, exactly?" Harry asked.

"Elsewhere," Theo's voice called from inside a room ahead to his left, which Harry entered to discover was a library. "Tell me," Theo said, startling Harry by appearing without warning at his side, book in hand, "what do you know about crisis management?"

"Nothing," Harry said, and at Theo's arched brow, he shrugged. "Well," he amended, "I'm told I have a good head for a crisis, if that helps."

"Not very panicky?" Theo asked.

"Not especially," Harry said.

"Good," Theo ruled, beckoning again for Harry to follow as he headed further into the room. "There's a problem at my club," he explained, pausing beside the library's fireplace. "We have to run an errand before I give you that secret I promised."

"So you're a bootlegger, then?" Harry asked.

"That," Theo said shortly, "is not a secret. Elbows in," he advised without transition, tossing emerald powder into the flames and taking Harry with him at the last possible second, the fireplace slurping them up and spitting them out into the room Harry recognized as the location of Theo's first party.

"Come on," was Theo's usual beckoning, his footsteps echoing into the distance as Harry wiped at the ash on his glasses, hurrying to follow. "I make most of my money from No-Majs," he said over his shoulder once Harry caught his heels, gesturing to an area that looked like a distillery, though
no machinery was involved. "They don't particularly care about quality, but I have my pride."

"You sell them magic whisky?" Harry asked, and Theo glanced at him, appearing to dismiss the question entirely.

"What's your story?" he asked. "No way you decided to come here just for Malfoy."

"His parents paid me," Harry said. "I needed the money."

He hazarded a glance askance, testing, but Theo seemed to have no particular reaction to the statement.

"Interesting," said Theo, insincerely. He seemed distracted by something else, tapping his wand on the door of his office and then proceeding directly to his desk, sifting through pages of what seemed to be something financial.

"How long have you been doing this?" Harry asked, glancing around the room, and Theo didn't look up.

"Long enough," he said.

"Long enough to what?"

That got a glimpse of something. Theo looked up, amused.

"To hate it," he said, and paused, leaning against the desk. "Are you prying, or asking?"

"Asking," Harry said. "You already promised me a secret. I don't need to pry."

Theo chuckled, returning his attention to his books. "Well, you've come to the right place for one," he said.

"Have I?"

Theo opened his mouth, glancing up, then closed it.

Then, abruptly, he took hold of Harry's arm, pulling him into the hallway and pointing to the sign above the club's empty stage.

**THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS**, read a set of illuminated letters.

"Oh," said Harry, and Theo gave another low laugh, returning to his office as Harry sighed and followed. "Look, if you want me to come back later—"

"Of course I do," Theo said absently. "The point of having a friend is to have one, isn't it? With some degree of reliability, anyway. How's Thursday?" he asked, looking up. "It'll be another loathsome party, which of course you're now obligated to enjoy."

"I might not be here Thursday," Harry reminded him.

This, despite being Harry's constant refrain, seemed to agitate Theo into motion. He set the pages down, then took several long strides to bring himself face to face with Harry. It was all so abrupt and absent of warning Harry felt himself suddenly cemented to the floor, unable to move until Theo's gaze had fallen curiously on his from no more than a foot away.

"What do you want to know?" Theo asked neutrally.
A thousand things flashed through Harry's head.

Unfortunately, "Why me?" was what fell out of his mouth.

Theo's voice was a laughing murmur. "Ego," he mused in dispassionate non-answer, tilting his head. "All the things you could have asked about me, and instead you decide to ask about yourself?"

"It'll tell me what I need to know about you," Harry countered, which was true. "Everything else I could technically glean over time."

"Assuming you're capable of gleaning much."

"Which I am," Harry said, "technically."

Theo's lips curled up slowly.

"What a talented man you are, Harry Potter," he said, and Harry fought a shiver. At this distance, he could smell the faint hint of tobacco on Theo's clothes mixing with the mint he half-imagined on his breath.

"I need someone I can trust," Theo said. "Someone who doesn't lie. You seem like someone suited to my needs, and I find it promising for my purposes."

"Who says I'm not a liar?" Harry asked.

"I didn't say I didn't want a liar," Theo corrected. "I just want someone who doesn't lie to me."

"And will you lie to me?" Harry asked.

Theo's tongue slid between his lips, moistening them at precisely the moment Harry realized his throat had gone dry.

"Only if you ask," he said, and then he pivoted away, returning to his desk.

**oOo**

Perhaps more curious a case than Harry Potter, Hermione thought, was Theo Nott. He, unlike Harry, was intensely secretive. All she could dig up about his past from his MACUSA records was the deed for a large underground basement and some tax forms, all of which confirmed the obvious—that he had made vast amounts of money very, very quickly. Perhaps that was easy enough to sort out, given what she suspected was his current profession, but still, it was too convenient to discard. Adding in his reputation for antisocial behavior (almost no one actually spoke to him at his parties, or so it seemed), it seemed an incongruous set of details.

How, she wondered, had Theo Nott come to make all that money?

**oOo**

The fireplace in Theo's office glowed brightly for a moment, revealing the slender figure of a blonde in an olive green coatdress. "There you are," said an exasperated Daphne Greengrass, tapping Theo on the shoulder. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Have you?" Theo asked, looking up at her, and then he gestured blindly in Harry's direction. "You already know Potter, don't you?"
Daphne turned, blinking with surprise as she identified Harry in the room. "Oh, Harry," she said, before peering expectantly over his shoulder. "Is Draco with you?"

"Not today, I'm afraid," Harry said. "He had some errands to run, I believe."

"Ah, well it's nice of Theo to keep you company," she said, sparing him a smile. "He's not usually the 'company' type, so you must be highly compelling entertainment. Either that," she amended with a laugh, "or miraculously lacking any of the usual irritating qualities."

"Harry's helping me through a crisis," Theo informed her matter-of-factly, cutting in before Harry could answer. "We're friends, as it were. Didn't you say I needed more of those?"

"It's true, you do," Daphne confirmed with a playful sigh, turning back to Harry with a smile. "Theo's always been the lonely type, ever since we were practically children."

"Children?" Harry echoed, surprised, and Daphne nodded.

"Oh, did he not tell you?" she said, frowning slightly. "Theo and I grew up together. Of course, he wasn't quite so fancy then," she recalled with a laugh, giving him a nudge. "I used to sneak him food and clothes," she explained to Harry, "but I always knew he'd be something one day."

Theo, Harry noted, didn't smile at the memory, nor did he seek Harry's reaction. "All thanks to you, I'm sure," he said to Daphne, who gave him a warm smile.

"Oh, hush," Daphne said, shaking her head. "Anyway, a crisis, you said? I should leave you to it, then," she told him, dusting a bit of ash from her skirt. "I have some shopping to finish, like usual—I just thought I'd see what you were up to," she explained, "seeing as I couldn't find you at your suite."

"Have to work, I'm afraid," he told her. "Not all of us have your charms."

"Thank goodness," she agreed, and then leaned forward, brushing her thumb fondly across his cheek. "Well, tomorrow, then?" she asked him. "Or was it Thursday?"

"Whenever you wish," Theo said, inclining his head slightly, "as ever."

She made a face, admonishing him with a little twist of her lips, then turned to Harry. "Do say hello to Draco, won't you?" she asked, and then she waved, bidding them both farewell and turning to the fireplace, the office suddenly quite drained of energy in her absence.

Harry noticed, too, that Theo's expression had gone slightly distant with distraction once Daphne had gone. Harry battled himself for a moment—several moments, all of him slightly in turmoil—but ultimately broke the silence when his curiosity got the better of him.

After all, it now seemed so terribly obvious.

"The money," Harry said. "This, everything. You did it for her, didn't you?"

In answer, Theo's gaze dragged slowly upwards, his eyes falling squarely on Harry's in another of his rare glances.

"If you want another secret," Theo advised, "you'll have to come back tomorrow," and where Harry should have suffered a twinge of annoyance, he felt instead a strange flutter of anticipation.

Though, at a glimpse of where Daphne had just been, he felt it quickly sour to disappointment,
leaving him with a bitter curiosity he couldn’t quite resolve.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Day 13

Summary: The advent, continued.

Hermione set Theo Nott's portrait aside, glancing at the one beside it with an irksome rush of loathing. Pansy Parkinson, of course, who hadn't left Manhattan despite losing her would-be fiancé. Pansy, whose wealth was limited by her father. Who seemed noticeably present, too.

What could be her motivation to stay?

oOo

Daphne dropped her purse with a clatter, holding a panicked hand to her chest as Pansy approached her where she stood beside the mirror.

"My word, you're quiet," Daphne muttered breathlessly to Pansy, bending to retrieve her purse as Pansy smiled thinly in reply.

"Shopping for something in particular? Or someone, I suppose I should say," Pansy amended, gesturing to the lingerie Daphne was holding up against her petite frame. A fortunate coincidence, Pansy thought, that she'd happened to spot the American heiress slipping inside from where she'd been walking down the bustling Woolworth street herself.

Well, it was luck, of course—and a bit of research about where Daphne Greengrass preferred to shop. Pansy was many things, but hardly uninformed.

Daphne's gaze darted away. "Just a little something, that's all," she demurred.

Pansy reached out, running her fingertips in muted appreciation over the silken hem of the bralette in Daphne's hand. "For Draco?" she asked neutrally.

Daphne's cheeks flushed. "I… hadn't thought about it," she informed her shoes, which were a stylish pair of heeled Mary Janes that Pansy would have coveted, were she not distracted with other things.

Pansy glanced over her shoulder, ascertaining that no one was looking, and then she gestured to one of the salon's private rooms. "Shall we, then?"

Daphne looked up sharply, eyes widening. "You don't mean—"

"Well, I need a new chemise myself," Pansy cut in innocently, summoning one from a table of silken unmentionables that had been debuted that morning for a fashion show. "And you did want us to get to know each other, didn't you?"

The turn of phrase, knowingly aimed as a challenge, was positively delicious. Pansy's bones thrilled with power, particularly once Daphne's breath visibly quickened, her porcelain hand fluttering up to her golden curls.
"I suppose that's true," Daphne said, uncertainly chewing her lip, and from there, Pansy had turned towards the changing rooms, beckoning Daphne in her wake.

She wasn't entirely sure what she wanted. She knew she couldn't forget the taste of Daphne's lips, that much was obvious, but aside from an unyielding desire to see Daphne again—to witness with her own eyes whether the effect had been diminished, only to discover that it unfortunately had not—Pansy wasn't entirely certain what she intended. In fact, it was only once she'd watched Daphne's silhouette through the curtain of her changing room that she decided.

"Let me see," Pansy called, gambling on a hunch, and she watched Daphne freeze in place.

"I can't come out like this," Daphne said, swallowing.

"Well, if you want my opinion," Pansy offered knowingly, and Daphne hesitated.

But then, of course, the inevitable.

"You'll have to… come in."

Pansy smiled, straightening her black silk chemise, and slid from her room to Daphne's, pulling aside the curtain. Unfortunately, all control Pansy thought she possessed drained when she looked at Daphne, who was wearing pettipants of an ivory silk crepe that had been lined with chantilly lace. The matching bralette, also a delicate ivory silk, slid smoothly around the creamy expanse of Daphne's rib cage, the fabric embroidered with a pattern of impossibly tiny roses.

Daphne herself, backed into a corner of her changing room, was holding her chin almost defiantly high, her lips trembling slightly. It was cold inside the salon, a visible shiver threading the curves of Daphne's body as she stood half-naked and chilled, and Pansy reached out, brushing the tips of her fingers over the pebbled skin of Daphne's décolletage.


"I worry," Daphne began, obviously nervous, and swallowed. "I worry," she repeated, with slightly more steadiness that time, "that the silk is too thin."

Pansy let her gaze drop, fingers falling with it. True, the pettipants were a near-transparent gauze of fabric. Difficult to launder, were they anything but witches. Pansy toyed with the hem, sliding her fingers under it to brush the outset of Daphne's thigh, and Daphne gave a little mewl so undeniably fearful that Pansy had to fight a laugh.

"Let's see," Pansy murmured, and slipped her palm against Daphne's inner thigh, curving around them. "Yes, I suppose there's quite little to the imagination," she said, watching her own hand rise to brush between Daphne's legs.

Her confidence faltered, however, finding an unexpected slickness there and saturating her fingers in the heat of Daphne's arousal, turning her attention to the way Daphne's breath had quickened. This wasn't her imagination, Pansy confirmed, but instead of triumph, she felt a rush of fear. Daphne had returned her kiss, and now Daphne wanted her. Wanted more.

What, then, did she want?

It seemed Pansy's hands, disembodied from her more practical thoughts, had decided for her. The lips of Daphne's sex were velvety and soft, warm and inviting, and she found herself unwilling to resist. She circled the pad of her finger against the slit of Daphne's cunt, watching the little pearls of Daphne's nipples strain against the blessedly sheer fabric of her bralette. Pansy lowered her lips
to the material, running her tongue across the silk, and in timid but undeniable answer, Daphne slid the strap of Pansy's chemise from her shoulder, fingertips exploring the shape of Pansy's clavicle. Pansy smelled her own perfume mixing with the sweet scent of Daphne's hair and marveled, lips still pressed against the silk, that anything could be so delicate, so fragile; so desperately feminine, and still with such a powerful ache she felt certain she'd swiftly come undone.

Pansy adjusted her hand, quickening her pace between the curves of Daphne's thighs, and was rewarded with the tightening of Daphne's fingernails into her spine. She yanked at Daphne's thigh, pulling her closer, and Daphne clapped a hand over her own ardent moan, biting on her palm until Pansy pulled it aside to cover Daphne's mouth with hers. She slid her tongue lightly along the inside of Daphne's lips, tasting her mouth with little pulses of desperation as she resumed her mindless circles of friction against Daphne's intoxicating heat.

"Miss Greengrass?" called the salon's owner, startling them both. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Daphne, panicked, moved to shove Pansy away, but having come this far, she certainly wasn't willing to stop. Instead, she held Daphne in place, feverishly increasing the pace of her hand, and Daphne shuddered out a silent moan.

"I'm… I'm fine," she called weakly to the salon owner, trying to hold Pansy's wrist still, but Pansy shoved her hand away, unrelenting. "I'll just, um. I'm—just need a… a minute, please—"

"Are you liking the new silk?" the owner called, sounding worried. Surely Daphne Greengrass' approval meant others would flock to the salon, and at the thought, Pansy had to fight a laugh. It was certainly effective lingerie, though given her current constraints, she would have preferred to leave it in pieces on the floor. As it was, Daphne Greengrass looked close to fainting, far more Venus than virgin; her lips were wantonly parted, head thrown back while Pansy's fingers darted inside her, then back out to circle her slit.

"It's… beautiful," Daphne managed, eyes fluttering open to find Pansy's. "Really, it's—it's such a lovely, ah—"

She broke off, finally rupturing at Pansy's touch, and shuddered so violently Pansy thought she might convulse. Her nails pierced the skin beneath Pansy's chemise, and with a stifled yelp of pain, Pansy retaliated with a hard kiss to Daphne's lips.

Daphne shoved her away, struggling to catch her breath.

"I'll take it," she half-shouted to the shop owner. "I'll wear it now, under my clothes. Charge my account, please, and see that—" She broke off, pressing a hand to her mouth as she stared at Pansy. "See that my friend Miss Parkinson gets whatever she likes, as well."

"Yes, Miss Greengrass, of course—"

Daphne fumbled for her dress, yanking it on and charming the buttons before Pansy gripped her arm to drag her from her haste, pausing her in place.

"Daphne," she said in a low voice, "if you tell anyone—"

"It won't happen again," Daphne said firmly, walking out without another word, and though Pansy should have been ashamed, she merely bit back a smile as Daphne went.

After all, that was easy for her to say, Pansy thought. Daphne would be spending the rest of the day wearing the incontrovertible evidence that Pansy had held her in her mercy with little more than a
lift of her finger—and that, Pansy reasoned, was more than enough to satisfy her.

She'd have liked to see Draco try that, Pansy mused to herself, before declining to buy the chemise, making her way out of the shop without making a purchase.

After all, the silk was obviously flimsy.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: happy birthday to my friend unicornshenanigans! May you be more celebrated today than taylor swift.
Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Day 14

Summary: The advent, continued.

Hermione was sitting on the floor, staring at a series of portraits—one of which, Daphne registered with a shudder, belonged to Pansy Parkinson—when Daphne walked into her dreadful hovel of an aurors' office, falling into the vacant seat at Hermione's desk.

"Have you found anything?" Daphne asked hopefully, and Hermione looked up with a grimace.

"Nothing, really," she admitted, shaking her head. "Draco Malfoy was my primary suspect, but I'm not sure he makes sense. I can't find any proof his family's company's made any money in the last few years, which certainly gives him a motive, but I also can't seem to find any evidence he's been behind any of the recent thefts."

Daphne grimaced, chewing her lip. "You think he's in financial trouble?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not sure, really, as Gringotts is particularly protective of their Sacred Twenty-Eight patrons. I'd have to get into his vault," she sighed, "which I couldn't do even if I had a Ministry license, Goblins are tricky that way, very private. Dangerously so," she added offhandedly, glancing back down at her notes.

"Surely there's some way to find out," Daphne said, slightly apprehensive, and Hermione frowned to herself, considering it.

"Well," she said slowly, "I suppose I could try to find out myself. He and I do know each other," she admitted with a grimace. "I have some idea how to make him talk, though I certainly wouldn't call us friends."

"I'd just feel so much better if I had some answers," Daphne lamented, glancing at her hands. After all, the sooner she had answers, the sooner she'd know who she could trust, and the sooner she knew who to trust, the sooner she could stop running into Pansy Parkinson—who, much as she hated to even consider it, had an unnerving way of getting under her skin.

She tightened her legs in an unwilling response to her thoughts, shuddering at the motion of the silk against her thighs.

Yes, she thought again, the sooner she had answers, the better.

"The thing is," Daphne exhaled, chewing her lip, "I just feel very vulnerable at the moment, and Draco's been pursuing me quite... intensely, as I'm sure you've seen." An understatement, really. Still, at least Draco's attention was something she knew what to do with; Pansy's, less so. "I know he has some interest in me," Daphne confessed, "but obviously I can't even begin to consider his proposal while he might be planning to use me."

"Proposal?" Hermione echoed, startled. "He's already proposed?"

"Well, he's certainly hinted at it," Daphne said, shaking her head. "But then, with this investigation — " And the continued existence of his former lover, she thought grimly, "I just thought..."
"Say no more," Hermione assured her, looking sympathetic. "I'll see what I can find out from him."

She shuffled through her notes, moving aside a few other portraits, and Daphne blinked with surprise, noticing the familiar faces blinking up at her. "Is that Theo?" she asked. "And… my goodness, Harry Potter, really?"

"Well, I try to be thorough," Hermione said, glancing down with a shrug. "And besides, there's something off about Theo Nott that I can't quite shake."

"Oh, but Theo wouldn't dream of harming me," Daphne said, frowning. "We've known each other for ages, since we were teenagers. I love him dearly, and he loves me."

Hermione paused, frowning to herself. "Hm," she said unhelpfully, scribbling something to herself — *motive*, Daphne managed to read, followed by, *unrequited?* and then several question marks, shoving it back into her pile of research. "Well, in any case, I'd better see what I can discover, which is hopefully something useful," Hermione said, setting down her quill and rising sharply to her feet. "Either way, it's about time Malfoy got what he deserved," she muttered absently to herself, vigorously slamming a drawer shut after checking her hair in a small compact mirror.

"My, that sounds vengeful," Daphne noted, surprised, and Hermione stopped short, seeming to have only just realized she'd said it out loud. "You're sure you don't mind talking to him?"

"No, no, I'm fine," Hermione assured her unconvincingly. "Everything's fine. See you soon!" she added in a too-bright sing-song, disappearing from the room and leaving Daphne to lean back in her chair, sighing in exhaustion.

Thoughts of Draco swam in her head, followed by the unrelenting presence of Pansy. Her lips were so soft, so sweetly insistent… Daphne shivered, shoving it aside. Likely she was only fixating because it was exciting, and because there was so little to compare it to. She'd only kissed one boy in her life, and that had been Theo.

Daphne bit her lip, contemplating it, and then leaned forward, identifying the parchment with Hermione's most recent notes and crumpling the page, depositing it in her purse. It wasn't as if she was doing anything wrong; after all, they were only notes. If Hermione remembered what she'd scrawled to herself, so be it. If she didn't, it still wasn't as if Daphne had really done anything to derail the case.

It wasn't Theo. That much she knew. It couldn't have been Theo. Worse, investigating him would only waste time, and it was Draco that Daphne needed answers about.

On second thought, she removed the crumpled page from her purse, skimming it.

*HP—family? Parents dead… money?*
*PP father (inheritance!)*
*DM no new investments, portfolio missing, M.O.? (?) NOTE TO SELF: still a tossery knob*
*TN unrequited… jealousy? love?*

"*Incendio,*" Daphne whispered, and from the tip of her wand, the page went up in flames.

Then she vanished the ash and brushed off her dress, making her way out of the office.

"You two are suspiciously quiet," Draco noted over dinner, glancing between Pansy and Harry as he sipped his wine. "What were you doing all day?"
"Went shopping," Pansy said.

"Did some paperwork," added Harry.

Draco waited for one or both of them to expound, but they clearly didn't feel the need to do so. Figured, he thought. Only the two of them could come to New York and do nothing at all worth remarking. He rolled his eyes in their persisting silence, returning to his dinner.

"Well, seeing as you're both so criminally dull—"

"Malfoy," came a voice behind him, and immediately, he felt his chest seize up with panic.

"Tell me that was a hallucination," he hissed to Pansy and Harry, who both looked up.

"Nope," said a sullen Pansy.

"Hi, Hermione," Harry added, and Draco scowled, turning to find the very hallucination he'd hoped to avoid in the form of a ruffled Hermione Granger.

"Hi, Harry," she said, voice gruffly affectionate, and then she turned her attention to Draco. "Listen, Malfoy, we need to talk."

"Oh, do we?" Draco huffed, doubtful. "I can't imagine why."

"It's important," Hermione informed him snottily, folding her arms over her chest. "Believe me, I wouldn't be here if it weren't."

"Well, that's marvelous for you," Draco said, "but as you can see, I'm very busy with my present companions. We're having din-"

"Oh, just go ahead," Pansy said impatiently, tossing her napkin down on her plate and rising to her feet. "Potter," she barked at him, "are you coming?"

Harry looked up, sighing heavily. "And what, pray tell, are we doing?"

"Throwing ourselves into the Hudson," she snapped, pivoting sharply away.

"Transcendent," Harry muttered, rising to his feet and following after her, "I can't wait—"

"Great," Hermione said firmly, pulling out Pansy's chair and taking her place just as a lean figure manifested across the room. "Now listen, I have to tell you, there's something going o-"

"NOTT," Draco bellowed frantically, and at the sound of his name, the slim silhouette of Theo Nott fell to a rigid halt, his head angling over his shoulder in the direction of Draco's voice. "Come join us, won't you?" Draco called, flagrantly feigning normality, and though Theo's eyes narrowed—and across the table, Hermione's mouth had become its most thinly pursed version—he consented to turn, making his way to their table.

"Hello," Theo said, nodding to Hermione, first, and then to Draco, looking pained by the task of speaking. "I'm very busy," he said, which seemed to be neither a greeting nor a refusal, but rather a declarative statement of information.

"Magnificent, we won't be long," Draco said, kicking the chair out for him to sit. "Granger?" he asked her. "You were saying?"

She set her jaw in annoyance, glancing at Theo, who shrugged.
"If it helps," he informed her, "whatever this is, I don't care."

"Nor do I," Draco contributed, and she scowled, sliding her chair out and rising to glare at him.

"We're not done here," she said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Is that a threat?" Draco retorted, and to his relief, she pivoted away, stomping off without a word of farewell.

"She seems nice," Theo said, watching her go, and Draco heaved an enormous sigh, the weight of his guilt settling in before her unruly curls had fully disappeared from sight.

"I did something terrible to her once," he admitted in a low voice, shaking his head.

Theo shrugged, reaching into his waistcoat for a thin glass vial that he poured into Harry's empty glass. "Probably more than once, by the looks of it," Theo said, gesturing to where she'd been before raising the glass to his lips.

"Fine, maybe twice," Draco muttered, glancing at the vial. "Got another of those?"

Theo removed a second vial, handing it to him, and Draco poured it into his wine.

"Cheers," he grumbled, raising his glass, and Theo made a face.

"I'd prefer if we didn't speak," he said, and Draco shrugged.

"Fine by me," he agreed, and leaned back in his chair, the two of them marinating in silence as they each took a sip.
"You know, you really shouldn't be spending so much money," Hermione called out to Draco, watching his shoulders stiffen at the sound of her voice as he spun to locate her amid the ostentatious Woolworth holiday decorations.

The moment his gaze fell angrily on hers (even as the rest of him turned irritably away), Hermione had to fight a smile. She knew quite a few things about Draco Malfoy, and was presently in the throes of employing three of them in particular to try to get what she wanted.

One—that he was extremely prone to accidentally revealing things under pressure.

Two—that nothing was more important to him than his family name, which often meant there was nothing more important to him than the man from which it had come.

Three—that he was an arsehole she'd once been foolish enough to almost-nearly-narrowly fall for.

(Though, there was certainly no danger of that happening again.)

(Also, that one wasn't necessarily relevant. It just happened to also be a fact.)

(For purposes of present use, she referred back to the earlier two.)

"I don't think your father would be too pleased about all this excess," she called to Draco's flustered back, and true to form, he paused for a moment, turning to face her with a grimace of displeasure.

"What do you want?" he said without greeting, forcing her to catch up to him on the sidewalk as he strode briskly and without pause in the direction of his hotel. "I feel I've made it very clear I have no interest in you, Granger."

"Hard as it is to believe, I'm not interested in you, either," Hermione informed him, half-jogging to match his lengthy stride. "What I am interested in," she panted lightly, "is whatever's going on with your company."

"Well, take a number," Draco muttered, "as I'm sure we'd all like to know."

She filed that away under 'ostensibly harmless comments which unintentionally reflect truth,' which was one of his classic missteps. It was also one of the first layers of sorting through his numerous deflective coping mechanisms, all of which she had been forced to learn after being partnered with him at Hogwarts.

"Your family's having money problems," she said declaratively, watching him stiffen in response. To her relief, his opposition caused him to slow down just enough for her to avoid a stitch in her side as she added, "You do realize you don't have to hide that from me, don't you? I'm not Pansy."

"I do not wish to discuss this or anything with you," Draco said, glaring at her. "And by the way,
that color doesn't flatter you in the slightest."

Well, there was 'blatant rudeness,' she thought, filing it away. That was deflective mechanism number two.

She was definitely onto something.

"Why New York?" she asked him. "Why not Paris?"

"Paris is full of French people," Draco replied with a sniff of displeasure, "and if I wanted to cater to the whims of pretentious artsy swines, I'd have simply had dinner with my cousins."

She plucked the word 'pretentious' out, opting to refocus the conversation.

"Well, it is quite easy to be a new person here," she admitted, certainly capable of knowing as much herself. "It's a bit freeing, isn't it?"

He slid her a suspicious glance, slowing to a meandering pace.

"What are you getting at, Granger?" he asked.

"Nothing," she assured him. "I'm just saying, if I wanted to start over, I'd do it here."

"Is that what you're doing?" he asked, changing the subject in a way clearly designed to irritate her. That was number three, or perhaps number four. It had been a while since she'd ordered them. "You know," he added snidely, "that would explain this new version of you."

She fought a roll of her eyes. "And what new version would that be?"

"You know. The one with all the socializing and the scandalous swimming costumes and the proximity to illegalities," he accused, falling to a halt so sharply that several people had to float on either side of them. "This isn't you, Granger."

"You don't know me," she reminded him. "You said yourself it was nothing between us."

"Ah, so I have," he said, obviously pleased with himself for having been clever enough to think of it already. "How accommodating of you to remember."

She dug her nails into her palms, trying not to let him distract her away from the point. That was one of his more effective mechanisms; she hadn't quite perfected a response to it, as she was pretty sure it was one of his own methods of debilitating her.

And it worked, clearly. The last time she'd been onto something, she'd ended up pushing him in the pool.

"Tell me the truth," she said, throwing him off their usual rhythm with a new move: a moment of sincerity. "After that night," she said, straining not to reveal any discomfort at the mention of it, "you started going with Pansy. Was that real," she asked plainly, "or was it for money?"

"My goodness, Granger, I'm not some sort of... courtesan," Draco sputtered, though all of his tells were going off; no eye contact, hands flailing, complete and total loss of composure. "Obviously she was a suitable match. Our families have been close for years, and as for the timing—"

"It wasn't a laugh, Malfoy," Hermione said firmly. She was gambling now, but if there was one thing to disarm him, it was definitely the truth. He never knew what to do with it. "Maybe it wasn't what you wanted, and maybe it means nothing to you now, but whatever it was, it wasn't a laugh."
He set his jaw, obviously conflicted, and then glanced down at her.

"What do you want?" he asked, and this time it was less mocking, though it was hardly warm.

"If you've done something bad," she said, hurriedly rushing it out in the spare moments of humanity he might have been willing to offer. "If you need help, Draco, all you have to do is tell me, and—"

Too far. She'd forgotten the extent of his pride, recalling it with palpable disappointment the moment his pale brow furrowed above his grey eyes.

"I don't need your help," he said flatly, turning to leave, and Hermione's hand shot out, catching his arm in the same moment he was forced to dodge a fast-walking passerby.

"Malfoy, wait, I—"

He collided with her, all of his momentum unsuscpecting pulled in her direction, and they staggered together briefly, caught in the paths of bustling New Yorkers. Irony, really, she thought with a grimace; colliding with him seemed to be as predictable as the seasons. It took a moment to steady herself, Draco's grip setting her upright away from the crowds, but then—to her immense surprise—by the time he glanced down at her again, he seemed to have softened slightly.

Maybe the crash had jarred him in some way, the same way it had unsettled her.

"It wasn't… for Pansy," he said gruffly, grey gaze sweeping over her face. "It wasn't like that. It wasn't you for her."

She looked up, surprised, and immediately regretted it, finding that his eyes on hers were the beginning of a very familiar choreography between them. He had a way of looking at her that generally left her reeling, and beneath all the layers of insincerity and subterfuge, she'd thought that had been the core of him.

That, she registered with displeasure, was a fact about him she'd clearly failed to properly calibrate.

"You're not going to leave me alone, are you?" he asked her, and she shook her head numbly.

"Not a chance," she said, and he grimaced, tearing his gaze from hers and breaking the temporary spell with his usual petulant scowl.

"Fine." He adjusted his hat, straightening his lapel and turning away. "Try not to accost me with so many people around next time," he sniffed with displeasure, and then he slid into the current of Woolworth's foot traffic as Hermione let him go, returning silently to her calculations.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: just landed in a foreign country without my suitcase. mazel! see you tomorrow my loves
Theo's affinity for rooftops was either a function of morbidity or loftiness. Perhaps he had always had a latent tendency for dramatics that hadn't been given the opportunity to surface until he could afford his own lavish sensibilities, but either way, he was drawn irresspressibly to heights. And distance.

Maybe distance was really the key.

He was standing behind the thin railing of the upper floor of his penthouse atrium, glancing moodily down at the others. Daphne had her arm looped through Draco Malfoy's, laughing brightly at something he'd said (doubtful it was actually funny) while the curly-haired English girl lingered nearby, observing. Presumably Pansy Parkinson was around somewhere, swanning about... yes, there she was, Theo registered grimly, and on the arm of—

Theo frowned, recognizing Harry Potter at precisely the same moment Harry turned, gaze rising to follow the staircase that had been charmed to pen the unruly (and unwanted) guests down below. Harry's glasses flashed in the light, glinting for a moment to obscure his attention, and then Theo blinked, finding that Harry had spotted him.

From below, Harry's mouth twisted to half a smile, nodding up at Theo, who raised his champagne glass in answer. Harry beckoned down, gesturing, and Theo shook his head, motioning Harry to the stairs. Charms could be altered; his willingness to interact with others could not.

Harry paused for a moment, considering it, and then turned to Pansy, saying something in her ear.

Theo tightened his fingers around his glass, waiting.

Then Harry slipped into the crowd. Theo, with a rousing satisfaction, flicked his wand and drained the rest of his champagne, meeting Harry at the top of the stairs.

"You know," Harry said in greeting, hands tucked into his ill-fitted tuxedo pockets, "if you want peace and quiet, you should really stop inviting people to your house."

"I should pay you for that advice," Theo said, tapping his glass to refill it and glancing at Harry's empty hand. "Care for a drink?"

"Not tonight," Harry said. "I think I've finally come to admit I don't particularly care for intoxication."

"Ah, and there it goes," Theo said, facetiously motioning to an imaginary breeze. "My last bit of usefulness to you, gone."

"Not true," Harry said, shrugging. "We're friends, aren't we? Given our recent wager."

"Are we?" Theo echoed doubtfully. "That wager was about whether you wanted something from me, not whether we were friends. Though," he amended, "I suppose that's really the same thing, isn't it?"
"If that's true, your other friends must not be very good," Harry said doubtfully.

"If I had any outside of you, I'm sure they'd be deeply insulted," Theo replied, turning to look down over the railing. "Good party, though, isn't it?" he asked, finding Daphne in the crowd. She'd worn gold, which suited her. She was always accompanied by some sort of ethereal gleam. "One of my better ones, aesthetically speaking."

Harry followed Theo's gaze, finding Daphne, and then glanced back at Theo.

"Listen, about your childhood," Harry began, and Theo scoffed.

"It's a party, Harry. Not a dull biography."

"But about what Daphne said," Harry pressed. "About… giving you things, I just wanted to tell you, I—" He hesitated, and then, "I understand. I grew up with my aunt and uncle, and my cousin. It was… not ideal," he exhaled. "My godfather and I reconnected later, but initially, it wasn't great."

Theo considered this a moment, then turned to face Harry. "Is this some sort of offering?"

"Maybe. Yes." A shrug. "The point is," Harry summarized factually, "it seemed to make you uncomfortable that I knew, so I thought I should make an effort at fairness. Now you know something uncomfortable about me."

More consideration.

Then, "What was the worst part?"

"Of being poor?" Harry asked, and Theo nodded. "The hunger. Not just for food," he clarified. "For recognition, for respect. For decency, I guess. For the right to have goals, or expectations." He leaned his elbows against the railings. "What about you?"

Theo angled his head towards Harry, pausing, and mirrored his half-smile.

It was a motion designed to indicate the sentiment: Of course you would say that.

Then Theo clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder, beckoning him to the stairs.

"Let us not have starved for nothing," he said, and Harry gave a conciliatory nod, consenting graciously to follow.

oOo

"You seem a little distracted this evening," Daphne noted, and Draco blinked, catching himself looking over her shoulder and turning his attention swiftly back to her. "She's over there," she added neutrally, gesturing to where Hermione was staring with confusion at a bright pink drink she'd just been handed in a champagne flute.

"I'm not looking for her," Draco said quickly, and Daphne arched a brow, doubtful. "Okay, fine, I was," he admitted with a grumble, "but only because I can't seem to get rid of her. I mean, I know she's your friend," he corrected himself quickly, "so, of course, but—"

"You and Hermione have a history of some kind, don't you?" Daphne prompted.

"Nothing very interesting," Draco said, hedging a little, but at his avoidance, she seemed to lose interest, her own gaze wandering into the crowd towards what Draco recognized as a familiar
weedy form. "Well, I only mean that I don't want you to worry," he told her quickly, hoping to regain her attention, lest he lose it again to Theo Nott. "After all, it's you I'd hoped to see."

Flattery, as he'd come to learn, was for Daphne, hit and miss. His attention was a ball of string she usually seemed pleased with at first, but which she easily cast aside if it failed to hold her interest. Thus, when she asked, "Well, what happened?" he felt he had no room for refusal, hesitating for a moment before finally conceding with a grimace.

"We were assigned to work together for a class our final year at Hogwarts," he explained, and she nodded, always keen to hear a story. "It seemed there might have been some… spark between us. We hated each other at first, of course," he said, and she nodded again, sympathetic, "but then—"

He coughed. She didn't need the details.

"In any case," he continued, "I asked her to meet me… romantically. She agreed, but that same day I received some unfortunate news from my father." He squirmed a little, not wanting to get into that, either. "I realized it was best that I not get involved with someone who wasn't going to be a possibility long-term."

"Oh?" Daphne asked, obviously made slightly uneasy by the statement, and Draco hurried to put her at ease.

"I was foolish then, afraid to tell her the truth. It's no wonder she hates me."

And it wasn't, all things considered. "But it's always been my job to inherit the family company, and unfortunately, she—" Another tick of hesitation. "She didn't quite fit my father's hopes for the future of our family enterprise," he summarized, as neatly as he could.

"What about Pansy?" Daphne asked, and Draco fought another grimace.

"Well, Pansy was the perfect fit, or seemed to be," he said, clearing his throat uncomfortable. "But, ah, circumstances weren't favorable."

"Meaning?" Daphne asked, arching a brow.

"Meaning," Draco said, flailing around for the right words, "that we were… ill-suited for each other. Not a very good match, personality-wise."

That, he thought, and the tiny, nearly inconsequential episode of her father casually threatening to kill his father. Which wasn't even to mention the note Draco had received that very morning adding his own name to the list of impending deaths if he didn't sort things out quickly.

Though, that wasn't particularly relevant, as the mismatched personality thing really answered the question in full.

"I don't know what to make of her," Daphne said thoughtfully, spotting Pansy in the crowd. She had just bumped into Hermione, who by then had consumed her pink drink and seemed to be seeking out another; the two were making strained, awkward conversation from a distance.

Strangely, he watched Hermione frown to herself—an expression he recognized as the look she got right before she discovered something, like an ingredient that needed to be added to a draught.

"I agree," Draco murmured to himself, watching Hermione draw a quill from her purse (which—of course she carried a quill in her purse) before scribbling something down on a napkin.

He didn't know what to make of her, either.
"Dull, isn't it?" Pansy said, obviously already a bit tipsy. "Nothing like a party with your ex and your constantly disappearing date to remind you how fleeting youth can be. God, beauty is a prison. Another drink?" she asked Hermione tangentially, then made a face. "Never mind, I'll get one myself. You know, for an American, Theo Nott makes an excellent Hanky Panky."

"A what?" Hermione asked, and Pansy scoffed.

"A Hanky Panky," she said, gesturing to the drink in Hermione's hand. "They've been charmed to match the party, obviously, and served in entirely the wrong glass, but it's definitely got amaro and vermouth. I've an excellent palette," she said with a lofty glance at Hermione, tongue slipping out to brush over her painted lips. "Very informed. Very partial to sweetness."

She paused, appearing to lose her train of thought, and then glanced back down at her champagne flute. "I'd no idea Americans even knew how to make it," she said, eyeing her glass and shrugging. "Well, bye, then," she said, wandering away, and Hermione stared after her for a moment with confusion, contemplating her comment before hurrying to write it down.

"Taking notes at a party?" came a dry voice behind her, and she jumped, startled to find Theo Nott standing idly at her side. "An odd choice of activity."

The accent was definitely American. She tried to place it, straining to identify the difference between the fast-talking split Manhattanite phonetics and the more Canadian-sounding regions from upstate, but it was difficult. She wasn't any sort of expert on the matter, though she figured she could be shortly if she drank enough Keep-Awake potion overnight.

"Just didn't want to forget something," she said, hurrying to tuck the napkin into her purse. "This is quite a party."

Theo made an incomprehensible sound of disagreement, somewhere between a 'tsk' and a 'mleh.' "It's fine," he said, taking a sip from his drink. "I've been to worse. No dead bodies at this one, at least."

Hermione blinked, jolted slightly by the reference. "Excuse me?"

"Funerals," Theo clarified, glancing at her. "I'm in what one might call the event planning business, if you hadn't gathered. Even the sad ones require libations," he informed her, turning his attention back to the crowd.

That, Hermione thought, was unnecessarily cryptic. "What exactly is your profession?"

"What's yours?" Theo countered.
"Touché, Hermione thought grudgingly.

"Just visiting," she said, and then, "I'm friends with Daphne."

"So am I," he replied.

"We've been friends for ages," she added.

"Funny," Theo said, taking another sip, "I don't remember seeing you there."

She drummed her fingers against her purse, caught somewhere between the necessity of lying and the absolute impossibility (but still, oddly tempting option) of telling the truth.

"Speaking of Daphne," she said, suddenly remembering what she'd been meaning to ask if she'd gotten the opportunity to speak to him, and he turned to look at her. "Are you two close?"

"Shouldn't you know that, friend of Daphne?" he asked, and she let out an impatient sigh.

"Fine," she said, "so we're... somewhat newer friends. Still, she's important to me." She paused, weighing his response, which was very close to nothing. "I suppose I can't help but wonder why you haven't proposed to her yourself, given how close you are."

He stiffened slightly, the pads of his fingers white against his glass.

"Daphne requires a certain kind of partner," he said, gesturing to where Draco and Daphne were dancing, "as I'm sure you might have guessed, given her current company."

"You mean the sort of partner who doesn't partake in criminal activity?" Hermione guessed, and Theo shot her an exhausted glance, as if he found her choice of retort immensely tiresome.

"You know Draco Malfoy, don't you?" he noted. "You have some sort of romantic history, by the sounds of it."

What a patently irrelevant comment, Hermione thought, bristling.

"You're not answering the question," she said.

"Aren't I?" Theo countered. "It's no difficult stretch. Tell me why you're not a proper fit for Draco Malfoy."

She blinked. "Excuse me? Who said I was—"

"Everyone," he said, "but also, no one, as such a thing would be highly uncouth to confess aloud, would it not?"

She stiffened. "Well, I never said I had any interest—"

"Correct, and neither did I," he cut in.

"But I wasn't—"

"I agree," he said with a smile. "All in all, you've made an excellent point. Miss Granger, was it?" he asked her, and she felt a sudden wave of dizziness.

"Yes," she said uncertainly, and Theo held out a hand for hers, bringing it to his lips and brushing them gently over her knuckles.
"Enjoy the party," he said, fetching another glass from a floating tray and placing it in her vacant hand. "Try not to miss anything," he advised, and then he turned away, wandering into the crowd.

oOo

"Hot out there, isn't it?"

Daphne spun to find Pansy standing expectantly behind her in the powder room, that same silken smile on her bordeaux-colored lips. She had gone full vamp that evening, her dark red gown and black evening gloves a stark and strident contrast to Daphne's lavender drop-waist dress. She strode over to stand beside Daphne, setting her purse down on the vanity and stumbling slightly, catching herself.

"Whoops," she said. "Drinks are a little strong this evening, aren't they?"

An innocent comment, only it wasn't. Heat rose in Daphne's cheek at their proximity, clearing her throat as she attempted to ignore the way Pansy was blatantly skating a gaze over her breasts.

"Don't," Daphne warned, leaning forward to apply a bit of powder to her nose, and Pansy slid a smile over her lips.

"I won't," she said. "Though I suspect you'll ask me soon enough."

Daphne scoffed lightly, glancing over her shoulder at Pansy with as much contempt as she could muster in her current state of general life confusion before returning her attention to her reflection.

"What on earth makes you say that?"

"Just a hunch," Pansy said, pulling a tube of lipstick from her purse. She wet her lips, biting softly, and then raised the lipstick to her mouth, applying a fresh coat with a tantalizing slowness. She was all sensuality all the time, Daphne thought, grimacing. Daphne might have been beautiful, but her beauty was born from perfection. It was designed and artfully curated to remain perfectly still, never disrupted. By contrast, there was something about Pansy that made her constantly in need of being unwrapped, laid bare, and it wreaked havoc on Daphne's insides.

"If," Daphne ventured with a shudder, and Pansy's dark brows rose with interest, quick to recognize the signs of an impending game. "If I were to ask," she managed to get out, "what would you offer me?"

"Hm." Pansy blotted lightly at her lipstick, turning to look at Daphne. "Well, I do have a distinct sense of fairness," she murmured, reaching out to toy with one of Daphne's curls, "so, given how things are, I'd tell you it was your turn to please me, Miss Greengrass."

Daphne swallowed. "And what pleasure would I possibly take from that?"

"Imagine how sweet I'd taste," she murmured, and Daphne fought a shiver as Pansy pulled away, leaning back against the vanity this time to angle them towards each other. "Though, of course, it's up to you. Perhaps you're tired of being everyone's little plaything," Pansy said with a shrug, turning to the mirror to adjust her lashes with the tip of her finger. "Maybe you'd like a little power for a change."

She slid a glance at Daphne, white teeth glinting as she smiled.
"You could make me beg for you," she said softly, "if you wanted."

Daphne's pulse raced in response, humming wildly in her veins.

She took a breath, then reached out, drawing her index finger slowly over the swells of Pansy's breasts; tracing the hem of her gown until the motion of Pansy's breath had ceased, withheld at Daphne's touch.

Daphne leaned forward, hand rising to Pansy's ivory throat and dancing up to her red lips, and watched Pansy's tongue drift out to brush over Daphne's fingertips.

"Then beg for me," Daphne advised, and precisely when Pansy staggered forward to touch her, she withdrew without a second glance, smiling to herself as she slipped out of the powder room and made her way back to Draco.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: In other news, I was accidentally involved in a tequila competition yesterday.
spoiler: nobody wins a tequila competition
Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Day 18

Summary: The advent, continued.

"I asked her to have lunch with me today," Draco was ranting, pacing back and forth through his hotel suite, "and do you know what she said?"

"Tell me," Harry muttered disinterestedly, flipping the page in his newspaper.

"She said she'd love to, only she already has plans with Nott," Draco snapped, glaring at Harry as if he should intuit the necessary implications. When Harry did not—due largely to his continued lack of interest—Draco clarified (angrily, and with exasperation), "She's putting me off, Potter! Always making excuses, stringing me along—it's like she's waiting for something—"

"For you to tell her how you feel, by chance?" Harry prompted, and Draco sighed irritably.

"That's not how the world works, Potter, you can't simply run around talking about feelings and just—" He waved a hand, "Maniacally confessing things, and then hoping people don't think you're an absolute lunatic—"

"My mistake," Harry said, flipping another page. "Clearly you're not a lunatic."

"I'm running out of time," Draco said, rubbing furiously at his temple and returning to his pacing. "Maybe I should just give up," he said, throwing his hands in the air. "She's not the only woman who's beautiful and rich, is she?"

Harry considered it. "Well—"

"Sure, they wouldn't have precisely her money," Draco cut in, "or quite her looks, but surely there's another similarly gorgeous pureblood who's recently inherited one of the largest wizarding fortunes on the entire continent. Right?" he asked hopefully, and at Harry's look of skepticism, he threw himself down on the sofa with a groan.

"Fine—anyway," Draco muttered, suddenly incomprehensibly morose, "even if there were someone like that, I'd still only have a week, at best."

"Why?" Harry asked, and Draco huffed something from behind where he'd clapped his hands exhaustedly across his face. "Sorry," Harry muttered insincerely, rolling his eyes, "you'll have to speak the King's English, Malf—"

"Malfoy," Harry sighed, "are you being dramatic, or are you finally suffering your long-impending psychotic break?"

Draco, unsurprisingly, wasn't listening. "Nevermind that if I'm not lucky enough for a quick death," he bemoaned with a wail, "I certainly wouldn't last five minutes in Azkaban—"

"Why on earth would you go to Azk-"
"DON'T ASK STUPID QUESTIONS," Draco bellowed, storming furiously into his bedroom and slamming the door shut.

"My goodness," Harry said to himself, returning to his paper just as the bedroom door flew open again, revealing a wild-eyed Draco in the threshold.

"I apologize," Draco said. "I appear to have temporarily lost my head—"

"I can't imagine what would make you say that," Harry said, sipping his coffee.

"—and in light of these recent events," Draco cut in loudly, "by which I mean—"

"Your continued descent into madness," Harry supplied.

"—yes, my continued desc-" He broke off, glowering. "Shut up, Potter."

Harry shrugged, taking another sip. "Go on."

"I—" Draco stopped, clearly having lost his place in whatever mystifying mental plane he was attempting to navigate and glaring at Harry before continuing on. "The point is," he announced, "I have decided to confess my affections and propose marriage to Daphne Greengrass."

"Remember when you thought that would be insane?" Harry said, chuckling to himself. "Ah, memories."

That, it seemed, had no effect on Draco.

"PUT ON A COAT, POTTER," Draco said, "WE'RE GOING OUT."

"What, now?" Harry asked, doubtful. "Right now?"

"Right now," Draco confirmed, vigorously tossing Harry his hat. "Up you go, Potter, on your feet—"

"Malfoy," Harry sighed, having clearly miscalculated, "do you even know where to find her? I mean this… this is not precisely what I meant when I said you should tell her how you f-"

"Of course I know where to find her," Draco cut in, entirely aflame with energy again. "She's with Theo Nott, isn't she? You know him," he added, tossing that in as an afterthought. "Where would he be?"

"Uh," said Harry, whose previous experiences with Theo Nott had been less enlightening with regard to his habits and personality than they had been purely baffling on all fronts. "At home?" he guessed.

"At home it is," Draco trumpeted firmly, launching Harry's coat at him and vaulting himself to the door. "Well, then, are you coming?"

Harry, who was beginning to worry Draco had, in fact, lost his mind, picked up his coat with a groan and took one last heaping bite of his breakfast.

"Leggo," he mumbled through a mouthful of toast, gesturing Draco ahead as they made their way to the lifts of the Harkaway.
"You've been busy," Daphne noted when Theo opened the door to his suite. "I hardly saw you at all last night."

He waved her inside without a word. "Drink?"

"Yes, please," she said, setting down her purse, first, and then her coat, followed by her gloves. She always removed them one finger at a time, focusing on the activity like it was a meditation. "Gin?" she asked hopefully.

"Always," Theo confirmed, beckoning her into his sitting room and wandering in the direction of his liquors to mix her a martini. She smiled her appreciation, watching him do it with her usual fondness, then proceeded to deposit herself ungracefully in one of the leather chairs of his sitting room. "How goes your courtship?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder as he charmed the contents of the glass to stir.

She sighed, prettily pursing her lips. "Oh, I don't know," she said, reaching out for the drink once he'd offered it and taking a sip, as satisfied with the drink (like always) as she was visibly uncontent with her situation. "I don't at all know what to make of Draco Malfoy," she explained moodily. "He seems perfectly interested in me, but then I worry perhaps he's hiding something."

"Be careful," Theo warned, mixing himself a drink. "There's something off about him."

"Him," Daphne agreed, "and that Harry Potter fellow. Whom you've been spending quite a lot of time with, by the way," she noted, giving him a knowing glance. "Are you even attending to your usual business? He seems to be taking up all your time, as far as I can see."

"I like him," Theo said, falling into the seat beside her. "He's a terrible fit for his surroundings, and I find it helplessly entertaining."

"Mm," she said disapprovingly, "well, I hope he's not after your money, Theo. Can't be too careful these days, it seems," she sighed. "Impossible to tell who can be trusted or not."

He slid a glance at her, arching a brow. "True," he noted without inflection, and she frowned, rightfully suspicious.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He drummed his fingers against the arm of his chair. "You're not telling me something."

"Of course I'm not not telling you something," Daphne countered. "What on earth would I not be telling you?"

"Well, I haven't the slightest idea," Theo informed her, "but I know I'm not as apprised as I should be."

She took a sip of her drink, biding her time. One of her more specialized magics, he thought.

"Is that some kind of accusation?" she asked eventually.

"Yes, it's an accusatory accusation," Theo replied. "I'm not the only one keeping secrets, Daphne."

She gave him the same impatient look she'd always given him when they were younger, before she'd learned what sort of woman she wanted to be.

"Theo," she began, about to launch into a lecture, when there came a loud, frantic knock at the
door. She sighed, beckoning for him to answer. "We'll continue this in a moment," she warned, and Theo rose neutrally to his feet, conceding with a tilt of his head.

He had barely placed a finger on the handle before Draco Malfoy came bursting into his penthouse flat, glancing wildly around.

"Where is she?" Draco barked, and Theo glanced over his shoulder to find Harry standing there with a look of tired complacency, shaking his head.

"Sorry," Harry said.

"In there," Theo replied to Draco, before adding to Harry, "No need to apologize. I love a good unraveling."

Harry's mouth did its usual unwilling quirk of a smile, and after a moment of silent consideration, Theo added, "An odd day, isn't it?"

"In my experience, it's simply called a 'day,'" Harry replied.

"You make an excellent point," Theo agreed. "Drink? I have some that will leave your corporeal state unaltered," he clarified, "if you prefer to be hydrated rather than inebriated."

Harry nodded. "Please," he said, and they followed Draco into the sitting room, finding him on one knee before a startled Daphne.

"—know this will sound strange," he was saying, and Harry and Theo exchanged a glance of muted agreement, "but truly, Daphne Greengrass, I can't possibly stand another moment without you. Marry me," he announced, and Daphne's eyes widened, Theo's own comprehension suffering a tick of lag before the words sank in. "Allow me the honor of being your husband. I know it's unconventional," Draco added desperately, "but isn't that love, in the end? Defying convention?"

"Well, he's not wrong," Harry murmured.

Theo glanced at Harry to find that the other man was watching him for a reaction. He gave a little swallow, clearing his throat, and cast his gaze to his shoes.

"Draco, I—" Daphne looked at Theo, obviously flustered. "How… unexpected," she said uncertainly, and it occurred to Theo that Harry wasn't the only one waiting for his reaction.

Still, it wasn't as if it mattered. Daphne would accept, of course. They would wed, naturally, and they would have a beautiful blonde ceremony filled with weeping, old-monied aristocrats, and Theo would cater the reception.

"Yes," Daphne said slowly, and then nodded, cementing her answer. "Yes, Draco, of course I'll marry you—"

Immediately, Draco's pale features were flooded with relief.

"Marvelous," he said, glancing over his shoulder at Harry. "I told you, Potter, I knew what I was doing."

Daphne, meanwhile, continued to look to Theo, who held up his glass. Engagements were a straightforward enough affair; he'd certainly seen enough of them to know.

"May you have a long and prosperous marriage," he offered, toasting her from afar. "Shall we
celebrate with a party this evening?"

He turned to find Harry looking curiously at him.

"Assuming you're still here, that is," Theo added in a low voice, meant for only Harry.

Across the room, Daphne's smile faltered, and Theo strode away, beginning the necessary preparations for the evening.

*Oo*

In her hotel room, Pansy opened a pale pink gift box, sliding the ribbon aside and finding with some confusion that it hadn't come with a note.

She opened the box, finding a bralette and pettipants that were identical to the ones Daphne had purchased, only these were black with green lace, the tiny embroidered roses a shade of red so deep they were nearly as dark as the silk.

"Interesting," Pansy mused, holding them up to her frame.

Yes, she thought.

These would suit her just fine.
Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Day 19

Well, fuck, thought Draco.

So he was engaged now. Magnificent. He'd have to be married shortly, and more than married, he'd have to make several large account withdrawals from his newly joint vault very soon. He shouldn't have spent so much time dragging his feet, he reminded himself, furious. He'd been distracted. Hermione Granger had distracted him, which was yet another reason he would need her to stay safely away until he'd placed the bloody ring on Daphne Greengrass' finger.

The thought of it, once more than appealing, sent a little shudder of apprehension up his spine. The stakes had always been high, but they were becoming increasingly difficult to stomach. He thought of the note he'd received and grimaced with revulsion.

Better work fast, Malfoy, or you won't wake to see 1926.

He'd been so lost in his own thoughts he scarcely noticed before bumping into someone on the street outside the Woolworth department store, nearly knocking them both into the horrific Christmas pageantry they were calling a display.

"Sorry, so sor- Oh."

"Oh," he unhappily agreed, glancing down to realize he'd once again collided with Hermione Granger. The cause, naturally, was that she was looking down and taking notes as she walked, reading a book in one hand and scribbling with a charmed quill in the other, and she looked up at him with the expression of distinct distraction he recalled as yet another version of her thinking face.

"Did you know there's an English Theodore Nott?" Hermione asked, glancing up at him, and Draco frowned, bemused. He attempted to step to the side, circumnavigating her, but she merely moved with him. "He's too old, though," she said, shaking her head before returning her attention to her notes. "Plus he died over a decade ago, so no point looking for him."

"That's all fine and good, Granger, but I hardly think I'm necessary for whatever this little project is," he informed her, taking another step that she again matched, "so if you could please remove yourself from my path—"

"What? I'm waiting for you to move," she said, bewildered. "I was… I thought—"

She glanced up, grimacing.

"Oh," she said, pointing upwards, and he winced, suddenly comprehending the issue even before he located the absurdly impractical sprig of mistletoe that was hanging from the Woolworth department store balcony. "This is a safety hazard," Hermione said indignantly, shaking her head and taking a step back that rapidly prompted Draco forward. "Someone should really inform the Office of Wizarding Decorations! Spelled mistletoe can be incredibly potent, and—"

"Granger, please," Draco muttered, rubbing furiously at his temple and hoping she'd do him the
very great favor of neither lecturing him unnecessarily nor continuing to move. "I'm tired, I'm engaged, I haven't eaten in about four hours, I have a party to get to and I can't find my good socks —"

"Sorry, what?" she cut in, startled. "Did you just say you were engaged?"

"Yes," he said, bristling from a sudden wave of irritability, "to Daphne Greengrass, obviously, and while we're on the subject—"

"Oh." She blinked. "Did that… just happen?"

"What? Yes," Draco said, impatiently waving a hand. "I just left her to go make sure my tuxedo for the evening was properly starched—"

"Oh." Hermione's brow furrowed, all her motions coming to a halt. At least she was standing still now, Draco thought grudgingly, though he wasn't sure at all how to read the latest expression on her face. "Well, congratulations, I suppose," she told him, forcefully ridding herself of her hesitation. "You'll be very, um… blonde together," she determined, and lifted a hand for him to shake. "Congratulations, Malfoy—"

"Granger, for heaven's sake, it's mistletoe," Draco reminded her, swatting her hand away and gesturing upwards again. "If you ever want to move independently again, we'll have to simply kiss and get it over with—"

This, like all things he said, was clearly the wrong thing to say.

"I can't kiss you," she said, rapidly transitioning from astonished to aghast. "You're… you're betrothed to another woman!"

"It's not a romantic kiss," Draco informed her, rolling his eyes. "It's just a… greeting. Like a hello, goodbye, many happy returns, et cetera. You won't even notice," he advised.

"Well, what if you notice?" she retorted. "And besides, maybe I happen to keep my lips to myself for all felicitations!"

"My god, Granger, you're impossible," Draco snapped. "This doesn't have to be difficult—"

"Like hell it doesn't, Malfoy—"

"Listen," he growled, "just… close your eyes—"

"I will not close my eyes! That's wildly intimate!"

"Fine, then leave them open—"

"Well, now that's simply unnatural. Do you have to look at me like that?"

"Granger, for the utter love of—just come here," he snapped, taking hold of her shoulders and dropping his head to press his lips to hers for a quick pulse of pressure. "There," he said, suddenly furious for reasons he could neither immediately comprehend nor wish to process. "See? That's it. It's just a kiss."

"Malfoy," Hermione said, and he glared down at her.

"It's nothing," he told her. "We've kissed before, haven't we? And this was nothing like that."
"Malfoy, I'm just trying to—"

"That kiss was passionate," he informed her, breath quickening a little at the thought of it; at the way her hair had been glowing in the low light of the library when he'd let himself get caught up in the moment, foolishly asking her to meet him the following night. "That was spontaneous, unplanned. That kiss was undeniable, and this is just… this is nothing. Less than nothing," he feverishly assured her, and she nodded slowly, overlarge eyes wide. "This doesn't mean anything."

"Malfoy," she said, more quietly that time, and he shook his head.

"I'm just saying, whatever we had before, it's gone," he told her. "It can't happen now, and it has to be over. It has to be done, do you understand? Because I have to do this. I have to, and if I don't—"

"Malfoy—"

"—I couldn't even begin to tell you what would happen if I don't, and—"

"DRACO," Hermione cut in, exasperated, and that time he blinked, looking down at her. "I was just trying to tell you that you can let go of me now," she pointed out, removing his hands from her waist and taking a step back, pointedly unhindered.

Inexplicably, he felt distance come between them like a measurable loss; at least of certainty or conviction, if not of warmth, draining from his entire constitution.

"Oh," he said gruffly, pressing his mouth thin. "Well. Good, then."

"Yes," she said, frowning up at him. "Though, at the risk of upsetting you—I have to ask," she ventured, tentative, "if something's going on—"

"I have to go," Draco said flatly. "I'm going to be late to my own engagement party, so I have to leave. Goodbye," he said, but as he moved to stride pass her, she caught his arm.

"You know, it really was a great kiss," she offered softly, and then, tentatively, "Which is why you're right that we have to let it go."

He flinched, nodding, and then she released him.

"See you at the party," she said in passing, turning away, and he rounded on her with an exasperated sigh.

"What?" he barked, but she had already resumed her walking, returning her attention to her notes as he looked down at his watch to register that he was, in fact, going to be late.

_oOo_

"Well," Pansy said, sidling up to Daphne amid the crowd of Theo's basement speakeasy. Like usual, champagne was flowing freely from an enchanted fountain in the center of the room, and the ceiling had been charmed to fade effortlessly into a vaulted recreation of the night sky, stars glinting above them.

"Congratulations on your engagement," Pansy said innocently, "though I suppose you seem to be missing a fiancé."

Draco was late, it seemed. Which, Daphne, supposed, meant she was now free to explore alternate uses of her time. After all, any second she wasn't being admired in her silver beaded gown with its
"It’s a trifle inconvenient," Daphne said, taking a sip of her champagne and sliding Pansy a glance. "Strange that you don't seem terribly upset."

"Why would I be?" Pansy asked, shrugging. She was wearing a shift dress that flowed loosely against her curves, black beading layered delicately over a green silk that, unfortunately, left far too much to Daphne's imagination. "Should I be mourning Draco's loss?"

"Well, I'm sure no one would blame you if you did," Daphne replied, taking another sip and then turning to face Pansy. "Are you wearing them?" she asked neutrally, and Pansy's red lips parted to accommodate a darkened smile.

"Perhaps I should show you," she said, briefly drawing the neckline of her dress down low enough for Daphne to see a little flash of embroidered roses, and at the sight of it, Daphne's pulse quickened. From afar, she caught Theo's approaching form and hurriedly turned away, gesturing Pansy in the opposite direction.

"Let's go somewhere quiet," Daphne suggested, and after a moment's pause for a smug look of triumph, Pansy gestured for Daphne to lead.

"Somewhere quiet it is," she murmured in agreement, the words sending a bristle of anticipation up the line of Daphne's spine.
Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Day 20

"Have you seen Daphne?" Hermione asked Harry, catching his arm before he passed and glancing around for her again, frowning. "I can't find her anywhere."

Harry shook his head. "I haven't seen Pansy, either," he said, "though believe me, I'm not complaining."

"Well, rats," Hermione said, frowning. "I'd better go find her—Daphne, I mean," she clarified with a shudder, "not Pansy," and he shrugged.

"Best of luck," Harry called after her, but he seemed entirely distracted, his gaze falling on someone approaching from afar as Hermione hurried away, seeking out that familiar head of buoyant blonde curls.

She'd come to a conclusion; rather, a half-conclusion, really, after going through some of the records of the previous years' thefts. There was a distinguishable modus operandi, she'd noted, which was missing from at least one of her suspects—namely, Draco Malfoy. While the other thefts were relatively quick—timelines of only days, followed by near-gruesome violence— whoever was now targeting Daphne was most certainly taking their time about it.

After talking to Draco, Hermione felt more certain than ever that something was definitely wrong with him, but he was obviously not her primary suspect; suspicious, maybe, but not a threat. The marriage aside (which, Hermione reminded herself, she felt nothing about, and certainly no opposition) she did feel she owed it to Daphne, her client and her friend, to warn her of two things: firstly, that something dodgy was going on with Draco Malfoy, and more importantly, that someone else in her midst was probably far more dangerous.

"Let me guess," Harry said, catching sight of Theo approaching. "Walk with you?"

Theo permitted half a smile. "You're good, Potter," he said, and then pivoted away, taking Harry down the now-familiar path to his office. "It was getting a bit unbearable in there," he noted, charming the lock free and pushing open the door, beckoning Harry inside. "It's a wonder you haven't fled yet."

"Well, it seems now I'll have to stay for a wedding," Harry noted, gesturing in the general direction of the party. Theo, unhelpfully, had already busied himself with his liquors by then, pouring them both a drink while Harry eyed the now-familiar twining of the enchanted snakes on the green painted walls.

No point biding his time, he reminded himself. If Theo wasn't offering a response, he'd have to simply ask.

"Do you love her?" Harry posed abruptly, and Theo paused his motions, angling his head over his shoulder to scrutinize Harry from afar.
"Yes," he said, "in a way."

Well, there it was, Harry supposed. He dropped into one of Theo's chairs, crossing one leg over the other.

"What sort of way?" he asked.

"In a way that will always be paved with inequity." Theo replied without hesitation, turning with a drink in each hand. "Yours is practically juice," he offered tangentially, handing it to Harry with a grim smile.

Harry accepted the glass, watching as Theo made no opposition to Harry's fingers brushing his.

"You know, there's something strange about you," Harry said, observing as Theo carefully lowered himself into the seat beside him. "You have this air of trauma," he explained for the benefit of Theo's questioning glance, "though I can't decide if it's related to Daphne or not."

Theo swirled the liquid in his glass, crossing one leg over the other. "It's more of a musk," he said. "An eau de toilette, really." He took a sip of his drink, testing it, and then returned his attention to Harry. "Do you suspect me of something?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Many things."

It was a challenge, in a way, though one which Theo obviously planned to decline.

"You already got one secret," Theo pointed out. "Not a very good one, I might add, which is entirely your doing."

"Tell me another, then," Harry invited, and Theo chuckled into his glass.

"They're not free, you know."

Harry hadn't thought so, but he wasn't quite ready to relent. "Well," he attempted, "what would be an acceptable currency, then? In the event I have something to barter with," he amended, banking on Theo's inability to resist his own curiosity.

He wasn't wrong. "I'd say a secret of yours," Theo said thoughtfully, "but you don't strike me as the secretive type."

"I don't?" Harry asked, surprised.

Another sip. "Well, you just seem so very fond of your truths."

"Truths and secrets aren't precisely dissimilar, are they?"

"No, but secrets require lies. They're a prerequisite." Another sip, and a narrowed glance. "Not a secret, then. But perhaps an answer."

Close, Harry thought with a rush of anticipation. Very close.

"An answer to what?"

"A question."

"Yes," Harry said drily, "I'd gathered as much."
"A question I've already asked, actually," Theo said, rising abruptly to his feet and wandering over to his desk, running his fingers over the grains of the wood. "You might remember we made a wager," he said. "A day of your time in exchange for a secret of mine. Do you remember the terms?"

Did Harry remember? Of course he did. He ran through the little slivered pieces of that conversation one by one each night.

Still—"Something about whether I might want something from you," Harry said, pretending at a faulty recollection. "Is that it?" he asked, while he hoped Theo pretended not to be pleased.

"Yes, quite." Theo set the drink down on his desk, letting it float for a moment above the wood with a flutter of his fingers, and looked at Harry where he sat in the chair. "So," Theo beckoned, leaning against the desk. "An answer to the question, then."

Harry set his glass down on the floor, rising to his feet to slip his hands into his pockets. "Which is?"

"Did you decide what you want from me?" Theo asked, expectant.

Harry considered it a moment, taking a step in Theo's direction. "You know, it's the strangest thing," he said slowly, "but I have this entirely unhelpful desire to understand you."

Theo gave him a laughing glance. "Understand me, really?"

"Know you, at least," Harry corrected himself. "I think the understanding would come on its own, if I simply knew more about you."

Theo's gaze dropped again, his fingers tapping his glass in another moment of consideration.

"Like what?"

"That's the thing," Harry said. "I don't know where to start. I want to know what made you, I suppose. What broke you." He stepped forward, bringing himself to eye-level with Theo, and paused; just before their knees might have collided, or their various spheres of existence might have merged.

Harry stood on the border between himself and Theo, waiting for the audacity of invasion to come. Somewhere, some splintered versions of alternate lives and other Harrys took a breath and walked away, leaving only words to linger in the space between them.

But in this one, boldness had never failed him.

"I want to know what shape you took," Harry said softly, "before you rebuilt yourself into this."

He reached out, brushing his thumb over the expensive fabric of Theo's double-breasted tuxedo, and Theo didn't move. Beside him, his drink was long forgotten.

"That's not the answer," Theo said.

"Isn't it?" Harry countered.

"It's an answer," Theo corrected, "not the answer."

His gaze rose to Harry's again in that careful, measured way. There was that mint and tobacco smell, that hazy burn of whisky; something smoky and almost ashy, and still slightly sweet. If
Theo moved, Harry thought, and if he had a sound, then he would sound like the rustle of silk. Theo would sound like tousled sheets against bare skin, and he would feel like the intactility of smoke, dissipating impassively from a cigar beside the bed.

"What do you want from me?" Theo asked him, and Harry, already emboldened beyond any reasonable state of fear, reached his hand up, stretching the tips of his fingers to run them lightly over Theo's mouth.

That answer, it seemed, was suitable enough.

"Is this what you wanted to hear?" Harry asked, and Theo's tongue slipped out, brushing across Harry's fingertips.

"Yes," he said, and Harry, who'd always known when he'd caught something valuable between his hands, leaned forward, pulling Theo in gruffly for something he only realized was a kiss when his mouth initiated the motions.

At first, it had only been some need to pull Theo closer; to be closer, to eradicate the gap between them, but when Theo's tongue had parted Harry's lips he'd understood that no, this wasn't about space. It was about contact, but not in any recognizable way. For all that he'd imagined holding Theo's fractured little pieces and re-living what sparsity he had of them, replaying them in his sleep, he had never imagined how much he would long for the taste of him.

Gin, vermouth, a little hint of bitters. Crushed mint, the vanishing smoke from an hour ago, and the heat of desperation.

"What do I taste like?" Harry rasped in Theo's mouth, and Theo's hands fell to Harry's hips, coiling tightly in the too-loose fabric of his trousers.

"Like honey and clove," Theo murmured back, pulling Harry's hips against his, "and the best fucking gin this side of the Atlantic."

Harry shivered, smoothing a hand through Theo's slicked-back hair.

"And the secret?" Harry asked, watching Theo struggle to drag himself to cognizance. "The one you owe me," he clarified, "in exchange for my answer."

Theo looked up through heavy lids, leaning his head back as Harry slid his thumb over the column of his throat, hooking a finger in the knot of Theo's tie.

A pulse of the clock.

Two, three.

Harry felt Theo's throat swell with hesitation, the motion of a swallow manifesting beneath his fingers.

"I've caused a lot of pain in my life," Theo said, "but I would never hurt you."

Harry tightened his grip, nails scraping across the pale blue veins beneath the skin of Theo's throat.

"That's your secret?" he asked neutrally. "Pain?"

Theo shrugged, one hand fisting Harry's shirt at the small of his back.

"Is it good enough?"
Good enough. What a question.

Pain, Harry didn't say, was the only secret he'd ever understood.

"Tell me another in the morning," Harry said, and brought Theo's mouth to his again, making plans for whatever would pass between them until the sun rose.
Summary: The advent, continued.

Nearly ten years of glamour charms and potions and skincare rituals (Vesuvian clay to detoxify imaginary layers of grimy city air; Alpine lavender essence to soothe any lingering blotchiness; Atlantic sea urchin venom to slow aging and brighten her color) had ensured Pansy would never look at herself and expect to find perfection. Instead, she had always thought of herself as a canvas to be improved. Here, a little narrower. Here a little warmer, a little less sallow. It was businesslike, a brisk and impersonal study of enhancement that she had never thought to question, and had never given a single moment of pause. Her father had always had clear, precise expectations; Pansy met them, or tried to. Questioning him had never seemed worth the time.

But here, twisted up in Daphne Greengrass' silken sheets, Pansy Parkinson looked down at the slivers of bare skin emerging from virginal white and saw nothing, not one thing, that she would change about the palette of the moment. On the floor, her new undergarments were discarded and left in ruin, and for once, Pansy didn't care to cover any part of herself. She slid one leg out from beneath the sheets, newly admiring the unblemished curve of her thigh. It had looked better while thrown over Daphne's narrow shoulders, but languidly outstretched in Daphne's bed was a close second.

She looked and looked and looked at herself until she'd drunk herself silly on looking, venturing into a combative state of pure intoxication.

"Your fiancé will be looking for you," she said, turning to Daphne, who didn't open her eyes.

Daphne's lips were parted, relaxed, and Pansy had been right about at least one thing when it came to her furtive imaginings of Daphne and Draco together. All the times that, amid her little perversions of envy-turned-desire, she'd considered them lying next to each other—glistening with a sheen of sweat, finally sated after making love (no, fucking) for hours—Pansy had never once thought Daphne would curl up in Draco's arms like a child needing to be soothed. No, Pansy thought enviously, Daphne was never shrunken or diminished; neither by the rapidly-vanishing phantom of the Draco in Pansy's imagination or by the reality of Pansy herself, who'd been the one on the tip of Daphne's tongue until the creeping tendrils of morning. Instead, Daphne lay still and detached, elongated and glorified by a spare ray of sun from the window, and one hand was stretched overhead to rest amid the undone waves of her golden hair.

In answer to Pansy's disruption by virtue of Draco's mention, Daphne was quiet for a moment, unwilling to break from her moment of peace.

"I'll see him shortly," she said, apparently deciding to focus on logistics. "An hour, perhaps two. He's joining me for breakfast." She turned her head, meeting Pansy's lingering gaze. "You realize this will have to end," she warned, apparently unconcerned with how she'd so ardently begged Pansy not to dream of stopping just hours prior. "When I sent the lingerie to you I had no idea Draco had planned to propose, but things are different now."

Different now. The thought plunged a tangible bitterness into Pansy's chest. "Why should your engagement change anything? It's not as if his existence makes any difference to me." She sat upright, suddenly bristled with irritation. "Anyway, it's not as if he doesn't deserve a bit of
deception. He's used plenty on both of us already."

Daphne lifted her head, propping it on one arm. "Meaning what?"

It took a moment. A struggle, actually, not to laugh. "He thinks I don't know," Pansy said, turning over her shoulder to give Daphne a look of dry impassivity. "He passes it off, you know, or tries to. A little 'can you get this one, Pans?'" she mocked, "or some mention of forgetting his billfold, or perhaps having improper change—but I'm not stupid."

Daphne blinked. Blinked again.

"You don't think," she began, and faltered. "Is he… I mean, am I—"

_Is he using me_, Pansy guessed, and _am I a fool?_

Yes to both, she scoffed internally, rising from the sheets.

"That alleged fortune of Draco's is either recently drained or long-emptied," Pansy said matter-of-factly, feeling a rush of smugness; of cleverness, in fact, at what pretty little Daphne Greengrass had so simperingly failed to see. "I'm sure he thinks you'll be an asset in more ways than one."

The color had drained from Daphne's face. "But—"

"You deserve each other, you know. You're both liars, so have him," Pansy said flippantly. She'd always resorted to meanness when she was angry. She was malicious when hurt, always keen to leave a mark, just to prove she'd mattered enough to cause pain. "Enjoy your life together, Daphne Malfoy, and may you be satisfied with whatever comes." She hunted around for her slip, angrily unable to locate it amid her rising temper, which was rapidly devolving to shame. "Have your fortune," she muttered, chest and eyes and throat stinging, "and your precious standing in society, see if I c-"

She broke off as Daphne whipped her around, shoving her forcefully against the post of the ornate bed until Pansy's spine had aligned painfully with the wood. _Stand up straight_, Pansy heard her father snap in her mind's ear, _be beautiful, Pansy, be clever, be untouchable, and never, ever be weak—_

But just as quickly, Daphne's mouth was on the side of her neck, those pale pink fingernails digging into the skin of her thighs. Pansy arched her back with hopeless resignation, and Daphne's lips—which had long since sacrificed their crimson stain to the arousal between Pansy's legs—traveled down to close with patient delicacy around a nipple that, by the mournful tremor of Daphne's breathy sigh, may as well have been the very sweetness of heaven itself.

"Don't stop," Pansy said deliriously, or possibly didn't say, only thinking it with desperation. It was impossible by then to tell what was real and what wasn't, as Daphne's hips slid forward to graze hers with such indecent femininity it must have been a dream.

"I don't want to stop," Daphne confessed, and Pansy shivered, dragging two rebellious fingers down the line of Daphne's navel and letting them linger where they wished.

This morning, like last night, it would be Pansy's pleasure to see to it that Draco would have to wait.

_oOo_

Theo sat up with a start, displacing Harry's arm from his waist as he felt a brief, nearly
imperceptible shift in his wards.

"Whasgoinon?" Harry managed to cough up, eyes blearily half-opened, and Theo shook his head, motioning Harry to silence.

"Stay here," Theo said, summoning his robe and letting the silk drape loosely around him as he slid on his trousers, foregoing underwear. He stretched upwards—robe undone, torso still bare, covering a yawn—and glanced down at a mussed and shirtless Harry, who had fallen rapidly back asleep.

Theo fought a smile, shaking his head. There were certainly worse ways to wake, he thought, briskly making his way to the source of the disruption.

His moment of contentment at having a sleeping Harry Potter in his bed faded the instant he caught a glimpse of curly brown hair, recognition settling in with a sour grimace.

"Let me guess," Theo said loudly, and Hermione Granger promptly jumped, whipping her wand behind her back to obscure what she'd so obviously been doing. "Someone let you in," he drawled facetiously, "it's a big suite, you got lost, et cetera, et cetera—and now you can't find your way out?"

She blinked.

Then—"Yes," she exhaled rapidly, giving him a sheepish half-smile that played unconvincingly at helplessness rather than guilt. "Yes, exactly that, I'm so sor-"

"Except," Theo cut in, "nobody let you in, because nobody works here. It's a big place, that's true enough," he permitted, observing with a knowing glance of impassivity when her expression faltered, "only most of it is inaccessible without my permission. You're not lost," he corrected her, folding his arms over his chest, "you're looking for something. So, what is it?"

Like Harry, Hermione wasn't a very good liar. Her eyes darted up, down, sideways; anywhere but him as she threw out, "I thought I might find Daphne here, but then—"

"She's not here. You have three questions," Theo said, and at that, Hermione stumbled warily into silence, finally acquiescing to the reality of having been caught. "You'll ask, I'll answer, you'll kindly leave me alone forever, I'll politely decline to call the police. Understood?" he prompted, leaving no room for compromise.

She looked suspicious, of course. Rightfully. Her gaze traveled over his careless state of undress, weighing him—and his lack of weapon, he guessed.

She must have reasoned, correctly, that it was the best offer she was going to get.

After a moment, "Fine."

"Ask, then," he beckoned, and she grimaced.

"What's this?" she said, gesturing to the door behind her. It was, in Theo's opinion, fairly obvious, though that was as good a place to start as any. Most likely, it was the thing she'd had every intention to find.

"A vault," Theo said.

He half-hoped she'd mindlessly echo A vault? And he'd say Yes, a vault, and she'd say What kind of
vault? and he'd say *A money one* and then they'd be done here, and she could leave, and he could continue the morning the way it had started—with the man sleeping peacefully in his bed.

Whatever he hoped, though, he certainly expected more from her, and she didn't disappoint.

"Most people keep their money in banks," she said.

"Not a question," he replied.

"No, it's not," she agreed. "It's a statement. A conversation, almost," she attempted.

Her optimism was charmingly ineffective.

"I don't converse with people who break my blood wards and sneak into my suite," Theo said.

To her credit, she grimaced. "Fair." She glanced over her shoulder at the vault's door, then back at him. "Fine, I'll bite," she said, and he gestured; get it over with, I don't have all day, that question's as good as any. "Why do you keep your wealth in a vault in your home instead of in a bank?"

"I'm not overly fond of goblins," he replied.

He considered that an evasive enough response, only to his discomfort, her brow furrowed.

"Goblins," she echoed curiously, heightening his agitation, "are specific to Gringotts. Aren't they?" she asked, tilting her head with expectancy.

Ah, so he'd underestimated her. Wonderful, Theo thought. The sensation of surprise had for so long been so very difficult to come by and now here he was, surprised twice in less than a day.

"I was making a reference I knew you'd understand," he said smoothly. "You're obviously British, aren't you? I don't expect you to know Manhattan's idiosyncrasies."

"How accommodating of you," Hermione said, which sounded more like, *I'm not stupid.*

"I think myself a welcoming host," he replied, sharpening his voice with a hint of, *Careful, you only have one question left.*

She smiled politely. He smiled back.

"You know, it's interesting," she mused, "I've found almost no public records for you. No birth certificate, no certificates of schooling, no records of anything at all, really. In fact, it's almost as if—"

"Almost as if I've never mattered?" Theo guessed, leaning against a wall. "Tragic, I agree."

"Almost as if they've been completely wiped clean, actually," Hermione said neutrally, and forced another smile. "Isn't that interesting?"

This time, her tone said, *Caught you.*

He smiled broadly, replying, *With what?*

"There's another Theodore Nott," she informed him. "He's dead."

"Pity," said Theo.
"The timing is also interesting," she added. "What records you do have came after his death—did you know that?"

He supposed he could have considered that her final question and sent her out the door with a lesson on how not to be so careless, but as it turned out, he was enjoying himself. She, on the other hand, did not appear to care for his demurrals, which only contributed further to his lack of urgency.

"No," Theo said, and added, "I do tend to carry an umbrella, though, as one never knows when it's going to rain."

Behind him, he heard the quiet padding of footsteps. Something inside him braced, but Hermione, who hadn't noticed, had already abandoned her patience with their game.

"One more question," she said, and he nodded as if to say, If you must. "Say I were accusing you of something. Murder, perhaps," she suggested, and Theo schooled his expression, a long-practiced gift of weighing a response. "Say I thought you were a killer," Hermione went on, "and a thief. Say I believed you responsible for terrible atrocities, and then say, hypothetically, I asked you one thing: Why?"

She paused, and then, "What would you say to me?"

In that precise moment, Theo Nott was conscious of two things.

One was the truth, which Hermione Granger obviously didn't have. If she did, she wouldn't be speaking in hypotheticals.

The second was the man he was certain stood listening somewhere behind them.

"I would say," Theo replied carefully, "that underneath all the wealth, perhaps I've always been nothing. That if ever someone stripped everything away," he said, waving a hand around his penthouse with its spectacular view of New York's wizarding splendor, "they would eventually find that nothing at all would be left in its place."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Is that all?"

"That," Theo conceded, "and the fact that there is nothing more terrifying than the prospect of your own emptiness."

He paused, letting the statement settle between them, and then, "Would that answer your question, hypothetically?"

She opened her mouth. Closed it.

Opened it again, and narrowed her eyes.

"Is that true?" eventually escaped her.

"No real way to tell," slipped carelessly from him, and then, "But either way, you've gotten what you came for."

He had her there, and they both knew it. She nodded, and then she left, her footsteps carrying down the hall as Theo turned to find the corridor vacant, the unexpected presence in the room suddenly gone.
It struck Harry as more than a little ironic that he was currently pacing the floor of Theo's bedroom precisely the same way Draco had wandered their shared hotel suite the morning prior. Harry's devolution, however, had been the result of his helpless struggle to figure out what to say and how to say it, as the words you're lying, I know you're lying, I know the shape of your mouth when you lie and I know that your voice only shakes when you're telling the truth had a tendency to come off cold, perhaps even angry. He had nearly perfected the right Tone and Cadence and Pattern of Speech (proper nouns for a Proper Undertaking) when he heard Theo's voice echo through the suite again, spearing temporarily through Harry's crisis of confidence.

"You can't be serious!" Theo suddenly snapped, and Harry blinked, leaning helplessly towards the slivered vacancy of the door. "No, listen to me, I've had it. This has gone too far, much too far—"

Harry frowned, waiting, but whoever Theo was speaking to clearly had more presence of mind than to match his volume. Could it have been Hermione still? No, Harry was sure she'd left at least ten minutes ago, though he hadn't been able to sort out why she'd been digging into Theo's background to begin with. What concern was Theo of hers?

"—not doing it again!"

Harry supposed, given his lack of alternate options, he should probably lend some thought to whether or not Hermione could have been right about her suspicions. He tried to think of whether he'd ever gleaned any hint of wrongdoing from Theo—which he most certainly had, several times over. Was it possible he'd dismissed something serious? Theo's air of quiet violence had been the very first thing Harry had noticed about him, so perhaps it wasn't a dismissal. But what if that violence wasn't quiet so much as strategically suppressed?

"Bloody Christ, are you listening to yourself—"

Harry frowned, leaning closer. He could have sworn he'd heard the slip of an English accent, only it was definitely still Theo's voice. Harry had never heard it so angry; more often Theo was contained, always cool, sometimes chilled. The temperature of his present rage sounded strange on him, cloaking him in something that was both more human, and less.

"—will not calm down. Haven't my hands been dirtied enough?"

At this point, Harry was forced to acknowledge that whatever was happening in his head was far less interesting than the conversation taking place outside Theo's bedroom. He stepped closer to the door, careful not to let the beams creak beneath him.

There was a muffle of a response to Theo, the voice unidentifiable at a distance. Harry held his breath, straining to hear, but Theo's anger had suddenly dissipated as he said, "Leave him out of it."

Muffled sound, and then, "I'm serious."
More muffled sound, a light scoff, and then, to Harry's alarm, footsteps.

He launched himself backwards, scrambling for the wand in the pocket of his trousers before yanking the covers over him, feigning sleep.

"Stop," was Theo's bristled opening, and Harry cracked one eye, his fingers still tight around his wand. "I know you're not asleep," Theo muttered, letting his robe fall from his shoulders as he rubbed wearily at his temple, every fibrous grain of muscle tensed beneath the lean expanse of his back.

Harry was still watching silently as Theo's rigid stalking around the room fell to a sudden halt. He cast a swift glance over his shoulder, ascertaining Harry's position in the room, and turned away.

"Thought you'd left," Theo said, the sound of the words so quietly miserable Harry was sure he'd half-imagined them.

In an instant, the speech Harry had so intentionally rehearsed fell away from his lips, leaving something inadvisably bare in their place. "You can tell me your secrets," he said without preamble —without forethought or even a measly hint of guile—but it was only after he said it that he realized he meant it.

Harry sat up, abandoning the sheets behind him; leaving behind his wand and his self-preservation and reaching for Theo's hand. On a whim, he pressed his lips to the scars on Theo's knuckles: Tell me your sins, let me count them with you, let me fall asleep cradled in the palms of your immoral hands. Give me your troubles, grant me the filth of your lies, permit me the purity of your terrors, let me carry them for you to the ends of the earth.

Tell me your secrets and I will bless you for them, Harry's lips said to Theo's fingers, and he felt the little cracklings of Theo beginning to give way, shedding his scales of inequity.

"It started," Theo said, "with my father. The elder Theodore Nott. The promises I've had to make, they've been because of him." A pause, and then, "I bound myself to a lifetime of lies, all to rid myself of him. Every time I get close, I—"

He broke off, mouth tightening.

Then, "The horizon recedes, you know," he murmured. "It falls back as you approach it."

Harry shivered helplessly, as vulnerable and exposed as Theo had become, purely by virtue of listening. This was the distinction about Theo's real voice, Harry thought. He'd considered it dry, low, measured, but in reality, it was rehearsed. This, the privilege of an untold story, turned Theo's voice nearly melodic, all with an echo of childhood Yorkshire.

Harry pulled Theo close, lips finding a home in the bend of his shoulder.

It started with my father, Theo had said.

"Where did it end?" Harry asked, and Theo let his head fall back.

"It hasn't," Theo said, eyes falling shut. "And perhaps it never will."

oOo

"Come in," came the disgruntled voice behind the door, followed by the restless casting of an unlatching charm. "Potter's not here, Pansy," Draco added from where he was standing across the
room at the window, pressing two fingers to the bridge of his nose and raising a glass of whisky to his lips. "Haven't the slightest idea where he's been all night, either—"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Not Pansy," she said, attempting a gentle interruption, though Draco still whipped around with a start. "Sorry," she hurried to say, holding her hands up to assure him she hadn't come to fight. "I just… needed to tell you something."

His eyes narrowed a little, still guarded, but he nodded slowly. "Sit," he suggested somewhat gruffly, beckoning her to the sofa of his hotel suite, but she hesitated.

"I think it's better if I just get it out," she said, and he shrugged, apparently indifferent. He perched on the arm of the sofa, waiting, and she inhaled swiftly, wondering where to start.

"So," she said, opting, aptly, to begin at the beginning, "the truth is I'm an auror. Sort of. Conditionally." Her cheeks burned slightly at the sight of Draco blinking with confusion, unreadable save for his bemusement. "I… work for MACUSA. Well, I'm sort of on loan from the Ministry," she hastily explained, "but, you know, they didn't have room for me, so I worked out a deal to take the auror exam—anyway, it's a long story." She swallowed, adding, "I've finagled a bit of a deal to make sure they hire me back in London, but the point is—"

"Good for you," Draco cut in neutrally, taking a sip, and Hermione paused, startled by the absence of irony in his tone. She replayed it, altering the pitch in her mind, but even then, his expression—specifically, the fact that it lacked any noticeable scorn—was bewildering. "What?" he asked, noticing her tepid glance of doubt. "You're smart. Talented. Makes sense." He shrugged. "Besides, it explains things, doesn't it? Your interest in me."

She blinked. "Sorry, what?"

"Well, all this following me around you've been doing. Your little curiosities about my well-being and all that. Makes a bit more sense that it's purely professional," he said with another sip, "doesn't it?"

It crossed her mind that perhaps he'd intended to imply something else, but she didn't dare the imbecilic optimism of imagining what.

"Oh, um—yes." She cleared her throat. "Anyway," she continued briskly, "the point is that I've been investigating possible subjects of interest with regard to the recent pureblood thefts, and—"

Draco's face drained slightly, the hand holding the glass of whisky giving the briefest, nearly imperceptible tremor. "You know, then?"

That, she thought with a frown, was not the response she'd been expecting.

"I know Daphne's a target," Hermione confirmed slowly, "and I know something's gone terribly wrong with you, but I wasn't—"

"It's my father," Draco interrupted, rising so sharply to his feet she nearly collided with him again. "He made a few bad investments with company money. More than a few," he corrected himself, shaking his head with a grimace. "He fell in with some goblins to try to cover his tracks, now he has personal debt he can't pay off. I came to New York to see about a loan, but no one will lend to us now—and at this point," Draco exhaled, returning to the same motion of suppressing what looked like a building tension headache, "my failure to find a suitable solution means my neck is on the line. My parents might be foolish enough to think if I come home we can outrun goblin debt forever, but I'm certainly not." He shuddered, flinching. "And now, if I don't marry Daphne, we'll
"Malfoy," Hermione said with concern, reaching impulsively for him, and he shook his head.

"Don't you see?" he asked her, grey gaze finding hers in a way that sent a terrible, euphoric shiver up her spine. "It was you I wanted all along," he confessed, diminishing her to silence as the admission continued pouring out of him, "but then I found out the company was failing. I needed Pansy's money, but then once Parkinson knew my father was in debt—I don't know how," he said, a bit frantic in his distress. "But somehow, he managed to blacklist us from every financial institution—"

"Malfoy, I didn't mean—"

"So what was merely debt became threats, and now," Draco exhaled weightily, shaking his head. "Now that it's much too late, I'm realizing what a fool I was. I've been trying so hard for so long to save the money," he told her, suddenly snatching her hand up with his, "and only now that I've risked my life to save it does it finally make sense—it means nothing. It never did."

He leaned forward, desperate, and Hermione, helpless, leaned against him, rapidly losing track of why she'd come.

"I don't expect you to forgive me," Draco murmured in her ear, "but I wish you would. I just want you to know, Granger, before I lose my chance to say it, that the only time I ever felt worth anything at all were those quiet evenings alone in the library with you. It was always you," he said, obviously pained, "and now—"

His admission, something Hermione had been adamantly denying that she'd ever wanted, was suddenly unbearable. It was impossible, and so she forced herself to say something, anything, just to make it stop.

"Theo," Hermione blurted, and Draco blinked, stepping back.

"Excuse me?" he demanded, indignant. "I understand it's a difficult moment, Granger, but I would hope you'd recall I'm Draco—"

"I think it's Theo," Hermione explained, chewing her lip. "I was on my way to tell Daphne, but I stopped to tell you first, because…" She broke off, swallowing. "Because, well, I wanted to make sure you were going to be well, Draco. Because despite everything—despite my job," she said, frustrated, "and despite my client, and my obligations—it was you I thought of."

Her gaze fell to her hands, unable to meet his.

"It's you I worry about, Draco, constantly. It's you I think about, even when I shouldn't. It's you that I—" She broke off, cheeks hot with shame. "It's you that I miss," she murmured in confession, and he let out a strangled sigh that was both frustration and relief, tugging her firmly into his arms.

"I wish I'd known," he said hoarsely, his lips so close to her ear she could only imagine them other places; lingering on her skin somewhere, lit by the patient flicker of a candle. "I wish I'd had any idea, Hermione, and I might have made other choices—"

"You knew," she told him, aching sharply at the implausibility of his ignorance. "I agreed to meet you, didn't I? I was ready to throw everything away for you, Draco, and then when you weren't there—"

He shook his head. "Not that. That's not what I meant. What I meant," he said, taking her hand a
second time, "is that I wish I'd known how little the money really mattered. I wish I'd been less afraid," he murmured, brushing his lips to the tips of her fingers as she felt her pulse stammer in her chest, torn between don't, you can't, I can't and please, yes, this, please. "Underneath the wealth I was nothing," he said, smoothing his thumb over the lines of her palm, "and it terrified me, knowing how insignificant I could be, but with you—"

He tilted her chin up, nose grazing hers, and she felt her eyes flutter shut, utterly spellbound.

"I wish I'd known that fear could be so easily undone by one touch from you," he said, the words tender and tempting on her lips, and all at once, Hermione was hazily aware that she could kiss him. It wasn't inconceivable; he was close enough—so very, perilously close—and she had tasted him before and liked it, wanted it, craved it; had found that all his thorns and too-sharp angles could melt to softness in her hands. If she kissed him now, she thought deliriously, perhaps everything would be different. Maybe they'd both shed their skins and become something new, something unmade and unmasked and unmastered, and he wouldn't have to marry another woman for something as paltry as money; something as superficial, as madness-inducing, as meager and false as money, or the pale glitters of something as deceptive as gold.

At the thought—Draco standing so close to her now that she could fill the vacancy in his lungs with the breath from her own lips—Hermione's eyes snapped open, something registering sharply in her mind.

"I know who it is," she said suddenly, and Draco blinked, stepping back with astonishment as she tore out of his arms. "I know who did this," she half-shouted at him, "and I have to do something, but just… just wait here, Draco, I can fix this for you, I promise—"

"Granger," he said, aghast with puzzlement. "What are you—"

But she was already gone, not even bothering to shut the door behind her.

She had to find Harry Potter before it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: They'll be a little longer until we reach the end, hope you don't mind. Excited to bring you the last two days! Also, my favorite line from the story is in this chapter. Just a fun fact.
"I know everything," Hermione said, her wand aimed between Theo's shadowed eyes as she shoved Harry behind her, keeping him back. "Harry told me the whole story. I know what you've done, and it's over, Theo." She steadied her wand, and then, again, "It's over."

Theo held out his hands, emptied and spent, and glanced at Harry, whose pulse quickened.

"Well," Theo said, speaking to Harry instead of Hermione, "are you sure about this, then?"

Harry dug his nails into his palms, forcing certainty into them.

"It ends here," he confirmed, and when the green light left Hermione's wand, Harry didn't close his eyes; didn't blink, determined instead not to let his gaze fall from Theo's narrow form as he dropped, weightless and insubstantial, to land beneath the slithering patterns of emerald-colored snakes.

oOo

"Tell me you've heard," Pansy said, rushing into Daphne's suite and hastily nudging aside the little fishnet veil concealing one dark eye. She knew she shouldn't be barging into Daphne's flat like this, but given everything, she couldn't prevent herself from launching directly to the Harkaway from where she'd been shopping once Draco had sent her an owl. "You have, haven't you? It's terrible, truly, and to think, all this time, none of us had any idea—"

"What is it?" Daphne asked, shutting the door behind her with bemusement and an airy sense of disruption. "Pansy, you look an absolute fright, what's happened?"

That, Pansy thought, was an impossible reaction. She gaped at Daphne for a moment before blurting, "You really haven't heard?"

"Pansy," Daphne sighed, primly impatient, "really, I hate to be rude, but you'll just have to speed this along, I have plans with—"

"It's Theo Nott," Pansy said, chewing her lip; she hadn't expected to be the one to deliver the news and immediately loathed that she hadn't waited long enough to let the aurors precede her. "I hate to be the one to say this, Daphne, but…"

She trailed off, reticent. The moment Theo's name had entered the conversation, Daphne had gone rigidly still.

"Tell me," Daphne said flatly, pretty mouth lined with dread. "Tell me now."

"He's—" Pansy swallowed. "He's dead, Daphne," she said quietly, and in response, Daphne's breath seemed to catch in her chest, frozen. "They caught him—the aurors, they came with a warrant. He
resisted arrest and they killed him on the spot."

Daphne blinked.

Blinked again.

Turned pale, and then, abruptly, exhaled sharply.

"Well, then," Daphne said, suddenly coltish and unsteady. "I'm going to need a favor."

oOo

Is it done?

Three words over two hours ago, and all he needed was one more. Draco was beginning to think he'd done permanent damage to the floors of his hotel suite from the incessant pacing, but he stopped the moment he saw the owl.

He hurried to reach the window, scrambling for the letter attached to its leg. "Come on, come on," he muttered to himself in some sort of secular prayer, and then he unrolled the little scrap of parchment, hands shaking as he went.

Twenty-hour hours for confirmation of payment. Then it's done.

Then, as if it were a joke between them, a little sign-off: You got lucky, Malfoy.

Draco exhaled his bitter relief, falling back against the sofa cushions. He looked out his window to watch snow falling, Christmas carols echoing somberly in the background of his thoughts. Tomorrow would be Christmas morning, and perhaps then he might finally be free.

All there was left to do was wait.

oOo

Theo Nott had been born richer than the devil and he'd never given two fucks about it. Privilege, after all, didn't amount to much when its ungodly fingers come intertwined with isolation and violence.

Theodore Nott, named for his father, was born in the middle of winter and sometimes wondered if the snowy chill had never really left his soul. His mother had died in childbirth—a strange thing, considering all the money and all the magic and yet nothing they had could save her—and his father had never forgiven him for it. How dare he deign to resemble her, after all? It was as though Theo had called on Death himself just to steal her lovely features and claim them for his own. He had Aria Nott's coloring, her build, her profile; the one thing his father had provided were the eyes, cold and luminescent. There was distance in them, a command: Take a step back.

Don't get close to a Nott, others of the elder Sacred Twenty-Eight would say with a laugh. Call it pain, if you must, but it is a horror to see—which is perhaps why none had known a Theodore Junior ever existed. The elder Nott had made sure no one had ever seen him, and in the end, that had been his father's greatest favor: anonymity, by virtue of neglect.

Theo saw death for the first time when he was standing over his father's body, curiously analyzing the glassy quality that had taken over the elder Theodore Nott's eyes. Nott Sr had been a hard man, and death did not suit him; the man who'd come to the house seemed to agree, his face contorted softly in consummate displeasure.
"I didn't do it," Theo said quickly, straightening and crossing his arms over his chest.

"No," Parkinson agreed, his lips pursed. "Though I imagine that has less to do with your mercy than it does with his faulty diet."

Theo forced a shrug, intent on showmanship, even at thirteen. "I'd have done better work, I think," he commented, looking down again at the dark green eyes that were so precisely like his own.

"Well, there is elegance in simplicity," Parkinson countered. "To be killed by a heart is a rather poetic thing, in the end."

True enough; the irony, Theo thought, was that he hadn't known his father possessed one.

"Should I run?" Theo asked, after perhaps a minute of silence.

"Run?" Parkinson echoed, doubtful. "What for?"

"No family," Theo supplied, shrugging. "I'll go to some other prick. You know."

"I do know," Parkinson agreed, and for the first time he seemed to regard Theo with purposeful consideration. "Yes," he mused thoughtfully, nodding his assent. "I suppose you could run." He paused, then sighed, eyeing Theo carefully. "You're trouble, aren't you?" he commented tangentially.

Not entirely inaccurate, Theo thought, though he didn't appreciate the oversimplification. There was a certain inelegance to the notion that this man, standing so disinterestedly over Nott Sr's unmoving body, would see Theo no differently than his brute of a father had done.

"So?" Theo posed, his fists clenched.

"So," Parkinson supplied carefully, "I think it's best if I keep an eye on you. I have a partner," he explained, unbuttoning his jacket as he bent to scrutinize Nott Sr, fingers hovering above the dead man's face to solemnly shut his eyes. "Greengrass," he continued, rising to his feet. "In New York. We have something of a joint venture, and perhaps you could be of use."

"Why?" Theo returned, vehement in his confusion. He knew his face had taken on that angry twist of his, the one his old governess had called deeply unsettling, Nott, you should really tighten the reins before he'd woken to find her gone and himself ostensibly too old for a governess. "I don't need your help."

"Actually," Parkinson replied, tugging at a pair of formal leather gloves, "if you truly wish to leave this behind you, then I rather think you do."

Loan shark, Theo later learned, was the word for his new employer, who'd done something truly ingenious: he'd taken his family vault, his good name, and his spotless record and he'd used them as a shield to keep himself from even a shameful speck of suspicion, doubling, tripling, perhaps more of what had been his ancestral wealth. This, Theo discovered, was his first lesson about how money begot money, which would remain true until the end.

Theo would also come to learn that Greengrass was Parkinson's partner in what was less a true business than an oligarchy of questionable activity. It was from Viridian Greengrass that Theo learned the business of bootlegging, the craft of violence, the talent of concealing one's identity ("Lose the accent," Viridian had said when they first met, and so Theo had promptly abandoned it) and the delicate art of leading two lives: one with his two daughters upstate, and the other amid seedier circles in Manhattan.
Of the two Greengrass daughters, the important one (in Theo's mind) was a pretty, spirited girl named Daphne who grew into a lovely teenager and from there a radiant, beautiful woman. Daphne, who'd nursed Theo's cuts and bruises and never asked what errands he'd just returned from on behalf of her father. Daphne, who'd eventually kissed his lips and touched his heart and told him it'll be okay, Theo, one day it'll just be us, and you won't have to answer to anyone.

When they were seventeen, Theo tied a piece of string around Daphne's finger and asked her to marry him. "I'll make us some money," he promised her, "and then you and I can have a little house near the ocean."

"You'd better," she said, taking his face between her silken palms and smiling.

It became a game between them. When we're grown, when we're rich, when we're married. When we have a set of twins and a white picket fence, a dog and a cat and an icebox to keep our drinks cold. When I can drape you in pearls and you'll fix my cuffs as I walk out the door, kissing my cheek and wishing me luck at the office.

But then Greengrass had died unexpectedly, and it had been Theo, hoping for an inheritance for his fine labor, who had discovered the truth: Viridian Greengrass had died without a cent to his name, and the goblins had come shortly after.

"Parkinson is owed," they said.

It turned out the partners had not split their wealth equally—and perhaps hardly been partners at all, seeing that Parkinson had considered Greengrass' 'little loans here and there' to be liabilities requiring goblin oversight. More than one wealthy pureblood had indebted themselves unwisely to goblins, and Theo had known it well enough, having observed it many times himself. The 'thefts,' as they were being called by wizarding officials, were little more than episodes of recompense for fortunes already drained. In the end, it seemed Theo had watched more closely than his employer.

The options, as the goblins informed Theo and Daphne, were either payment for restitution, prison for Greengrass' (and consequently, Theo's) illegalities, or death—which was, presumably, for fun.

"Perhaps option one," Theo suggested blithely, and the goblins shrugged.

"You have until January first to pay the debts belonging to Viridian Greengrass," they said, pretending at sympathy for Greengrass' grieving daughter, and then they disappeared, leaving behind a ticking clock and a sudden wrench in Daphne and Theo's plans.

"I'll have to marry someone," Daphne whispered to Theo, watching with pale-faced horror as they lowered her father into the ground. Astoria had already done it, but Daphne, as Theo had always privately known, wouldn't be satisfied with a simple house upstate. "Someone with money, status, someone who can keep us afloat a little longer—"

"But I can do it," Theo said, objecting, naturally, to the idea of her being on someone else's arm. "I can take over your father's businesses. Hell, I can run the bootlegging myself, I certainly know enough about it—"

She'd soothed him with a touch, like always. She thought he'd come from nothing, an orphan beholden to her father and possessing nothing of his own, and he'd been happy to let her believe it. She, on the other hand, had grown accustomed to a certain kind of prestige. Her father had drilled it into his favorite daughter's head that her lifestyle should rival any pureblooded heiress from London, Parkinson's own daughter included.
"It'll have to be someone else," Daphne said gently, and then, as if the thought would cheer him, "We could always kill him, you know, when we're done. It's what that Zabini woman did in London."

She'd inherited more than purely debts from her father. "Sure," Theo had said, and then she'd set about making herself the Daphne Greengrass of Manhattan, socialite extraordinaire.

The moment they arrived, Draco Malfoy became the obvious choice. Theo, in the meantime, was responsible for maintaining the facade of wealth that would afford him and Daphne their eventual life together, or so he'd believed. Regardless, the pretense came naturally. All he'd ever done for a lifetime was pretend.

Daphne, meanwhile, was out of her element. She didn't look it, of course, but they argued constantly about what should be done to ensure they'd selected the right mark. The past month, too, had been an issue. Daphne had fallen in love not with Draco, but with adoration, with being the deceitful darling of wizarding society, at the same time that Theo had grown disenchanted with his own role. He was restless, tired of lying; the Daphne he'd known seemed to have disappeared entirely beneath the silks and jewels he was bankrolling, and their combined attempts to trap money with money (the lesson he'd never forgotten from his employers) barely scratched the surface of repaying her father's debts. She was spending too much, he said when she selected the alcohols and commanded his parties. He was too stiff, she replied, too sulky, no fun at all, and didn't he realize this was all for them?

It wasn't, he knew, and then the final blow.

"You'll need to marry Pansy," Daphne said, hastily scraping together a plot once it was revealed their mark was empty, but Theo, who knew Daphne had strayed as irreversibly as he had strayed, had long since run out of patience. "Draco's a dead end, but Pansy—"

"You can't be serious!" Theo had snapped, and Daphne opened her mouth to argue, but by then, he couldn't stand to hear it. "No, listen to me, I've had it. This has gone too far, much too far—"

"Calm down," Daphne hissed, her voice barely above a whisper. "Theo, listen to me, it won't be hard. She's desperate, and I can convince her—I can talk her into it, I promise, she listens to me—"

"You don't understand, Daphne—we've been through enough of this already," Theo gritted through his teeth, "and I'm not doing it again!"

But she wasn't listening; she hadn't been for months. "We'll have to kill her father if it's going to be worth it," Daphne said, prompting Theo to gape at her in reply.

"Bloody Christ, are you listening to yourself—"

"Well, he controls her allowance, Hermione said so herself—"

"Don't get me started on the auror," he cut in, grumbling. "She's onto me already. I wouldn't be surprised if she uncovers me sooner rather than later, just wait—"

"Calm down, Theo—"

"I will not calm down. Haven't my hands been dirtied enough?"

Suddenly, the whole thing was unbearable, and Daphne seemed to know it. Something between them that had been showing cracks in the foundation for months had finally broken, shattering over their heads.
"Is this because of Harry?" Daphne asked him, both hard and soft in the solemnity of her anger. "You would have done anything for me, Theo, before him."

"Leave him out of it."

"I know you, Theo," she pressed. "I know the way you look when you're in love. It's the way you used to look at me, isn't it?"

"I'm serious," Theo said, pained. "Stop—"

"If you don't want me anymore, Theo—"

"It's not you I don't want," he said, feeling something inside him collapse at the admission. "It's all of this, Daphne. This... life, this debt, this pretense, I want it gone." Once the words began, he couldn't stop them, exhaling, "I want all of it over, I want the quiet life we always talked about—"

"Well, I've changed," Daphne said, lifting her chin. "I don't want quiet, Theo. I don't want to be soft, I don't want to be sweet, I'm tired of being everyone else's plaything. I want more, I want freedom, and I want—"

"Someone who isn't me," Theo said flatly, and then he walked away, because by then they both knew it.

Then Theo Nott had told Harry Potter the whole story, who'd relayed it to Hermione Granger, confirming her suspicions.

And that was how Hermione had known to be waiting for Daphne Greengrass at her father's estate, surrounded by a flock of MACUSA aurors.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: "Tell me your secrets and I will bless you for them." One more day!
Felicitous Tidings from the Nouveau Riche, Day 24

Summary: The advent, concluded. Merry Christmas Eve!

"I knew it was you," Hermione said. "And do you know why?"

"Oh, do tell," Daphne invited drily, eyeing the wands pointed in her direction.

"Because it was perfect," Hermione replied, lowering her wand. No point pretending; obviously Daphne could make no escape, with or without Hermione threatening her. "Because there's always something darker behind every glimmer of perfection, and no one would know that better than you."

She stepped closer, watching Daphne's mouth twitch with half a satisfied smile.

"You saw MACUSA's coverage of the goblin thefts and decided to paint yourself as a likely target," Hermione said. "Easy, wasn't it? They had no reason to doubt you," she said, which had been precisely the elder Greengrass' play. "People who look wealthy enough are always trusted, and you knew it. You probably also knew they'd have no interest in your case and assign you an inexperienced auror. You must have thought it was your lucky day when it was me," she guessed, challenging Daphne, whose crimson lips stretched up with pleasure.

"Only for a moment," Daphne said. "But then you kept getting close. Figures," she added flippantly, "that a women would see what any man would have missed."

True enough, Hermione thought, struggling to remember whose side she was actually on.

"Your only mistake was your mark," Hermione continued. "Otherwise you'd have gotten away with it, wouldn't you? Married Malfoy, staged an accident, run off with his fortune?"

Daphne gave a lovely shrug, and Hermione sighed.

"Are you even blonde?" she asked, and Daphne's hair rippled for a moment, and then became a deep, saturated auburn that slid over her shoulders, disappearing in a river down her back.

"Like I said," Daphne said without a hint of shame, "If you'd been a man, I'd have won."

She smiled. And even amid her frustration, Hermione smiled back. Daphne had done her a favor; she tucked that particular line into the file marked 'how to cement the Ministry auror job,' certain it would sway Kingsley Shacklebolt at least a little.

"So," Daphne said, nudging Hermione back to her narrative, "you were saying. You knew to come after me because…?"

"Ironically, because of something Draco and Theo said," Hermione told her. "Something about being nothing underneath all the wealth. When Theo said it, he was lying," she explained, "but it sounded so close to the truth it must have been, in some way." She paused, and then, "Once I sorted
out who he was, I realized he must have been doing all of this for someone close to him. Someone who lived paralyzed by fear, and once I realized that, I knew it had to be you."

Daphne's mouth tightened. "You think I'm afraid?"

"I think you'd have to be," Hermione said plainly, "with so much to lose. With so little agency on your own, gambling on your looks. You think I don't know what it's like to be dismissed?" she prompted, and despite her attempts at sympathy, Daphne remained expressionless. "So then I looked for Harry to see if he could be convinced to turn Theo over in order to get to you, and what do you know? He was," she mused, reaching out to brush an errant strand of auburn hair from Daphne's cheek. "And now, of course, here we are."

Surprisingly, Daphne's facade faltered slightly, wavering as Hermione stepped nearer. "Just tell me one thing," she said, lowering her voice for Hermione alone. "Is he really dead? Theo," she said, obviously struggling to say his name. "Is it true, or—or—?"

For a moment, Hermione almost felt sorry for Daphne Greengrass, the woman who had been so ruthless, so calculating, and so terribly, terribly devious that in the end, Hermione envied her far more for her cleverness than for her beauty.

"The death certificate was filed with MACUSA this morning," Hermione said. "He's gone."

For the briefest moment, she was sure she saw Daphne's lip tremble.

"Oh," Daphne said faintly, but by then, there was no further conversation to be had.

"Daphne Greengrass," Hermione said, speaking louder for the benefit of their audience and reaching for her wand, "on behalf of the Magical Congress of the United States of America, I am hereby placing you under arrest for conspiracy, attempted murder, attempted robbery, and—"

But she never got to finish her sentence.

Before she'd finished speaking, the lights had all gone out, and the moment Hermione could finally see again through blearily cracked eyelids, Daphne Greengrass had vanished.

oOo

"She was just… gone?" Draco said, astonished. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," Hermione confirmed, grimacing. "Still, I did my part, or so Shacklebolt seems to think. He's arranged for me to sit for the auror exams next week."

"Well, congratulations," Draco said, impressed, holding up his champagne flute and permitting it to clink lightly against hers. "Here's to Auror Granger, then."

"And you?" she asked expectantly, bringing the glass to her lips. "Your father's debts all squared away?"

"Yes, many thanks to you," he told her. "And to Theo Nott, of course."

Upon proving Theo Nott's lineage, the contents of the Nott vault, which had been previously unclaimed for lack of heirs, transferred to Theo. Theo's death then meant the contents then transferred to his chosen beneficiary, which was, to the surprise of many, one Draco Malfoy.

From there, it had been easy enough to contact the goblins his father had owed. The debts were
paid, with interest; the Malfoy fortune would remain dwindled, but by then, Draco was no longer particularly concerned with what might be said about him.

He'd lost his taste for polite society, as it turned out.

"Well," Hermione said, rising to her feet after a sip of champagne, "I suppose I'd better leave you to pack, then. If you're going to be home in time for Christmas, anyway," she said primly, "which I think Harry was fairly intent on doing—"

She was thoroughly, utterly, undeniably impossible.

"Granger," Draco growled, catching her hand and pulling her into him with shake of his head. "You do realize I don't plan to leave your side as long as I live," he murmured in her ear, "don't you? I wasn't lying, you know, when I said it was you I wanted."

She had never been one to give in so easily. "And say I want you to stay away?" she countered, leaning back to admonish him with a glance, and he smiled.

"Not. A. Chance," he murmured, parroting her and venturing forward to brush his lips against her forehead. "This time, where you go, I go," he said, dropping to kiss her cheek, "I promise."

She squirmed in her hesitation, and he delighted in the tension of waiting. It was what he deserved, anyway, and it would make the winning of her affections all the sweeter.

"Well, you'll have to get a job," she said, not quite ready to relent. "I certainly don't plan to watch you indebt yourself to goblins again, or to bail you out a second time," she sniffed, and he sighed.

"I suppose if you require my assistance," he said, attempting to kiss her again, and she rolled her eyes. "What, like your government salary is going to be anything impressive? In this economy, honestly—"

"I'm serious, Malfoy—"

"Fine, I'll get a job hanging mistletoe outside Woolworth's," he said, earning himself a smack to the gut. "Whatever it takes," he coughed up with a laugh, pulling her now-unresisting form into his arms again, "to be with you, Granger, I will."

She sighed, consenting to be held, and then reached up, stroking a slow line over his cheek.

"You're still a pompous toadstool," she informed him, "and you'll have to make all of it up to me, you know. With interest."

A debt, he thought, he was perfectly willing to pay.

"Well, you're the spiteful shrew who saved my life," he replied, "so I suppose I can stomach the dreadful restitution."

She made a face, and he laughed, tightening his arms around her.

"Will you run if I kiss you this time?" he asked her.

"I won't if you won't," she promised.

In the end, he bent his head to hers in the same moment she tipped her lips up, crashing into him as they'd always done; colliding, meeting up like sky and sea, this time with the privilege to stay.
"Happy Christmas, Malfoy," she said to his lips, the words warm and tender between them, and briefly, he pondered the value of the moment.

"Happy Christmas, Granger," he replied, and swept her up in his arms, determining that for the first time in his life, he possessed something wholly and blissfully incalculable.

OoO

"Are you positively mad?" Parkinson demanded, glaring at his daughter.

"Of course not, Papá," Pansy replied, shrugging. "Spiteful? Yes. Vindictive? When it suits me. But mad? Never," she said, lowering her sunglasses to glance at the brunette beside her. "You don't think I'm mad, do you?"

"Certainly not," said Daphne Greengrass, facetiously indignant at the suggestion. "Mad would be, oh, I don't know… snatching someone from a room full of MACUSA aurors and mysteriously disappearing," she hypothesized, shrugging. "This, on the other hand, is a simple matter of leverage."

"That was my thought," Pansy agreed. "Leverage which we do have, don't we? Sorry, Daddy, blackmail's new to me," she lamented, glancing back at her father, "but by my calculations, we have enough to put you in Azkaban, oh… thrice over, would you say, Daph?" she mused, and Parkinson scowled as Daphne gave a lash-batting smile of agreement.

"You realize this solves nothing," he snapped, furious. "She's still wanted by MACUSA," he said, giving Daphne a pointed glare, "and after this, you'll both be international fugitives—"

"Which is precisely why we need the money, Father," Pansy sniffed, holding out a contract signing his control of her wealth back over to her. "So, are we in agreement?"

Parkinson, who until then had had his limbs bound to his favorite chair, leaned forward with palpable loathing, taking the quill Daphne cheerfully handed him and signing his name to the spellbound contract.

"There," he muttered, shoving it towards Pansy, "and I hope you know what a disappointment you've been to me."

"Oh, you have no idea, Daddy," Pansy assured him, tucking the contract into her silken bralette and then tugging Daphne towards her. "Shall we be off, darling?" she asked, brushing the tips of her fingers over the beading of Daphne's evening gown, and in reply, Daphne smiled her perfect smile.

"Let's," Daphne said, and leaned forward to kiss Pansy full on the lips, disapparating them in precisely the moment Parkinson began to scream.

OoO

The hotel room in Paris was nearly as nice as the Harkaway, though it became obvious at first glance that it wasn't nearly as secure.

"What's that?" Daphne asked, immediately catching sight of a note tied to a labelless bottle of champagne, and Pansy shrugged. She, Daphne determined, was still riding a high from the thrill of disobeying her father—and, presumably, from staking her claim to a large sum (read, as he hadn't: all) of his fortune.

"Don't know," Pansy called disinterestedly, meandering towards the clawfoot tub to run what was
sure to be a very expensive bath.

Daphne, meanwhile, felt a pang at the sight of the handwriting, swallowing hard once she recognized the familiar scrawl.

"Pans," she said, unrolling it slowly. "You know, you never told me the details. How did you know how to break into my father's house?"

"Hm?" Pansy asked, demurring as she lazily waved her wand, filling the tub. "Well, turns out I'm a criminal's daughter, Daphne, in addition to not being stupid. Must be in my blood somewhere. Are you coming?" she added tangentially, slipping out of her robe.

"In a moment," Daphne said, heart leaping in her chest at the contents of the note.

I'll always find you, D.

Not just anyone could have known the escape mechanisms of the Greengrass estate without first serving nearly a decade at her father's side. Not just anyone could have found her hotel room without first developing the skill to do so. Not just anyone would leave her this note without first loving her enough to let her go.

Daphne smiled slowly.

He's gone, she suddenly remembered Hermione had said, not he's dead.

The tricky minx.

Daphne's pulse raced a little, wondering how quickly he would find her.

Soon, she hoped.

Though not too soon, of course.

First, she had a bath to take.

"Alright, Pansy," she said, slipping her cloak from her shoulders and unzipping her dress, letting it slither to a crumpled heap on the floor. "I'm ready."

oOo

Harry shaded his eyes from the sun, turning to identify the lean figure loping towards him.

"Well?" he asked, and Theo Nott, recently deceased, gave one of his usual impassive shrugs, tucking something into the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Walk with me," he said, and Harry replied with a resigned sigh, following as Theo continued to wander the old Greengrass estate, checking the remaining contents of his many, many hiding places. "I think I've got it all now," Theo murmured, mostly to himself. "Enough to get us to London, anyway."

"Well, you'd better," Harry said. "I was hoping to be home by Christmas, if you recall."

"Mm, of course," Theo said lazily, "and how do you plan to explain me, then?"

"Easy," Harry said. "I don't."
Theo rolled his eyes, sparing Harry a fleeting glance. "I suppose I shouldn't ask any more from you," he said, "given that you've already permitted me my freedom."

Actually, that had been quite easy. Most of it had been Hermione's idea: Use Theo as the bait to prompt Daphne (the guiltier party, in Hermione's conditionally-professional opinion) to drastic action, fake his death, pass his money off to Draco and neatly solve all her problems before disappearing forever. It was, as Hermione had offered plainly to both Harry and Theo, the perfect deal in exchange for revealing Daphne's complicity—nobody would be looking for him, and for the first time since his father's death, Theo would owe nothing and no one.

"This is so good of you," Harry noted neutrally. "Showing gratitude. It's very nice."

"Never say that to me again," Theo muttered, and then glanced sideways at him. "It's a relief, you know," he murmured, "to be free of everything." He stared out over the New York landscape, shaking his head. "Most of the people I spent every day with until you had tasted everything and still managed to have no taste."

"Not you, though," Harry said, and Theo turned to him, a smile sliding slowly over his lips.

"I hadn't tasted anything yet," Theo said, and brushed his lips against Harry's jaw, prompting him to a shiver.

"By the way," Harry said, pausing Theo's meandering fingers before they progressed too intently over the bones of his hips, "while we're on the subject, I've been meaning to tell you something."

"Mm?" Theo asked.

"You chose the wrong mark," Harry said, and Theo scoffed, unsurprised.

"Well, I certainly know you're poor," he said, running his tongue over the notches of Harry's throat. "That's a given," he said, flicking the material of Harry's ill-fitting shirt, and Harry shook his head, nudging Theo away.

"I meant when you chose Malfoy," Harry said, and Theo frowned, pulling back with bemusement.

"I'm not actually poor, technically," Harry explained, impassive. "I have my parents' fortune."

Theo blinked. "Did you just say—"

"Fortune? Yes," Harry confirmed, shrugging, "though I haven't spent a knut of it, and I've been saving for the right reason to use it. Some express purpose. Something of significance," he murmured in clarification, running a hand through Theo's hair. "Which, I hope you understand, does not include massive parties."

"If I never attend another party as long as I live, it'll still be too soon," Theo said with a shudder of distaste, and then he gave Harry a look of curiosity. "What will you use it for, then?"

Harry shrugged again. "Well, I'd like to see things," he said, and then, with a second glance at Theo, he added, "Taste them."

Theo's lips parted with clarity. "Ah," he said, and smiled slowly. "And where should we start, then?"

Harry shaded his eyes again, looking out into the horizon.

"There," he said, pointing, and Theo leaned his chin up, letting the slowly fading sunlight cast a
shadow over his restless cheeks.

Tell me your secrets, Harry thought, and I will carry them with me to the ends of the earth.

"Perfect," Theo said, and closed his eyes, twining his fingers with Harry's.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Boundless gratitude to Aurora for her eyes on this one, especially with how difficult it ended up being for me to write. This has been a roller coaster of a month in my personal life, and while I wish I'd been able to give this story the attention I'd planned for it before things went awry (I mean really, a nottpottt!Gatsby, I was so excited to write it!) I do hope you've enjoyed it. Just a side note: the line 'tasted everything and having no taste' comes from The Talented Mr Ripley, which was the second inspiration for this fic along with The Great Gatsby. Look out for my D/Hr Advent one shot to post in this collection tomorrow, and have a wonderful Christmas Eve!
A Matter of Practicality

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Matter of Practicality

Pairing: Dramione (Draco Malfoy x Hermione Granger)

Universe: Hogwarts eighth year

Rating: T

Summary: Behold my contribution to the 2018 D/Hr Advent, which originally posted to AO3 on December 1. Thanks to those of you who nominated me! In honor of the day, please enjoy this bit of Christmas fluff.

Returning to Hogwarts to take their N.E.W.T.s hasn't exactly been fruitful, seeing as Hermione's relationship has disintegrated and Draco's family and fortune have both been dismantled by Ministry decree. At least they'll be alone for the holidays, which is precisely what they both want. Or is it?

You can find this one shot here: A Matter of Practicality [ AO3 ]. Again, just posting the chapter on FFN without disturbing the matching chapter enumeration on AO3!

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Be sure to check out aurorarsinistra's edit for this story and Little Chmura's contribution to the advent on tumblr! In 2019 you can expect to see a few new oneshots in here; definitely a new theo x daphne that's sort of a prequel for Ride or Die, probably a new batch of Disney AUs, there's something in my notes about a mermaid story and... archery? Anyway, until then, have yourself a merry little Christmas! Thank you for sharing your holiday with me.
Black Jeans and Daphne Blue

Pairing: Nottgrass (Theo Nott x Daphne Greengrass)

Universe: Prequel to Ride or Die, basically a muggle high school AU

Rating: M for sex and language

Summary: For Valentine's Day, a little bit of teen trash Daphne and Theo I've been dying (for literal years) to write since I heard the song One More Time by Jon Bellion. Title from the song Daphne Blue by The Band Camino. For reference, if you haven't read the full length version of Ride or Die or need a refresher: it is approximately the year 2005, and Daphne, Theo, and Draco are seventeen years old, best friends, and juniors in high school. Draco and Theo aren't Death Eaters yet, but their fathers are, and they plan on it. Narcissa is a college professor who doesn't always live at home. The Weasleys and the Malfoys have bad blood. Daphne's father is alive, and he Doesn't Approve™ of Theo.

Begin scene.

In 1958, General Motors trotted out a custom color for its newest Cadillac, a shade of blue they dubbed 'Daphne.' It fell somewhere on the color wheel between baby blue and teal, something pastel and candy-colored and sweet. Now, people might recognize it as something akin to Tiffany blue, like those little boxes of expensive jewelry that usually land in movies and commercials. It's iconic, and that's always been true. But in the 1960s, Fender guitars made Daphne Blue part of their official lineup, putting it to work for their electric Stratocaster, and that's what's much more important.

Because at some point in the late eighties, Viridian Greengrass told his girlfriend Ava that one day, after he'd made it as a rockstar and settled back down in Diagon, he was going to have a girl and name her Daphne, after the blue of his prized possession: his vintage Fender Strat. "I think I'd prefer something prettier, like Astoria," remarked Ava, busying herself with daydreams of weddings and babies, but Viridian, who thought it unlikely he and Ava would even end up together considering the fame and innumerable blow jobs that were surely just around the corner, merely shrugged.

"Fine," he said, "you can name the next one that, but Daphne will always be my favorite."

Fast forward a few years to the age of Juicy Couture sweatsuits and the resurgence of gangster rap (crunk, maybe, though that hyph shi is picking up) and you get Daphne Greengrass in the flesh, though she's not exactly as sugarspun as the original shade of Daphne. She typically gets to school in her dad's old coupe, which is neither a Cadillac nor vintage. It's a Volvo, actually, which is dumb, especially because Viridian won't let her have a bike, despite the fact that he gets everywhere on his Harley. "It's fucking dangerous," says Viridian. "I know," says Daphne, which should tell you a lot about what she's like.

Unsurprisingly, Daphne wears her namesake with pride, and today she's wearing a Daphne Blue t-
shirt that ends just below her navel and a pair of worn black jeans that ride low on her hips. A little of her black thong is sticking up above her jeans, which Ava yelled about this morning. "Whatever, Mom," said Daphne, and Astoria, who is fifteen and worships the ground Daphne walks on, rolled her eyes in conspiratorial agreement.

"Hey," Daphne says to Astoria, who's riding in the passenger seat and hoping to one day be half as cool as Daphne. "Can you get a ride home this afternoon? I'd take you, but I'm probably going to a party with Theo."

"Maybe Draco will take me," Astoria says hopefully, and Daphne tries not to laugh. Yeah, sure, Draco fucking Malfoy is going to take her kid sister home from school, that checks out. More likely he'll be with her and Theo until he bails, making eyes at Pansy Parkinson or sweet-talking his way into some chick's pants with the promise of Lucius' beer and Narcissa's weed. (They're both out of town 'working on their marriage' or whatever, which sounds gross. Hence the party.)

"Sure, maybe," Daphne says, and then adds, "I'll meet you out here at three to make sure, okay? But if you can get a ride, that'd be ideal."

"Okay," Astoria says happily, and Daphne's not worried. Astoria's pretty and popular and she's not completely an idiot, though Daphne likes to check on her fairly often. Big sister shit and all that. "See you at three, then."

"Right, see you," says Daphne, but she's immediately distracted by the hand slipping over her bare midriff, because it means Theo's found her.

Theo does this thing she loves where he gives her belt loop a tug and a spin, pulling her into him. She tells him she hates it, obviously, because she doesn't want him to think he can go around manhandling her whenever he likes, but in reality, it thrills her. Yes, have me, she thinks, take me however you want, make me feel like I'm yours. Make sure everybody here knows it, make sure they believe it.

Still, for appearances' sake, she swats his hand away and turns, reclining against her car door as Theo leans towards her, resting one arm against the driver side window.

People think Draco's the smooth one. They're wrong.

"Hey," Theo says, and Daphne fights the urge to kiss him and like, whatever, write poetry about his face or something. Which he doesn't know that she does. Well, he knows, but they're songs, not poetry, and she tells him the only reason she writes love songs is because that's what gets picked up. Viridian always says the only reason he never made it is because his stuff was too abstract. Nobody cares if you're a true artist, Viridian always rants, they just want someone they can control, and don't you ever be that, Daph, don't you dare fucking sell out.

But at the same time, he smiles when she sings, and so does Theo.

"Hey yourself," Daphne says, and Theo smiles, dropping his chin to kiss her. He slides a hand under her t-shirt, resting his palm flat against her ribs. When he kisses her, he always yanks her hips against his like she belongs to him, and she does.

She does, and she fucking loves it.

"Gross," coughs up an unsurprising voice, which means Draco's here, as he usually is (where Theo is, Draco is never far behind).

Daphne slides a thumb over her lip, winking up at Theo, who almost certainly needs to readjust his
"We get it," Draco mutters with a roll of his eyes, "you're animals. No need to fuck right here in the parking lot and make us watch."

"You wish you could watch," Daphne says, letting Theo tuck her securely under his arm. Across the parking lot Astoria turns, spotting Draco, and waves enthusiastically. Draco waves back, amused, and Daphne cuts him a glare. "Don't lead her on, shithead. That's my sister, Malfoy, and I'll kill you before I ever let you touch her."

"Relax, Greengrass, she's a baby," Draco says, shrugging. "But hey, can you blame her? She's got a crush, it's cute."

Theo slides Daphne a look that says, Draco is so fucking shameless sometimes.

"What?" demands Draco, catching it, and Theo laughs.

"Calm down, princess," he tells Draco, shifting his arm so the tips of his fingers brush Daphne's cheek as Vince and Greg spot them from near the planters, rising to their feet. "It's too early to lose your shit," Theo reminds Draco, who isn't listening. Probably because for Draco, losing his shit is an hourly occurrence.

"What the fuck are you looking at, Weasley?" Draco sort of half-shouts, because apparently Ron and Dean and Seamus have also stopped to stare at him from where they're standing near the high school's center quad.

Daphne sighs, feeling Theo's arm slide from around her shoulders. "Nott, fucking don't," she warns, but he's not listening, because Draco's taken a step forward and that means Theo's stepping forward, too. Boys are so stupid, she thinks. It's like their brains shut off for fights and sex.

"It's a free country, Malfoy," Ron is saying, and Daphne sighs, spotting Susan Bones and wandering over to her, because obviously the boys are going to go around measuring their dicks now or whatever.

Susan's with Greg Goyle or something, hard to tell. She might be gunning for a spot in their crowd, not that it matters. She's cool, and anyway, she can't upstage Daphne. Daphne's Nott's girl, and besides, she's Viridian's daughter. If she acts like hot shit, it's because she is.

"I hate this," says Susan, who's nervous for Greg because she doesn't understand the hierarchy yet. Someday she'll learn that only Draco and Theo take blows, and only because they give them twice as hard. If Greg gets involved, it's going to be with Seamus or something, who's really not into this shit. Daphne likes Seamus, and Dean, too. Dean's smart, which she appreciates.

Ron, on the other hand, mostly loves to do two things: run his mouth and stare at Daphne.

"Don't worry about it," Daphne says coolly, watching Theo's shoulders tense as Draco and Ron continue swapping dumbass taunts. She doubts Ron Weasley knows how often Theo and Draco spar after school, or how good they actually are. Lucius taught Draco how to throw a punch when he was like, eight, and when Darian Mulciber caught the two idiot boys wrestling like idiot boys, he taught them how to actually fight. Sometimes Daphne watches them do it when she's bored. Viridian taught her, too—just some basic self-defense things—and sometimes Theo pulls her into the 'ring,' which is really just four cones on the floor of the Manor while Darian's working.

Theo's the one who really taught Daphne where to aim, how hard to hit. Once, he made her punch him in the face, repeatedly, until she was no longer scared of doing it. He just stood there, not
defending himself, until she understood: Make people respect you. Don't just make them flinch.

Ron Weasley has no fucking clue who he keeps picking fights with, though secretly, Daphne's a little worried about the fact that if he keeps talking shit, he might find out. It's not like she wants him to die. Besides, if Theo and Draco get expelled, what the fuck is she doing to do at school all day?

Inevitably, the perpetual argument between Ron and Draco escalates to the real problem: that Ron's dad is a prosecutor and Lucius Malfoy is someone who makes a living out of fucking with the law. Ron thinks this makes him a good guy and Draco a bad guy, and Draco fucking loves to play the villain.

"I doubt you'll be so fucking cocky when your dad's in prison," Ron says, which isn't good. This is never all that far from reality, which they all know. "What do you think's gonna happen when he gets caught, Malfoy? Your dad's whole club's going down."

Ha, Daphne thinks, hoping Draco will laugh it off too, but he doesn't.

"Say that again to my face, Weasley," Draco warns, and he's not dicking around anymore.

The bell rings, and nobody moves.

"Nott," Daphne says, and catches a little hesitation in Theo's shoulders at the sound of her voice. "Nott, don't waste my time," she says, boredom in her tone, though what she means is: Nott, don't get in trouble again, you know your dad will fuck you up if you get in trouble and we both know this little shit isn't worth it.

Ron, of course, lets a smile flicker over his face. "Yeah, Nott," he says, "listen to your girlfriend. It's either her telling you what to do or Malfoy, isn't it?"

Jesus. He fucking wants to die, doesn't he?

Daphne struts forward, positioning herself so she's the point of a triangle between where Theo and Draco are standing and where Ron is flanked by a visibly uncomfortable Seamus and Dean. She knows better than to get between them in an actual fight, but still. They need a wakeup call, and she knows if she flips her hair a little, Ron will notice the lace of her black g-string and forget about whatever shit might otherwise come next.

"Hey," Draco snaps, because Daphne's basically an oracle and surprise, surprise, Ron's looking. "Don't look at her like that," he says, because he knows Daphne's his best friend's girl, and Theo obviously isn't thrilled that someone else's eyes are on her.

"Oh, shut up, Malfoy," Ron says testily, and arches a brow at Theo. "Or does he always fight your battles for you, Nott?"

That, of course, is not a remark that lands well.

"Jesus," Daphne mutters under her breath, throwing a hand out in an effort to put some distance between Ron and an aggressively peacocking Draco. "Malfoy, come on," she warns, shoving him away from Ron, and then she catches Theo's eye, giving him a look that says, Come on.

Come on, Theo, this isn't sexy, give it up.

Theo gives a gruff nod of acknowledgement and yanks Draco back by his collar, giving him a look, and Ron lets out a triumphant little laugh.
"Good thing you've got your whole crew of snakes, Malfoy, or else you might've actually had to—"

Daphne turns and punches Ron, hard, in the gut, somewhere that'll leave a bruise but not one people can see. He coughs up something angry, but by then Theo's taken hold of Daphne's arm and pushed hurriedly through the crowd of people, dragging her away just before a teacher comes to break it up.

"Babe," Theo says, which is a mix of, Babe, seriously? and Babe, that was so fucking hot. "You could have gotten in trouble. Again," he adds, lifting an admonishing brow as if he hadn't been the one to fucking start it, and she sighs, shoving him against the wall and glancing over her shoulder.

There's no one there, so she kisses him hard, partially to shut him up and partially because she knows she owes him one for parading around for Ron Weasley's benefit, even if it was just to distract him. Theo's hands drop to her belt loops and she grinds against him for a second before saying in his mouth, "Fuck homeroom."

He grins at her. They're already at least ten minutes late to class anyway. They'd get detention if they went, and it's only a matter of time before Ron squeals and she gets dragged to the principal's office.

"I'll drive," Theo offers.

"Thought Draco drove this morning?" They always come to school together.

"He did. But I've got keys," he says, and gestures to where they're clipped to his belt loop. It's Draco's Impala, which used to be Lucius', but as with anything that belongs to Draco, it's just as much Theo's. "We just have to be back at three."

"Cool," says Daphne, and slides her tongue over his lower lip. "Then let's go."

Draco's basically the only guy at school who's never made a move on Daphne, aside from Seamus and Dean (who are either really nice or super gay and either way, Daphne is chill with it), and it's because she's always been Theo's. Even when they were younger, Draco always understood that Theo was the one who really loved her. Theo never tugged her ponytail or teased her. He was always good to her, even as a kid. Daphne didn't know what that meant, but Draco did. She only figured it out when Cormac McLaggen took her to Homecoming sophomore year and he got a little too handsy on the dance floor. She was pushing him away, trying to tell him nicely that she wasn't into it, but it was loud and the bass was thudding in both their ears. Before she knew what was happening, Theo had grabbed Cormac's shoulder and punched him in the face.

Daphne had taken Theo home and iced his knuckles, telling him he was stupid. "Well, I didn't like that he wasn't listening to you," Theo said, and then he left when his dad came to pick him up, stone-faced.

"Stay away from Nott's kid," Viridian warned Daphne, watching Theo and his father drive away. "He and Malfoy's mini-asshole are just begging for trouble," he told her, probably because they were, "and I don't want my daughter getting mixed up in all that." High school boys only want one thing, blah blah. The usual dad bullshit, like Daphne's some kind of precious flower he needs to protect. Though, thankfully, Viridian's never laid a hand on her and would probably fucking die first. Unlike Theo's dad.

The point is, the following Monday she'd grabbed Theo's hand at lunch and pulled him behind the gym.
"Hey," she said, "do you like me?"

"Define like," he said, and she rolled her eyes.

"I thought it was noble, what you did," she said. "Dumb, but noble," and he gave her the little smirk he and Draco were already so fucking adept at. She had no idea where they learned it, but it was getting ridiculous what it was doing to her.

"That's me," Theo said, and she didn't do anything about it yet because what kind of answer was that, but when she asked Draco about it, he gave a laugh that wasn't even really a laugh. It was more like a scoff.

"Does he like you?" Draco echoed, looking repulsed. "Jesus, Greengrass, what are you, blind?"

Yeah, she thought, yeah, maybe I am, because look at him. I don't know how I missed it, but it's a real fucking shame.

She kissed him the next day because it had become apparent she would need to do most of the heavy lifting.

"Damn," Theo said, impressed, "you're good at that."

It was her first kiss. She told him so, warily—thinking he might be like yikes, what's wrong with you, to which she would have had to defensively point out that she'd been waiting for the right guy because, you know, she wanted it to be special and all that, and anyway, she was a lady and she didn't just go around giving shit away for free—but instead, Theo smiled.

"Mine, too," he said, and she thought: Fuck.

She had a feeling Theo Nott was going to be a lot of her firsts, and maybe a few of her lasts.

Theo Nott is named for his father, which isn't nearly as cool as Daphne being named for a guitar—or maybe it was cooler, when he put it that way?—but either way, who gives a fuck. His mom died when he was a kid, which probably accounts for most of his flaws. Not that that or anything else is important at the moment, though, because by the time he slips Daphne's t-shirt—her signature color, Daphne Blue—from her shoulders, Theo's mind pretty much goes blank.

She's wearing a soft, pretty pink bra. This, Theo knows, is only for him. The racy black thong he can see above her jeans is a taunt for the rest of the world, daring them to want her so that she can say fuck 'em and refuse, but the pink lace under her t-shirt is for his eyes only.

He slides his lips over the curves of her breasts, taking his time, and she sighs quietly, tightening her legs around his waist.

"So, about Draco's party," she says, and Theo looks up. "Wanna skip it?" she asks, and Theo chuckles, shaking his head.

"We can bail early," he offers, but they can't not go, because Draco expects him to be there. He's Draco's shadow, he knows, but he doesn't give a shit. Who cares what people think? He's got Daphne Greengrass, he's got Draco, everything else is secondary. Besides, people have Draco all wrong. Draco's whip-smart, and he's going places. When Draco talks, people listen. People fucking listen, and Theo knows a leader when he sees one. That, and Draco doesn't treat Theo like his second. Theo's not just some mindless goon. People listen to Draco, and Draco listens to Theo. They're going places, the two of them, someday.
Daphne smiles at him and Theo fucking melts. She makes him gooey and stupid, which Draco mocks because he doesn't understand it. He will someday, Theo thinks, but probably not anytime soon. Draco's playing the field or something, and besides, there's only one Daphne Greengrass. There's only one, and she's his.

"Hey," she says, nudging him. "Were you kissing me or what?"

God, she's so fucking bossy and Theo loves it. It's one of her best features, though Theo thinks the hottest thing about Daphne Greengrass is the way she aims a gun. Not because she's a girl who can shoot a gun, though that's obviously not unsexy, but because of how fucking fast she learned it. Viridian showed her once—one time—and then handed her the Glock and said, Go. She had it on the first try, and Theo worships her for that.

He worships her for a lot of things.

"Maybe we should slow down," he suggests, because her nails are tracing over the bare skin of his torso and he's so hard now that things might get out of hand real fast if they don't stop. She gives a little whine, tightening her legs around him, and he kisses her neck. "We are not," he says firmly, "having sex for the first time when your mom could come home any minute."

People make assumptions about their relationship. Theo lets them think what they want.

"That doesn't mean we have to stop," Daphne says, though Theo thinks he hears an engine from outside. Daphne gives him a shove, straddling him on her bed, and leans in so that her auburn hair falls around him in a wave. "Nott," she says, and good god, she is convincing. As if teenage hormones aren't bad enough. As if having a dick isn't already hugely problematic. She's positioned right on top of his cock and he is having some extreme difficulties controlling himself—which is presumably the point, but still.

"I heard something outside," he says, throat dry. "I heard a bike, it might be your dad—"

"You're paranoid," Daphne says, and when she kisses him he growls his concession into her mouth because sure, fine, whatever. Viridian Greengrass carries a handgun around and can and will kill Theo for this, but sure, it's worth it. He tugs at Daphne's hair, his hands peeling back the cups of her bra, and she grinds slowly against him, making his breath fall short. Theo sits up slightly, kissing beneath her jaw, and she leans her head back just as her bedroom door slams open.

"Daphne," says Viridian, and she scrambles away with a stifled yelp, while Theo abruptly suffers a brush of cardiac arrest. "Get dressed," Viridian says to Theo with a notable lack of surprise, tossing him his shirt, "and get the fuck out of my house."

"Daddy, it's not his fault," Daphne says quickly, grabbing Theo's arm before he can obey. She's already tugged her t-shirt back on and she's commenced phase two: glaring at her father. "What are you even doing home?"

"What am I—?!" Viridian struggles to contain his temper, and Theo suspects the only thing preventing him from shooting Theo right there and then is the fact that Viridian and the elder Theodore Nott wear the same snake emblem on their leather cuts. "Daphne, you're supposed to be at school!"

Daphne rolls her eyes, adjusting her choker. "Yeah, well, it's not like anything important is happening tod—"

"Your principal called me," Viridian snaps. "Then I saw this little fucker's car in the driveway," he
mutterts with a hard glare at Theo, before transitioning back to admonishing his eldest daughter. "You punched someone, Daphne?"

Daphne lifts her chin, defiant. "Just Ron Weasley," she says, gloriously irreverent, and if Theo wasn't deeply afraid for his life, he's pretty sure he'd kiss her right then, right on the mouth. He'd take the bullet, he figures. It'd be worth it, because look at her. She's a fucking girl almighty.

"Weasley's hardly someone," Daphne says, "and anyway, he started it. I ended it."

Viridian's expression hardens, and his hazel eyes—very similar to the ones he gave Daphne—cut to Theo. "Get out of my house," he says again, "and if you ever put your fucking hands on my daughter again, I will end you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," lies Theo, who isn't an idiot, but naturally, that doesn't remotely work.

"Jesus, Dad," Daphne growls, still refusing to let go of Theo's arm even after he tugs his shirt back on and reaches for his shoes. "I'm not a child, and this isn't the middle ages. You can't just tell him not to touch me like I'm your property——"

"Daphne, don't start," Viridian warns, looking positively exhausted. "I'm not done with you——"

"Oh?" she scoffs. "Well, I'm done with you," she says, and Theo has no choice but to pick up his shoes and let himself be dragged away as Daphne shoves past her father, leaving Theo to give him something of a half-apologetic look.

"Daphne," Viridian grits through his teeth, "DON'T YOU DARE——"

"What are you gonna do, Dad?" she demands, spinning to face him. "Lock me in here, ground me, what?"

Viridian, Theo can see, is trapped. Daphne is his favorite child and Viridian has never said no to her, and now look what he's done. He's raised a beautiful, vicious, angry little goddess, and because he never set limits, she has none, and inevitably, Theo loves her.

"Look, I'm going back to school," Daphne says, using her silky liar's voice, "and we can talk about this when I get home."

"There's nothing to talk about," Viridian says, but even Theo can see he's giving in. "I don't want to hear from your fucking school again, Daph, do you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," says Daphne, tugging Theo behind her and tossing him the keys he would have very well forgotten as he struggles to pull on his shoes. It's his usual, an old pair of black Chucks with holes in the heels. Draco wears coke-white Vans, artfully scuffed. Daphne wears black high-tops that she draws on with silver Sharpie during class. Everything you need to know about them is visible by their footwear.

"Drive," Daphne tells him, falling into the passenger seat, and Jesus motherfucking Christ, someday Theo's definitely going to get shot. She leans over and kisses him hard, her hand tight on his inner thigh. "I love you," she says fiercely, "so fuck my dad."

It's thrilling, really, being in love with someone so fucking insane.

"Where are we going?" Theo says, and Daphne shrugs.

"Just drive," she says, and closes her eyes as he slips the key in the ignition.
Diagon's not exactly a big place, so it's probably not a huge surprise when Theo tenses at the sound of a motorcycle pulling up outside the Leaky Cauldron. Daphne's just finished ordering an extra basket of fries when they spot the elder Theodore Nott aiming himself at the diner's front doors. The Impala's parked outside and there's no time to hide, so Daphne slips hastily onto Theo's side of the booth, shoving him closer to the window and serving as a buffer.

"Don't," Theo says, trying to convince her to stay out of it, but she wants to make damn sure his father doesn't lay a hand on him. The only way to do that, as far as she can tell, is to make sure he has to go through her.

"Shut up," she says, and then Nott is at their table, giving Theo that dead-eyed stare he always gives him, like his own son's a stranger. Just some good-for-nothing kid that looks like his dead wife, which makes Daphne furious.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" says Nott.

"It's lunch," Daphne says before Theo can open his mouth, and Nott glares at her, then returns his attention to Theo.

"Get the fuck back to school," Nott says. "I don't need Greengrass calling me to tell me to get my kid under fucking control, do you hear me?"

Fuck, Daphne thinks furiously, because her father has no fucking clue what he's just done. Theo can't go home now, his dad'll beat the shit out of him. He'll have to stay with Draco again, but it's not like Nott won't find him there. Her dad has never understood that just because he loves her, it doesn't mean all dads are like that. Some men have no fucking problem treating their kids like shit.

"Yeah, Dad," Theo says. "Sorry."

Daphne curls a fist, waiting. She's seen Nott backhand Theo just for looking at him wrong, and she almost wants him to try it now. She was ten back then, but she's older now. She's not afraid of an old man, whether he has the same tattoos as her father or not.

Theo nudges her knee with his, warning her not to push it.

"Go to school," Nott says.

"Okay," Theo replies.

Nott looks at Daphne, who glares up at him.

"You're a fucking handful, aren't you?" he says. "Figures. Viridian's too soft with you."

"Dad," Theo says tightly, "don't—"

"My father's worth ten of you," Daphne snaps.

"Actually, your father's a fucking idiot, but fine," says Nott, and turns to leave just as Daphne considers throwing a punch. What's he going to do, hit a teenage girl? Just try it, she thinks murderously, only Theo's got his arms around her waist, tugging her firmly back to his side.

"Don't you dare," he says in her ear, and she sighs, relenting just as their fries arrive. "Can we get a box?" Theo asks the waiter, who nods, turning to retrieve one, and Daphne looks at Theo with surprise, bemused.
"Why?"

"Because we're going somewhere," Theo says, and he's wearing his best 'fuck it' expression, which means something fucking amazing is about to happen. Immediately, Daphne's rage with his father (and hers) melts away. Theo usually has adventures with Draco, but today he's going to do something stupid with her, and she's fucking amped.

"Fuck my dad," says Theo.

"Yeah, fuck him," Daphne jubilantly agrees, exhilarated. "Where are we going?"

Theo twines her ponytail around his hand, giving it a tug that bares her throat, and then he kisses her in the spot just behind her ear, which always makes her shiver.

"My house," he says.

She's breathless. "Why?"

"Because," he murmurs in her ear, "we're gonna borrow a fucking bike."

"Borrow?"

She can feel him smile.

"Yeah," he says, "sure."

Theo's dad has a collection of motorbikes that he thinks aren't in proper working order, unaware that his son is a uniquely skilled mechanic. Theo's dad is also unaware his son has an A in AP Physics, which is a class normally reserved for seniors (which Theo is not), and that Theo has managed this despite the fact that he's almost never there. To the surprise of many, the only class Theo is actually failing is physical education, because he's gotten a dress cut five times, and that's only counting the times he's bothered to show up. Getting Theo into a uniform isn't exactly the easiest thing in the world, nor is telling him what to do.

Theo parks a few blocks away, just in case, and then he and Daphne sneak into his father's detached garage. He picks out the old Ducati Scrambler he fixed with Darian and Caleb last month and scrounges around for an extra helmet, handing the good one to Daphne. She straps it on and straddles him easily, like she was born for this, which he figures she probably was.

"Let's go," she says, holding him tightly, and he's full of the adrenaline of theft and the thrill of having her hands on him. He loves the way it feels to have her confidence, to know she trusts him. Her thighs are wrapped around his and he lifts one of her hands, kissing her knuckles brusquely.

"Let's go," he agrees, and takes off from his driveway.

They don't go anywhere in particular. He gets on one of the back roads, making their way through the hills. The point is to be free, to go fast, though not too fast. Precious cargo, he thinks, knowing he's responsible for her, and that the point of wearing leather is to not get all scraped up. He hasn't earned a cut yet, something he and Draco are both very, very conscious of. Lucius says they can't join until they graduate, which Theo is pretty sure is Narcissa's rule. She's pretty chill as far as parents go, but she's a college professor and Draco's education is deeply important to her—which is why Draco, unlike Theo, almost never skips class.

Theo has better things to do, he thinks, Daphne's arms tightening around him while he hugs the
curves of the narrow road. He leans to take the speed with something his father probably doesn't know is expertise, but which very much is. Draco rides Lucius' motorcycle with his father's permission, but Theo actually has a license, class C and class M both. He's been forging his father's signature since he was eleven years old.

"Pull over," Daphne says in his ear, and he does, because her hands are tugging at his t-shirt and it's not that hard to figure out what she wants. He pulls to the side of the road, near a forested section of trees, and he turns around so she's on his lap, hands fumbling with his belt buckle. Her hair smells like wind, a little like gasoline and a vintage motor, and he flips open the button of her black jeans to slide his hand under the fabric of her underwear.

They haven't had sex yet, but still, Theo knows how to do a thing or two. Daphne moans, rubbing against his palm, and he smirks against her lips, cock twitching as he nudges the black lace thong aside. Anyone could see them if they drove by, but no one does. She pants and whines, breasts straining in a way that makes him want to fucking die. Her black nails dig into the back of his neck and sure, his hand almost cramps, but it's worth it when she comes, biting down on his lip and grabbing his hand to hold it still.

They ride it out together while she catches her breath, his cock straining beneath his jeans.

"Come on," she whispers, "let me return the favor."

She's very reciprocal that way, which he appreciates, but still. "It's two, Daph. We should get back."

"Oh please," she scoffs, rolling her eyes. "Like this'll take long."

Unfortunately, she's right. More unfortunately, Theo hears a car coming the moment her hand closes around his shaft. He hurriedly pushes her hand away, and lucky he does, too, because it's a police cruiser coming around the bend.

"Slughorn," he mutters, and Daphne makes a face of repulsion, buttoning her jeans and adjusting her bra.

The police chief pulls up next to Theo's bike, rolling down the window and arching a brow.

"Nott Junior," he says, knocking his sunglasses down his nose to give Theo a pursed look of disapproval, "shouldn't you two be in school?"

"Maybe," Theo says, because if there's one thing he doesn't give a shit about, it's cops. He doesn't know anybody who does, and Daphne's no different. Theo re-settles himself on his bike, pulling his helmet on, and says, "Got a problem?"

"You shouldn't be here," Slughorn says.

"We wouldn't be if you weren't still talking to us," Theo says.

Slughorn looks at Daphne, then back at Theo.

"Get back to school," he says. "If I catch you here again, I don't care who your daddy is, Nott. You can go downtown and stay the night."

"For what?" Theo scoffs. "I'm not doing anything illegal."

"Come on, babe," Daphne says. "Let's go."
She usually has a cooler head when it comes to these types of run-ins, probably because Slughorn doesn't ride her the way he does Draco and Theo. Slughorn has it out for them, the same way he had it out for their fathers, and the fat bastard doesn't even bother to know that Theo's dad doesn't give a shit if he rots in jail. Theo's first call would be Draco or Darian, not his dad, but that's not important.

Daphne said to go, so they're going.

"Later, Chief," says Theo, tossing him a lazy salute. He starts the engine when Slughorn says something; probably something along the lines of 'I'll get you next time, you meddling kids,' but Theo can't hear it. He only hears Daphne laughing in his ear as he flips the bike around, heading the other way down the narrow tree-lined path.

Daphne's perched on Theo's bike, reclining against it when Astoria emerges from class, dark eyes widening at the sight of her big sister being the stuff of every teenage boy's wet dreams. "Keep walking," Daphne lazily advises Ron Weasley, whose mouth snaps shut when he realizes she's noticed him noticing her.

"You heard her," Theo said, slinging an arm around Daphne from behind and winking at Ron, who flips him off, meeting up with his sister Ginny.

"Hey, Gin," Daphne calls, tilting her head to lean against Theo's chest, and Ginny turns. "Party tonight at Malfoy's. You coming?"

They're not friends, exactly, but Ginny's taken a drag from Daphne's joint before. She's cool. More importantly, it makes Ron furious.

"Yeah," Ginny says, "su-"

"No, she isn't," Ron snaps, incensed, and Daphne winks at him before turning her head, slipping her tongue in Theo's ear. "You two are fucking disgusting," Ron shouts at them, hurrying his sister to the beat-up old station wagon his brother Percy used to drive as Daphne and Theo laugh, waving him away.

"Wait, it's Draco's party?" Astoria says, because unfortunately Daphne forgot her sister was within hearing distance while she was busy trying to ruin Ron Weasley's day. "Can I come?"

"Absolutely fucking not," says Daphne, because Astoria is a freshman and fifteen and a fucking baby bird and nobody, nobody, at that party is going to be anything but trouble. Daphne included.

"Aw, come on, Greengrass," Theo drawls in her ear. "Let the kid have some fun."

Daphne elbows Theo, who nips at her neck, and then she's turned her head and he's trapped her into a kiss and she's scolding him, muttering to his lips about how he needs to just shut the fuck up once in a while, but then her tongue is in his mouth and his hands are on her bare torso and fuck, she's forgotten about Astoria again, until someone else sighs loudly.

"Nott," says Draco's voice, "what the fuck is this?"

Daphne and Theo break apart, regrettably, and she hunts for chapstick in her bag while Theo explains to Draco why he doesn't have the Impala anymore and only has a bike.

"You weren't at lunch. Have you two honestly just been fucking all day?" Draco says, exasperated, and Astoria giggles. "Better get it out of your systems before tonight. I don't want people throwing
up in my house just because you two can't keep your hands to yourselves."

"True," Theo drawls, "I usually leave the vomit-inducing to you. Hate to have to steal that crown."

"Tighten up," Draco mutters, "that was abysmal."

"Hey, Draco," Astoria simpers coquettishly, and Daphne notices that while Draco was talking to Theo, her little sister rolled the waistband of her white miniskirt. Subtle, Daphne sighs internally, and gives her sister a glare of admonishment as Draco glances distractedly elsewhere.

"Yeah, hi Astoria—"

"Come on, let's go," Daphne suggests, leaping down from Theo's bike and giving him a parting kiss. "I'll just take her home and then I'll meet you at Draco's."

"Wait," Astoria says, looking disappointed. "I don't want to go home, Daph—"

"She can come if she wants," Draco says, giving Astoria half a glance and shrugging. "I've got errands to run, anyway. Can't do it on a bike," he grumbles, giving Theo a purposeful glare.

"Don't sulk so much, sweetheart," Theo advises, giving Draco's cheek a smack before nudging Daphne. "Babe," he says, with the puppy-dog look he usually gives her when he's about to ask for a favor, "give Draco your car so he can buy cups and perfect his party mixtape."

"I don't have a party mixtape," Draco says irritably.

"Sure you don't," Theo soothes him, and Daphne is hesitant, but after a moment of consideration (and after glancing at Astoria, who is feverishly begging Daphne with a desperate glance), she grudgingly retrieves her keys.

"Drive carefully," she warns Draco, who rolls his eyes. She knows he's a good driver, but still. She wants it to be perfectly clear she'll murder him if he ever lets anything happen to Astoria, who looks positively rapturous at the prospect of going to the liquor store with Draco Malfoy. "And as for you," she says to Astoria, "you are not drinking tonight, do you understand me? You can stay for a bit, but that's it."

Astoria, unfortunately, is too excited to listen. "Oh, Daph, you should bring your tattoo gun!"

"Your what?" Theo and Draco say in unison, and Daphne groans.

"You're not supposed to know about that," she says to Astoria, who smiles sheepishly. Daphne hides it in her car, which is the one place her mother doesn't snoop through during the day because it's here, in the school parking lot. She hasn't used it on skin yet, because duh, but she thinks she could probably figure it out. Provided it isn't Astoria she's using for a guinea pig.

Luckily, though, there are other things to discuss. "We'd better go," Theo tells Daphne, catching that Draco has noticed Ron where he and Ginny have stopped to talk to Dean and Seamus in the parking lot. Like this morning, Ron and Draco are now giving each other murderous glances, which is apparently as annoying to Theo as it is to Daphne.

"Hey," Theo warns, backhanding Draco in the chest and nudging him towards Daphne's car. "Pick a new fight, Malfoy. This show's getting old."

Draco makes a gruff sound of agreement, his attention shifting slightly, but not quite enough.
"Weaslette's gotten hot," he muses unhelpfully, looking like he might have licked his lips like a cartoon wolf. Beside him, Astoria makes a tragic face of disappointment, wilting slightly.

"He's an idiot," Daphne reminds her sister, "who just wants to fuck Ginny to piss off her brother—which, by the way, is objectively stupid," she adds to Draco, giving him a warning glance. "And not even worth it."

"Sure," Draco says, smug as always, though he concedes to grant Astoria the almighty gift of his attention. "Hey, you into Coheed and Cambria?" he asks her, pulling the cd out of his bag.

"I love Coheed and Cambria," Astoria lies dotingly, and Daphne turns to Theo with an eye roll, beckoning him back on the bike.

"Let's go, stud," she says, and he smiles at her in a way that reminds her how much she likes his mouth. It also reminds her that she owes him something, and that she thinks she can remedy it. Draco's driveway conveniently stretches out to the backyard, and if Theo pulls his bike around near Lucius' shed, she can go down on him out of sight from the street.

She loves the way Theo's torso looks in daylight. He's always been lanky, but lately his natural weediness has sprouted abs and one of those Adonis belts, with the V-shape that angles down along the bones of his hips. It's exciting, feeling the hard crevices of him. Probably as exciting as her softness, Daphne guesses, and she thinks again that maybe she really does want to have sex with him. She likes everything they've done so far. She especially likes when Theo goes down on her, something she was nervous about until it was him, which brings her back to thoughts of his mouth.

"Let's go," he agrees, and suddenly, she can't wait to touch him. She thinks she probably won't wait long at all, and then, true to form, once she decides not to, she doesn't. The moment they pull into Draco's house, she has him leaning back on his bike with her hands on his hips, and while he's gritting her name through his teeth, she thinks: Yeah, maybe tonight.

Maybe it'll be tonight.

The party that night is the same as every party, even when Ron shows up with Seamus and Dean. Theo and Draco have done the same thing with the older Weasley brothers' parties—because this is Diagon, and it's a small town, and it's not like there's anything else to do.

"Weasley," Draco says coolly, "glad you could make it. Weaslette," he adds to Ginny, handing her a beer, and Theo watches with half a smile as Draco employs a little of the panache he usually reserves for special occasions of seduction. Her cheeks flush instantly in the same moment Ron makes a face, which makes it clear they'd never planned on coming until Ginny insisted. Theo thinks, fuck, she doesn't stand a chance, and then he laughs to himself, knowing Ron Weasley's kid sister is about to fall victim to the charms of Draco Malfoy.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Daphne says, reappearing from the bathroom. She slips comfortably under Theo's arm, eyes narrowing at the sight of Draco flirting with Ginny. "Really, her? How transparent is he?"

"Apparently not very," Theo says, gesturing to where Ron looks like he's about to lose his mind. "It's very good revenge, if you want to think about it that way."

"Ugh. He could at least not do it in front of Astoria," she says, gaze flicking to her sister, who is definitely drinking. Both the Greengrass daughters refuse to follow instructions, it seems, and
Theo's amused by that, but he knows Daphne won't be. He lures her away from Astoria and grabs Draco, yanking him away from Ginny.

"How about you put that tattoo gun to use, Greengrass?" Theo says to her, and this, he knows, is enough to get Draco's attention. The only thing Draco loves more than his mom, his dick, and his books is the prospect of getting tattoos, which is another thing Lucius has forbidden until Draco's eighteenth birthday, along with joining the Club. "We should try it out."

They're just drunk enough that this is a great idea, but not so drunk that Theo has any lingering doubts Daphne can do it. Though, in fairness, he always thinks she can do anything, whether he's been drinking or not.

"Yeah, let's," Daphne says, and turns to Draco. "So what d'you want?"

"A dragon," he says instantly, "on my forearm."

"Yeah, aim lower," Daphne says with a scoff. "I'm just a girl with a tattoo gun from a pawn shop, not a fucking professional tattoo artist."

"Or someone with a sterile environment," Theo says, "though, throw some vodka on there and I can only assume we're good to go."

"Fine," Draco says, and settles for his initials on the inside of his bicep.

Theo approves of the choice. Daphne's always been especially good at lettering, which he knows from having watched her do it in her school books since they were kids. He hopes he can talk her into singing tonight, too, which she doesn't do often, but it always reminds him of the fifth grade talent show when she does. She'd borrowed her dad's acoustic guitar and sung Fleetwood Mac, looking like an angel in her white prairie dress. Baby, I'd give you my world, he can still hear her sing in the bell-like tones of her soprano, and it always prompts a shiver in his bones.

Draco's pleased with it, more arrogant than ever from the impulsive thing he's just done. He wants to try tattooing Daphne in return, but she says no, so he immediately loses interest and bails.

"What about you?" Daphne asks Theo, and he shrugs, sipping from his beer.

"Surprise me," he says, and she takes his arm, giving him a narrow, angular heart just beneath the fold of his elbow, on the inside of his forearm. The needle scratches at his skin and stings and he suspects he now has a little of Draco's blood flowing through the tunnels of his veins, but Daphne's hand holding him steady is warm, comforting, sure. His skin is red and a little swollen, but when she finishes, she looks up at him with a smile.

"It's so you always have my heart on your sleeve," she says. Her auburn hair is falling forward into her face, and he fucking loves her. He wants to aim his fist at the sky, Judd Nelson-style, because he loves her and she's his and he's got her heart on his sleeve, but he doesn't.

Instead, he pulls her to her feet and says, "Dance with me."

In the background, Draco's been playing 90s hip-hop (because Professor Narcissa once told him Straight Outta Compton influenced a whole generation and Draco thinks of himself as Revolutionary with a capital R even though he is most certainly Not with a capital N) and Theo wants to dance with Daphne. He wants to dance with his girl, and sure, he wishes it was some smooth 70s classic rock ballad so he can hold her close, but he'll take what he can get, and she smiles at him and lets him do it. She grinds on him to Shoop, which she knows most of the words to (You're packed and you're stacked, 'specially in the back! she mouths with absolute delight),
The song becomes *Gold Digger*, which, fair enough, is a jam, and then transitions to *Candy Shop*, which has Daphne's hips swaying in a mesmerizing figure-eight. Everyone else is dancing now, lurching sloppily to the music while 50 Cent raps about blow jobs. Theo, meanwhile, has his hands tight on Daphne's black jeans, his thumbs toying with the hem of her blue t-shirt and a little sweat starting to drip down his back. His new tattoo still stings and he wonders if he should do something to treat it, but discards that when Daphne leans against his chest, reaching behind her to pull him closer. *Give it to me, baby, nice and slow*, Fiddy says, and Theo thinks through gritted teeth, *You're not helping.*

Daphne turns, laughing, and her black eyeliner is smudged, and she's perfect. Theo takes another sip of his beer, letting her hands slide under his t-shirt, and yeah, everyone's watching, but fuck it. He kisses her, she kisses him back, and they only slow down when the song changes again, this time to *Let Me Love You*. This one is slower, a little closer to the ballad he was looking for, and he pulls her into his chest, cradling the back of her head.

His lips brush her cheek, his hands running along the slickness of the sweat on her skin. She wraps her arms around his neck, humming along.

"I'm going to get a real tattoo soon," she muses in his ear, just loud enough over the music for him to hear her voice. "A snake and a rose, I think. Around my upper arm. For my dad," she adds, "and for you."

"I'm the rose?" Theo says, and he's joking, but she smiles up at him.

"Maybe," she says, and he tips her chin up, kissing her again. She tastes like euphoria and the vodka soda she's been drinking and he's pretty sure he could find an empty room somewhere to do a lot more than kiss her, but she stiffens, frowning. "Where's Draco?" she says, and Theo blinks, looking around with suspicion.

Sure enough, Ron's still there, but Ginny's not at his side. It seems a little like Ron and Theo have sorted this out at the exact same moment, and similarly, they both spot Ginny pulling Draco's hand somewhere that looks like it's about to be a room upstairs—where, coincidentally Theo had hoped to take Daphne.

"Hold it," Ron says, launching in front of his sister. "You're not going anywhere with him."

'Hi'm is, of course, delivered with venom, or as much venom as someone like Ron Weasley can conjure, which is more like a juvenile tantrum.

"Oh, shut *up*, Ron," Ginny says, rolling her eyes, but Ron looks more murderous than usual, so Theo gives Draco a look that says, Don't start.

In reply, Draco lifts his bottle to his lips, smirking something that looks like, *Already did.*

"Malfoy," Ron growls, "if you so much as *look* at my sister the wrong way—"

Draco winks at Ginny, who slides her tongue out over her glossless lips.

"MALFOY," Ron snarls, but Theo makes a point of stepping deliberately in front of him, suggesting wordlessly that perhaps he's chosen the wrong place for a turf war.

"Out," Theo says, and Ron's eyes narrow.
"It's not your party," Ron says.

"No," Theo agrees, "but if you'd like to remain in the same condition you came in, then consider it a piece of friendly advice."

Theo's 150% sure that Draco is doing this purely to upset Ron, and he's 800% sure it's working. Ron scowls, letting his gaze cut to Draco.

Draco, meanwhile, throws an arm around Theo's shoulders, posing with all the regality of someone who should definitely get punched in the face, but likely won't. At least not tonight.

"Bye, now," Draco says with obnoxious cheer, and surely—surely—they're going to pay for this someday, but they don't really care about it right now. Theo and Draco watch Ron get dragged out by Seamus and Dean, holding their ranks in silence until the front door shuts, and Theo turns to Draco.

"You're a dumb piece of shit, you know that?" Theo says, and Draco grins, downing the rest of his bottle.

"I'm doing the poor girl a favor," he says, shrugging. "What was I going to do, turn her away?"

"It'd be a first," Theo drily agrees, and Draco laughs, clapping a hand on his shoulder and returning to the party as Theo looks around for Daphne.

He finds her in the backyard with her arms around Astoria, who's sniffling quietly. "Hey," Daphne says, relieved to see him, "thank god you're here. You can drive, right?"

Theo, who doesn't care much for drinking, has had less than a beer. "Yes."

"Can you help me take her home?" Daphne says, stroking her sister's hair. Poor thing, Theo sighs internally. Falling for Draco Malfoy is surely a unique form of punishment.

"Yeah," Theo says, and gestures Astoria around the side yard so she doesn't have to walk through the party, where Draco is almost certainly dancing with some other girl. Daphne flashes him a grateful smile and cups his cheek, and he's disappointed the night with her is over, but it is what it is. He figures he'll probably come back here and help Draco clean up, maybe pass out on the couch like he does when he's avoiding going home, but then Daphne surprises him.

"After we take her home, let's go somewhere," she says softly, and Theo blinks.

"Really?"

"Really," she says, and gives him a smile that he's pretty sure means this night is far from over.

Daphne and Astoria have a bond that means when Daphne says, "Don't tell Mom any of this," Astoria nods and it's as good as a blood oath between them. She sneaks in through Daphne's bedroom window, and though there's no way Viridian or Ava are sleeping, that's not Daphne's problem right now. In terms of punishment, Astoria takes the early shift. Daphne will take the brunt of it later.

"Come on, let's go," she says when they pull away with the headlights off, but they've got nowhere to go, really, so Theo drives them back to the high school. They park in the parking lot and make their way to the football field. Obviously, neither of them are much for team sports. They're adept at hopping fences, though, and when the field proves uninteresting, they make their way past it to
the pool.

The whole place is so dead it's like they're ghosts, like time is somehow suspended. Daphne pulls off her shirt, then unzips her pants, and Theo sighs like, Really? and she smirks like, Really. He strips down to his boxers and she's left in her bra and underwear, and then she jumps into the pool, full cannonball, because that's her style. Everything about Theo is meticulous and hard-won, but Daphne likes to push him, to shove him out of his comfort zone. To her, he is most beautiful when he's like that, when he's thrilled and fucking scared and alive as shit, which he always is when he's jumping in after her.

"Fuck," he says when he surfaces, flinging his dark hair out of his eyes, and she floats over to him, wrapping her legs around his hips as he slides an arm around her ribs. "And to think," he says, "we could have just gone to the Leaky and had bagels."

She shuts him up with a kiss that escalates to friction, her fingers running through his wet hair. Her makeup is probably a lost cause by now, but she's not worried about it. He tastes like salt and chlorine and she's just tipsy enough that the heat of his touch is positively fucking infernal. She can feel his hand on her ass like it's going to leave a mark, like it's going to brand her, and his fingertips are tracing her skin in smooth little circles that are never, not ever, going away. She licks at his lips and gives him sloppy, syrupy kisses, over his cheeks and up to his eyes and then to his forehead, where she lingers.

"I love you," she says.

He looks up at her, half-smiling, half-dazed.

"And I love you," he replies, and if only all of life can be this simple. If only life is as easy as when Theo holds her close, kisses her hard, slides his hands over her body. If only the whole thing could always be as uncomplicated as her hips grinding against his while she listens for the inevitable gasp that follows. She squirms and wriggles and moans and tightens her fingers in his hair, and it's just that, and it's perfect, and it's easy. Just her and him, both of them stupid and young and in love.

How many times in life does a person even get that lucky?

With him, every opportunity is the perfect one.

"Theo," she says, when her whole body is flooded with numbness and bliss and his chin is resting on her shoulder, his lips pressed to the line of her clavicle. He looks up, and she twists her fingers in his hair. "I want you to give me a tattoo," she says.

"Where?" he asks.

She smiles.

"Good question," she says, and floats toward the stairs, beckoning for him to follow.

They go back to her car to retrieve the tattoo gun. Daphne's busy being mysterious, as she loves to do every so often, and while Theo's a little paranoid her dad's going to be out looking for her soon enough, he forgets about it the moment she unzips her jeans for the second time that night.

She tugs her black thong down to show him. "Here," she says, pointing to a spot just below her hips, and he swallows. "We should do it back there, then," he manages to say, gesturing blindly to the backseat of her car,
because he can't stop staring at her. "You know, where there's better light."

"Yeah, sure," she says, and she climbs into her backseat. He shoves the two front seats down and clammers in after her, noticing that she's discarded her black jeans altogether. She looks at him for a moment, seeming determined, and then she pulls her underwear down, too.

He looks down at her and thinks for probably the hundredth time that day that he's almost certainly going to die tonight, and that's perfectly fine with him.

"There?" he manages to say, tracing his finger over the spot she's selected, and she nods.

"There," she says, and shows him how to operate the tattoo gun. "I want a heart," she says, "like the one I gave you."

His heart, she means.

It's really not that complicated, though trying not to spill the little tub of ink is messy and he's worried the heart is lopsided. She makes a little hiss of pain at first, startled by the vibration on what is obviously extremely sensitive skin, and he worries the entire time that he's hurting her. Which is good, because if not for that, he would be distracted by how close he is to her bare cunt, which is something he's touched before, and tasted, too, but only in hasty moments of shoving her underwear aside or ducking his head under her skirt. That she's basically naked now, right there in the backseat of her car, is failing to process in his brain, and he can hardly think at all except to think Dear god, please say I'm not hurting her, please tell me I never will.

He finishes and blows lightly over her skin, which is super definitely not medically sound but he doesn't want it to sting, and it's what people do when they get cuts and bruises. It's what people do when something hurts.

Then he kisses it softly, and his lips are right there, so he slides down a little lower, hearing her breath come short.

This is not easy to do in a car, but he manages to arrange her legs in a butterfly around his head, and then he kisses her between the lips of her pussy, which he is hard-pressed not to notice is wet for him. It's almost worth laughing about, really, that it's him she wants, when he is nothing that anyone wants and somehow she, the perfect person—the world's most perfect fucking person—could be with anyone, anyone at all, and she picks him. He sucks her clit and thinks, You picked me, and it suddenly makes him ravenous to please her, desperate for her satisfaction as she moans and quakes around his head.

He was her first kiss, her first orgasm, her first everything, and she is his everything in general, and when she whispers, "Let's do it, please, I want to," he knows this was something that was always going to happen, even if he didn't picture it like this. Are you sure? Yes she's sure. Really, here? Yes, here, it's the perfect night, Theo, and I don't want to wait anymore, I want you, I want to know what you feel like. I want you too, I want you so badly, but I can wait for a better time, a better place—No, there is no better time Theo, this is the one, can't you feel it? Don't you feel it in the air, aren't you sure?

She strips him carefully, almost gingerly, partially because there's not a lot of room in this coupe of hers but also because he's pretty sure she's more nervous than she seems, but he understands that she doesn't want him to know that. He kisses her hands and tries, with what little resources he possesses, to make it special. He says I love you as many times as he can, calls her babe, calls her Daphne, calls her his. He kisses her in the spots she likes, behind her ear and at the base of her throat. He holds her head with one hand and her fingers with the other. Somehow, through no small
amount of fumbling, he's got on the condom from his wallet that he's put on with shaking hands. She pulls him close and he swallows hard and when he angles the tip of his cock at the slit of her cunt, they both suck in a breath.

"Nervous?" he asks her, laughing a little because he's scared shitless, and sure, he wants to do this with her more than he's ever wanted to do anything in his entire life, but he also kind of wants her to say no, so that next time he can be, you know. Ready. Or at least, more ready. Or something. But then no, if she changes her mind he'll die, probably. Or something.

"Yeah, I'm a little nervous," she confesses, and she's taken it off now, the Daphne Blue t-shirt that will forever be her color in his mind, and the pale pink bra, too. She's naked in his arms and they could get caught so easily but who cares, who gives a fuck about any of it. He'd rather go to prison for loving her than anything else. "I'm a little scared, but you're here," she says to him, and kisses him. "Theo," she whispers, "I'm not afraid when you're with me."

He nods, trying not to quake too raucously from nerves, and after another breath to look her in her hazel eyes and center himself, he slides slowly inside her.

She whimpers a little and he stops.

Then she nods, "Slowly," and he moves again. He pushes inside her and he can feel some sort of maddening euphoria, only he tries desperately not to make it too short or too terrible. He has a brief, traumatizing vision of her telling the story someday to some other guy, laughing about the time she lost her virginity to her high school boyfriend and how it was terrible, and that he was probably dead now for all she knew.

The thought's just sobering enough for him not to completely explode, though she doesn't look any more comfortable than she did before. He winces, certain he's going to get some sort of cramp from trying to fit his interminably long legs into the backseat, and then he pulls out of her gently, shaking his head.

"Let's try this instead," he says, sitting upright and pulling her into his lap, and agreeably, she straddles him, and now she's the one who gets to choose how deep he goes and when. She lowers herself onto him, and this time their eyes are locked, she's not flinching from pain, and she nods carefully when she takes all of him inside her. He's still very, very close to losing it, to coming undone with a single fucking shift of her hips, but she rocks slowly, very slowly, and he holds her in his arms while she does.

Hilarious, really, that everyone thinks they've been fucking for ages. Everyone thinks Greengrass and Nott get it all the time—like crazy, like rabbits. In reality, he has been falling in love with every part of her slowly, and as far as what he's wanted all this time, this isn't the only piece, or the best piece, or the last piece. It's not even the most important piece. It's just one piece among many, and Theo is lucky, luckier than she understands, that now, he will forever have a piece of her and keep it for himself. Sure, they have tattoos now, so there are multiple levels of permanence involved, but the fact that they chose each other on this particular night is something they will always keep between them, and that's why they waited. That's why everything that everyone else can see is such a fucking joke. Because she is Daphne Blue in his arms, and she is valuable and rare, and someday, he will be old, and he will still think of the night he held her like this, as close to her now as he has ever been to anyone.

She moans a little, because he's positioned just near her clit, and he holds on barely, just barely long enough for them to come at the same time. It's a fucking miracle, which probably means god was listening to him earlier and now they've entered into some kind of contract which might work out for Theo, or might not. It doesn't matter. It doesn't fucking matter. Theo strokes Daphne's hair
and runs his fingers over her spine and thinks about nothing else but the shape of her, about the beat of her heart, and about how it feels to catch his breath.

They sit there for a long time, him still inside her, her arms still tight around his neck.

"I should take you home," he says, and she turns her head, pressing her lips to his cheek.

"I am home," she whispers, and he closes his eyes, holding onto her so gratefully he can't even manage to speak.

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When she wakes, her head resting on his chest where they've somehow managed to fall asleep in the reclining seat on the passenger side, it's nearly morning. Consequence of teenage mischief, probably, that they still manage to sleep under the worst and most dastardly conditions.

They should go, Daphne thinks, because her father is probably going to come looking for her soon, and although the high school is hardly going to be the first place he looks, it's still a possibility. Diagon really isn't that big.

"Your dad's going to kill me," Theo says, his voice gravelly with morning, and Daphne stifles a laugh.

"Yeah, probably," she says, and rests her chin on his chest. "Sorry."

"Nah," he says, "worth it."

He plays with her hair, smiling a little absently, like his mind is on other things. On her, but on other versions of her. Maybe the her from last night, which makes her smack his chest with her palm.

"Stop," she says.

"Stop what?"

"Smiling like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you've seen me naked."

His smile broadens, and she groans.

"I said stop—"

"Alright, alright," he says, still looking terribly amused with himself, and then he says again, "I should take you home."

"Mm," she says.

Neither of them move, and she stretches out, her t-shirt rising up above her belly button while she slides her fingers through his lawless hair.

"Let's get bagels," she says, "I'm hungry."

Theo's mouth twitches. "Oh, yeah?"
"Yeah," she says, and then, after a second to consider it, "But before we go—"

"Yes?"

"I think that we should do it one more time," she whispers, and her fingertips trail down over the stubble on his cheeks until they brush his lips, temptingly. She looks at his green eyes and thinks, You make me so soft, you stupid boy.

Theo, in answer, puts his hand on her black jeans, tugs at her blue t-shirt, and thinks, for better or worse, This will always make me think of you.

In the late eighties, Viridian Greengrass named his daughter after the color of his Fender guitar, and a little under two decades later, she makes the shade her own. She claims it as hers, and then she gives Theo Nott permission to make it his. Fast forward a few more years, past the boho and the low-lows into the age of contouring and crop tops, and these things will still be undeniably true.

But in the early 2000s, with nothing in the world to worry about except the world itself, Theo gives Daphne Greengrass' belt loop a tug and pulls her in for a kiss, and like another young man once thought, the color Daphne Blue is Theo Nott's most prized possession.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Happy Valentine's Day, lovers! In case you care what's new with me, One For My Enemy is now available on my tumblr. Thank you for reading!
You Make My Dreams

Pairing: Jamcissa (James Potter x Narcissa Black)

Universe: muggle AU

Rating: M for sex and language

Summary: Narcissa and her sisters are a trio of burlesque dancers in downtown Los Angeles, while James is an aspiring actor. Turns out the industry of starving artists in L.A. is really rather small.

A little lower.

Please, god, a little lower, nearly there—

Yes, okay, good. Good, that's good.

Oh. Oh, better.

Yes, come on. There it is, blondie, right there. Suck on it a little, come on, give me something—

"Good?"

"Yeah, so good—"

Jesus, a little variation would be nice. Spell the alphabet, I don't care—

"You look uncomfortable."

"Hm? I'm not, I'm fine."

"You're fine?"

"Yeah, I'm… I like it, keep going."

Her phone buzzed from where she'd discarded her purse on the bed and she grimaced, turning to dig it out of her bag.

"Um," said Lucius, lifting his head. "Are you really going to take that right now, or—?"

"It's probably just my sister. Do you have a condom?" she said, and he blinked, surprised.

"I… Really? But—"

"Put it on," she advised, hitting answer, "this'll only take a sec." She raised the phone to her ear, unsurprised by the name on the screen. It was always either Andromeda or Bellatrix, though far more often the latter. "Andy?"

"Cissa, hi. How was the coffee date?"
Andromeda sounded nervous, which wasn't a good sign.

"Um," Narcissa said, glancing down at where her skirt had been pushed up around her waist. "Good."

"Great, good, excellent. So, about tonight—"

"The Edison, right?"

"Yeah. No, wait, sorry—no, it's Clifton's tonight." Narcissa mentally added 'frantic' to the list of Andromeda's unusual qualities, along with 'distracted.' "But listen, I called because, um. Okay, so, about Bella—"

Narcissa looked up, watching Lucius eagerly unroll the condom over his dick.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to tell her tonight."

"No," Narcissa said, shooting upright. "Really?"

She glanced up at an expectant Lucius and frowned, about to mouth for him to wait before swiftly changing her mind. It wasn't like it was any harder to have this conversation on her hands and knees. "Quietly," she warned, beckoning him.

His surprise lasted about half a second before he slid his hands hungrily over her ass, not needing to be told twice.

Andromeda, meanwhile, was still parsing uncertainly through her explanation. "I know it's not ideal timing, but honestly, will it ever be? I'm starting to think I should just get it over with. Ted wants an answer and really, I don't blame him. I know the whole thing puts you in a difficult position—"

"Is there lube on that?" Narcissa asked over her shoulder, covering the receiver and arching a brow as Lucius nudged the tip of his cock against her. He paused, then hastily leaned over, removing some from his nightstand and proceeding to spill it over his palm.

"—but I just don't think I can lie to Bella any longer about my plans. And listen, I promise I won't tell her until after the set—"


"What?"

"Not you, Andy. Talking to the barista."

"You're still there?"

"No, I'm—wait, what?"

"You're still at the coffee shop? I thought you said the date was over."

"Yeah, it is, I just—" Lucius pushed inside her with a little hiss between his teeth; to his credit, he was adequately sized. Narcissa shifted onto her elbows, frowning as she returned her attention to the phone. "Look, never mind. You really think it has to be tonight?"
Andromeda sighed. "Yes, Cissy. Tonight. I can't put it off any longer—but I'll warn you before I tell her, I promise."

Narcissa sighed, chewing her lip, and then, remembering she was supposed to be enjoying herself, she glanced over her shoulder at Lucius. "So good," she mouthed to him in reassurance, and he gave her a little smirk, traces of his fingers already manifesting on her skin.

"I've been wanting to do this since I first saw you dance," he said, and Narcissa held a finger to her lips, silencing him.

"Narcissa, are you still there?"

"Yes, Andy, I'm here—"

"You're not upset, are you?"

Narcissa grimaced. "I mean, it's not great news," she admitted, "but if you're sure—"

"I'm sure, Cissa. Really sure. But we can talk about it more if you want," Andromeda offered, gratuitously sympathetic. "Are you meeting us at the venue, or are you coming home first?"

Curtain call was at nine, which was seven hours away, and there was absolutely no chance Narcissa would be staying here longer than twenty more minutes.

"I'll see you at home. Bella's meeting us at the venue, though."

"Right. Yeah, I know. Okay, see you later—want me to get you anything?"

Lucius gave a low groan. Twenty minutes had been generous; Narcissa would be out the door in fifteen. Probably best, as she was starving.

"The salad with the strawberries, please?"

"You got it. See you soon."

Narcissa hung up the phone, tossing it aside, and straightened to glance lasciviously at Lucius. This was practice for later, really. No point wasting her best moves now, but it was at least more fun than lazily browsing her Netflix queue.

"Come for me," she breathed in Lucius' ear, raking her fingers through his hair.

Conveniently, he obliged.

A trio of pretty burlesque dancers—sisters, at that—could find fairly steady work in the downtown Los Angeles scene, surprising as that seemed. The Edison, a 1920s-themed bar located in an old city power plant, was one of the better venues for it, but that evening would be Clifton's, which was possibly one of the strangest and most eccentric places downtown. The bottom floor was a menagerie of taxidermy that looked straight out of the Matterhorn ride at Disneyland; the second floor was an enormous courtyard designed around a massive tree, from which two levels of balconies could be viewed. Typically, Narcissa and her sisters were distributed along the top floor, grinding slowly against glass barriers and turning sultry glances downward for the benefit of Clifton's patrons. Elsewhere on the third floor, in a marginally more private ballroom, there was a live brass band and, of all things, swing dancing; an abrupt shift from the club mix outside.

That particular night wasn't anything out of the ordinary. These types of appearances were less
choreographed than they were curated; as in, it wasn't about the dancing so much as how the sisters looked against the sparkling darkness of the club. Bella usually dressed Narcissa in black, offsetting the platinum blonde of her hair. "Everyone loves a little mystery," she always said, so while she and Andromeda wore red lace balconette bras with matching panties and garters, Narcissa usually wore a black satin bustier, her hair left in pillow-tousled waves down her back.

The three of them always got ready together in the makeshift dressing room, fixing lipstick and refreshing curls, sometimes interacting with other dancers. It was the highlight of Narcissa's evening, usually, as the dancing itself had gotten old. There wasn't a lot to think about anymore, aside from not tripping in her stiletto heels. She used to people-watch while she arched her back and swung her hips, but even her curiosity was mostly tired. Club mating rituals rarely changed enough to make it worth taking stock from night to night.

Typically, Narcissa preferred the elegance and careful rehearsal of their performances at The Edison to the chaotic, palpable weirdness of Clifton's. There was only one good thing about being there, though it wasn't always a guarantee, and she wasn't sure yet if tonight would be worth the hassle of finding out.

She followed her sisters back to the dressing room after their performance and changed methodically into normal underwear (and actual clothes), only half-listening while Bellatrix said something about their next audition.

"—a great opportunity, Cissy. Though, now that I think about it we should put you in white. Also, I know you have that whole wide-eyed ingenue thing going for you, but a little smiling might help —"

"Yeah, Bella, sure—"

"Andromeda agrees with me. Don't you, Andy?"

"Hm? Oh, right, yeah… but actually, um. Bella?" ventured Andromeda, looking demurely hesitant despite the flame-red of her lips and nails. She took their eldest sister by the crook of her arm, angling a deliberate glance over her shoulder at Narcissa. "Can we talk?"

That was warning enough. Narcissa grabbed her bag and pivoted away the moment Bella turned to Andromeda, leaving her costume behind and figuring it was only fair to make her sister take it home. She had no interest in being there after Andromeda confessed she would be leaving; Bella would assume Narcissa planned to stay, probably, which meant she'd have to make up her mind about whether or not she was going to.

Which she definitely wasn't interested in doing right now. Certainly not after a long night.

Narcissa wandered out of the dressing room, smothering a little disappointment when she found the rest of the club mostly empied. Luckily, she caught the motion of the alley door just before she slipped out through the exit, registering voices from outside. Downtown L.A. wasn't exactly the safest place to wander the shadowed spaces between buildings, but she was used to reading the atmosphere by now. She knew what kind of yelling to stay away from, and this wasn't that.

"Lil, come on—"

"Fuck off, James!"

"Oh, come on, I was joking—"

"You're an arrogant shitbag, James Potter, and I'm fucking sick of it. I don't know what possessed
me to sleep with you in the first place."

Narcissa waited, half-concealed behind the door.

"Fine, Lily," James sighed, sounding exhausted. A fair descriptor, as it was nearly two in the morning. "If you want to storm out, storm out. I won't stop you."

"Don't tell me what to do, asshole!"

Narcissa heard the sound of heels clicking down the alley, and then she stepped down from the stoop, catching sight of James. He was in his usual Clifton's disguise: neatly-parted hair, contact lenses, a white collared shirt and suspenders. He was one of the hired swing dancers, an aspiring-something, like everyone in Los Angeles. Screenwriter, actor, musician, dancer, the list was endless. Fame, unfortunately, was a very fickle mistress at times. At others, it was a recalcitrant whore.

"Sounds bad," she remarked, and James turned, hands in his pockets as he pivoted.

"Try not to sleep with your partners," he advised grumpily, and Narcissa shrugged.

"They're my sisters," she reminded him, "so if I did, we'd have a completely different set of problems."

To that, he gave an unwilling chuckle, pulling a joint out of his folded sleeve and offering it to her. "You want?"

"Need to light it, dumbass."

He rolled his eyes, reaching into his pocket for a lighter. "Here," he said, handing her the joint, and she placed it between her lips as he brought the little flame up to the edge of the cigarette paper. "Good night?"

"Oh, you know. Same old." She inhaled deeply, choking a little. "Yikes, this is—"

"Shitty, I know. Best we had in the loft." He shared an apartment with three other roommates, all fellow aspiring-somethings. One had a small part on a soap opera, while the other two were struggling musicians.

"Haven't seen you in weeks," James commented, and she made a face, handing him the joint.

"I know. We've been busy."

"Heard there's some interest in a reality show for you three?"

"Yeah, maybe, but that's not happening now. Andy's out."

"Out out?"

"Out out."

James inhaled, shaking his head. "Shame. She's really good."

Narcissa elbowed him sharply, prompting him to cough out a small cloud of smoke. "Don't."

"No, I'm serious. I mean Bellatrix is all tits and terrifying bedroom eyes or whatever, but Andy's got solid technique." He paused, glancing at her. "So do you, for what it's worth."
Of course she did. Narcissa had fallen in love with ballet first, then branched out to jazz and hip-hop. The easiest road to fame was the one her sisters had already paved for her, though, so burlesque it was.

"I haven't seen you dance in ages," she said offhandedly, taking the joint from his fingers, and James' mouth half-twitched.

"Got plans now?" he asked.

She considered it, exhaling with purposeful deliberation. "It's late."

"Yeah, and we're young, aren't we?"

She regarded him swiftly in silence.

"I take it you and Lily are broken up again?"

"I wasn't implying anything," he said quickly, but shrugged. "But yeah, I'd say so."

She took a long drag, exhaling, "Wonder if it'll last the week."

He slid her a grin, or a smirk. Hard to tell in the dark.

"You dating anyone, Black?" he asked.

"Went out with someone this morning."

"Yeah?"

She shrugged. "Just some guy who saw me dance last week. His dad's got some new hotel going up or something, I don't know," she lied. She knew perfectly well who was building the latest high rise downtown, just like she knew the Malfoy logo was bound to grace the skyline. "Bella said she thought we'd get along, which is probably code for 'blow him so he'll book us,' I think."

James nodded, unsurprised. "Do you? Get along, I mean."

Narcissa thought first of Lucius' mouth on her clit, then of the black card he'd put down to buy her coffee. "Well enough, I guess."

"Good for you." James reached over, brushing her fingers as he took another drag from the joint. "Need to go back inside, or—?"

"Nah." Andromeda and Bellatrix would be fighting for hours, probably, and Narcissa had no interest in sticking around to watch them do it. Instead, she watched James extinguish the smoldering joint with the pads of his fingers, shaking them out when they stung. "You're a fucking idiot," she noted, and James slid a hand over his hair, grinning. It was slicked back tonight, which he only did when he was performing. Otherwise, it usually fell into his eyes.

"Come on," he said, beckoning to her. "Since you're here, I'll even spring for an Uber."

"Decadent," she remarked drily, and he smiled at her, giving her a wink as he pulled out his phone.

Sirius was at a cast party, he said, while Remus and Peter were playing at Perch. They'd probably gone out with the rest of the hired musicians, James explained as he let her into his apartment, and if she wanted, they could meet up with them.
Nah, she didn't; Okay, a nightcap, then.

He poured her some cheap whiskey, diluting it with off-brand ginger ale, and then slid the glass across the counter to her. She stirred it with a finger, shaking her head. She wasn't rolling in money, exactly, but James was a full on mess. She doubted there was anything but limes and beer in his fridge, and it gave her a little ache of some nameless, shapeless thing, like an itch.

Someone needed to take care of him. He was just such a fucking disaster that being here was practically community service.

"Quit it," he said, observing her.

"Quit what?"

"That, all of it. Judging me. I gave you the good stuff, you know. It's luxe, baby."

He'd winked at her, the little shit, and she took a sip, making a face. "And to think Lily called you arrogant."

They all knew each other. Small industry, if you could call it that, which meant Lily and Narcissa had definitely sat together in waiting rooms for auditions before. Bella had once tried to recruit Lily for their burlesque act; something to do with wanting a redhead as part of the fantasy suite of sisters. In the end, the two had argued over costumes, and Lily had stormed out.

Obviously, though, they still ran in the same circles.

To Narcissa's surprise, James winced at the mention of his fight with Lily. "You heard that?" he asked, and Narcissa gave a disinterested nod. "Damn. Thought maybe you wouldn't find out until it was too late."

Maybe he was torn up about it. Always hard to tell with him.

"Actually, I think your arrogance is one of your better qualities," she assured him. "Comes with being good at things, you know."

She immediately regretting being nice to him when he smiled broadly. "You think I'm good?"

"Not anymore, I don't."

She took another sip, glancing around his apartment, and then snuck a look at him. He was one of those weirdos who really pulled off suspenders, something she couldn't honestly say about too many other men. Which wasn't to say he didn't look just fine in a t-shirt, but he definitely had an old-fashioned sort of handsomeness, like Matthew Rhys or James Marsden. Someday, someone would want James Potter for a period piece or something, and he'd win an Oscar, or at least a Golden Globe. He could sing, too, though Narcissa only knew that from a drunken night (or drunken early morning, more likely) in K-Town, so maybe that impression wasn't entirely accurate.

She blinked, registering a hand on her elbow.

"Come on," James was saying, snapping her free of her thoughts. "Hear that?"

His neighbor was playing *Despacito*.

"These walls are paper thin," she said, scowling her disapproval, and he shrugged, pulling her off the stool.
"Sure, but why waste it," he said, and spun her under his arm, yanking her back in for what she
realized was a salsa only after her feet had already begun to follow the familiar rhythms, her hips
expertly matched up with his.

She'd asked him once who taught him ballroom dancing and he'd said his mother, who was
basically elderly from the time he was born. James had come from old money, the kind who still
enrolled their daughters in debutante balls, so this sort of thing came as naturally to him as
breathing. She was pretty sure he could have a nicer apartment if he wanted, but he strictly reserved
his trust fund for when his roommates couldn't make rent. It was a pride thing, she guessed, or a
stubbornness thing. He was hell-bent on making it on his own, and who knew. Maybe he'd be one
of the rare ones who actually would.

James dipped her low, shifting his hands along her spine, and then brought her back up, one hand
securing her neck. She would never admit it, but the song was sort of feverishly danceable, even
for her professionally-salacious hips. She gave herself a little solo choreography, embellishing the
steps, and he gave her an approving grin, spinning her under his arm again.

It was fun, dancing with him. She'd forgotten dancing could be fun. Burlesque was always about
the audience, about being the object of fascination, which was less fun than it was erotic.
Ironically, though, Narcissa had always found salsa to be sexier. Ballroom was always about your
partner, which made it more intimate. The fact that she was fully clothed and barefoot on James'
probably-disgusting carpeted floors seemed somehow perfectly irrelevant, at least temporarily.

The door behind them burst open somewhere around the song's bridge and Sirius' broody
cheekbones appeared in the frame, taking up most of the doorway until he was nudged forward to
make room for Remus, who shuffled in while struggling to hold an amp and a guitar.

"NARCISSAAAAAA," called Sirius, winking at her. They were cousins or something, not that it
mattered. He'd been dramatically cast out by his parents for either being an asshole or sucking cock
(unclear which unforgivable crime came first) long after the Blacks had stopped doing
Thanksgiving together. "Long time no see."

"Pads," came Remus' frustrated growl, "for fuck's sake, move—"

"You're home," James said, a little breathless by the time he came to a halt.

Narcissa couldn't tell if he was actually disappointed, or if that was just her imagination.

"Are we dancing?" Sirius asked, stripping off his leather jacket and tossing it on the couch. "I could
dance," he purred, and clearly, he'd been drinking. He appeared to be doing his best impersonation
of the lead guy from The 1975, and Narcissa glanced at James, who shrugged.

"Hall and Oates?" he asked her.

She stifled a laugh. "I mean…"

"Don't you fucking dare," groaned Remus, just before Sirius approvingly hit play on You Make My
Dreams. It was common knowledge, at least as far as Narcissa could tell, that it was Sirius' favorite
song, and therefore Remus' least favorite. When it came to music, James liked everything, or
maybe nothing. Maybe he just liked fucking with everyone around him.

He pulled Narcissa into his arms again, tugging her into a too-fast swing pattern that didn't
remotely suit the music.

"James, what the fuck—"
"Come on," he said in her ear, "let me show off a little."

She sighed, shaking her head, but permitted him to set his hands on her waist.

"Don't throw me," she warned.

In answer, he promptly threw her in the air, catching her with her legs around his hips, and then dropped her back to her feet, locking her against his chest. She landed perfectly because of course she did, but still. He probably thought he was so fucking smooth.

"Oops," he said, and she wondered why she didn't hate him.

"You're hopeless," she told him, and slid her fingers over his hair, one wave coming loose to fall into his hazel eyes.

Remus dragged Sirius to bed when Peter came home two hours later (his bed was the couch, which was where Sirius had opted to pass out). It was nearly four by then, and James told Narcissa he'd take her home if she wanted. "Just have to swap out my contacts," he said, disappearing into his 'room,' and she followed him behind the curtain that served as his door, pausing just inside it.

He shared the closet-sized room with Sirius, or had at first, until it seemed like maybe Sirius had taken up residency in Remus' bed. There was a desk that served only to hold their individual headshots and the paperwork for Sirius' TV royalties, a calendar marked with auditions and gigs, and a whiteboard where James scribbled addresses for go-sees. Sirius, naturally, had left his mark in Sharpie with a drawing of a gigantic, hairy cock. Narcissa wandered over to it, picking up the dry-erase marker, and drew a tiny lightning bolt in the corner of the board.

"Okay," James said behind her, rifling around in the pockets of his jeans. "Just let me find my keys, and then we can—"

"My sister's leaving," Narcissa said, turning from where she'd been blankly staring at the whiteboard, and James stopped, dragging his thoughts from wherever they'd been. "I don't know what I'm going to do when she goes," she confessed.

From the living room, Peter gave a loud snort, apparently already asleep. James glanced over, shutting the curtain, and turned back to Narcissa, gesturing for her to sit beside him on the bed. "You don't want to dance with Bella anymore?"

"I don't know." And she didn't. "I like dancing, but not, you know. Like that."

"But you're so good at it."

"Yeah, but I've been doing it for five years, James. Without Andy there's no deals on the table, and to be honest, I don't know if it's worth it. I mean, at some point we have to admit this shit's not working, right?"

A practical thing to say, she reminded herself, though James didn't look like he agreed.

"Dunno, Black." He leaned back on his elbows, looking at her. "I'm not really the person to talk to about giving up."

True, he wasn't. "You're really that set on being famous?"

"I'm set on doing what I love, yeah. Which is apparently eating bar scraps six nights a week and
never owning property."

"And driving a shitty car, don't forget that."

"Shitty?" he scoffed. "I believe the word you're looking for is vintage."

(He'd definitely meant shitty.)

"I'm serious, though," she sighed, flopping back on the bed and turning her head to look at him. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know how much I have left in the tank, you know?" she asked, and he nodded, reluctantly understanding. "Without Andy, Bella's going to expect me to hustle. She wants… I don't know. To headline in Vegas or something. Be on TV."

James toyed with her hair. "And you want…?"

"I don't know." She closed her eyes, feeling James lie back to settle his shoulders beside hers. He had a comforting weight to him, like usual. He had a way of being a human anchor.

"Are you really that sure?" she asked him. "You never have doubts?"

"Sometimes I want to be less sure," he admitted. "If I could bring myself to care about a plan b, maybe I would actually take it. Seems unlikely, though."

She could feel him breathing beside her. His cotton shirt had a hole in it near the hem, which she had noticed earlier. Someone needed to take care of him; he was really a mess.

"I guess it makes me sad," James said slowly, "to think you wouldn't be doing this anymore."

She cracked one eye. "Why?"

"I don't know. Because it's a shame to waste it, your talent. Your art." Her eyes fluttered open, and she caught him looking at her. "You were having fun tonight, weren't you?"

"We were fucking around, James. It's not the same thing."

"Kinda, though."

His hand was resting on the bed between them. He didn't own a duvet, the motherfucker, just a set of jersey cotton sheets. She slid her hand over, touching the knuckle of her pinky finger to his.

"I do like dancing," she said. "And I like dancing with you."

"Because I'm arrogant?"

"Because you're good." She paused. "And, you know. Charmingly boastful."

He brushed his fingers over her knuckles, drawing little shapes around the slopes of them.

"You don't have to go," he said after a minute or so. Finally. She wouldn't have been pleased if he'd just assumed, but still. "Yeah?"

"We don't have to do anything. We can just talk. Or sleep."

"Should probably do that," she said.

But then, "Maybe later."
He traced the bones of her fingers lightly.

"Date went that badly, huh?"

He was teasing her, the asshole, like he didn't know what she wanted, or like he wanted her to be
the one to ask for it. Arrogant shitbag.

She swatted his hand away, rolling over him until her hair fell around his face, and slid her thumb
over his cheeks. He looked good like this, too. And he looked perfectly pleasing in nothing. It
wasn't just the suspenders that did it.

"You know how I like it," she murmured to him, "right?"

His hand slid under her tank top, palm stretched out over her ribs. Men had stared at her ass and tits
all night and it had been absolutely fucking nothing. She regularly played at sex in her corsets and
bustiers, but had mostly foregone the reward.

James gathered her hair in a fist, then parsed it through his fingers, letting the blonde strands spill
onto his chest.

"Yeah," he said, "I do," and tilted his chin up, kissing her until the skin under his touch pebbled
with longing.

Yes, like that, god yes.

Yes, James, yes, now just—there. Yes, there.

She let out a sigh, wistful and delicate.

"Like that?"

"So good, baby, right there."

Just give it a little—yes.

Yes, like that, oh. Oh, oh.

Oh, fuck yes, yes, yes—

He slid up to reach her mouth, hands tight on her thighs. Small details of physicality were
paramount to every discipline of dance; placement of fingers, fluidity at every joint. It was how to
translate passion, how to make ugly things look gentle. If the world were as it should be, James
Potter would teach a master class in making shame look and feel like innocence. Give the boy an
Oscar, give him a Pulitzer, give him the Nobel Prize. This morning she'd been in a penthouse, half-
clothed and languid in Egyptian cotton, and now her fully-naked ass was pressed to bare mattress,
the sheets twisted up and kicked away from where they'd been tangled around James' ankle. There
was a fucking shower curtain separating her from the three drunk boys on the other side of what
was definitely not a door, and she was having to be quiet, or trying to be. She had her hands in
James' hair, working it free of whatever cheap pomade he probably used that smelled like apples,
and her lips were saying things in his ear, nonsense things. You make me so wet, James Potter. I
hate you so fucking much for what you do to me, I hate you, I love this, keep going, please don't
stop.

He laughed in her mouth. His capacity for joy, with her, was boundless. He would think this
euphoric because he could find pleasure in anything, in touching her or not touching her, in waiting or insisting not to wait. He could look at her and make her want to melt, want to leave, want to die like this. He could try to be serious, he could try on Casanova or Romeo just to see how it looked, and maybe it would suit him with someone else, but she'd make him laugh. You're an asshole, James Potter, an arrogant shitbag, and please, please, don't ever stop.

"I missed this," he said. She slid her hand flat against his abs, saturating her palm in the sweat between crevices. The first time she'd seen him dance, they were at Clifton's together. They shared a dressing room that night and she'd looked at him and thought: Good thing he has that smile, because his six pack slopes down on the right. Good thing no one will ever say no to that smile.

"Missed you," he said.

Missionary was usually been-there-done-that territory, but she liked fucking James face to face. There was something about seeing him, or maybe about him seeing her. "Leave them on," she'd said when he tried to take off his glasses, and she hadn't said because I want you to look at me, but he'd figured it out for her. Eye contact. That was another thing they taught you in dance: See everything, and glorify in being seen.

Missed you, missed you, missed you.

She usually declined to stay the night. His apartment was disgusting, and he smelled too much like hope. He was full of pointless dreams, James Potter, in an infectious way, like a virus. Sometimes he made her want things so badly it stung inside her throat.

"You're an idiot," she whispered, angry because she was trapped and sad and maybe a little bit in love with him, and he paused so long she nudged him with her hips. "Do the thing," she said, meaning the thing she liked, and of course, it made him laugh.

"Okay," he said, and hiked one leg over his hip, pulling it up around his waist and turning to speak in her ear. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said in the announcer's voice he'd developed from one or two odd jobs as an auction MC, "you have known her as Dido, as Odette, as Juliet, as Carmen. You have despised her, you have mourned her, you have lusted for her—and for one night, ladies and gentlemen," he said raggedly, "you will have the privilege of loving her."

Narcissa shuddered, digging her nails into his back. She was close now, and surely he could feel it. He always felt things as intensely as she did; birds of a feather, or something. There was a little bit of glitter on his cheek, probably from touching her hair, or maybe from kissing her bronze-oiled shoulders. She probably smelled like alleyway smoke and tasted like cheap whiskey, but for a second, she was something with a little polish, or at least a little shine.

He adjusted her in his arms, catching the gasp that meant he should stay there. "It is my honor to introduce to the stage: Narcissa Black," he said in her ear, brushing her cheek with the line of his jaw.

Then it burst behind her eyes, blinding her like stage lights, and she closed her eyes, bathing in the aftermath of reverie.

"You called me baby," he commented afterwards, one hand thrown over his head. The cotton sheet was pulled low across his hips and around her thighs, draped with minimal effectiveness over them both.

She shrugged.
"It was sex," she said. "Just a sex word."

"You've never said it before."

"Maybe I'm expanding my arsenal."

"Ah." His eyes were closed. "Okay."

She waited a moment, twitching a little in the silence.

"You're not mine," she reminded him.

"I know."

"You and Lily fight all the time, but you make sense. You and me, we're not—" She trailed off, shaking her head. "This is just something we do."

He said nothing. She suspected he understood it, for the most part; that for a hustler, she was really kind of risk-averse. Not like him, and not like Lily. It's why they were the same, why he and his roommates were all the same, because they were fine with gambling their lives, their futures, their feelings. They would chase the things they wanted until it broke their backs, but that wasn't her. Had never been her.

"Though," she murmured, letting out a quiet breath. "The next time you want to break up with her—"

She broke off, glancing at him. He was pretending to sleep, she was sure.

"Let me know," she finished.

His mouth quirked with a furtive smile, and then a long arm slid over her torso, pulling her into him.

"For the record," he said in her ear, adjusting himself to curve around her, "I wasn't planning to apologize any time soon."

She slid her fingers over his forearm, lightly scraping her nails against his skin. He brushed his lips against the back of her neck and inhaled the smell of her, which she was fairly confident was mostly hairspray and body glitter. The sun would be up soon, and then they'd both become aware of how badly they needed to shower.

The dream was never quite as dazzling in the day.

"Idiot. She'll never take you back."

Not that it wasn't still pretty.

"Guess not," he said.

Then Narcissa closed her eyes, falling asleep to the vision of herself before an audience of starlight, floating on clouds with James Potter until the soles of her shoes fell away.

Chapter End Notes
a/n: Couldn't sleep the other night and wrote this. Will be back tomorrow with The Commoner's Guide to Bedding a Royal at its regularly scheduled time slot!
Death of a Con Man, Part I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Death of a Con Man, Part I

Pairing: Nottpott (Theo Nott x Harry Potter), background Dramione (Draco Malfoy x Hermione Granger)

Universe: Anastasia AU. Potterverse magic, consistent with canon until 1981.

Rating: M for sex and language

Summary: Seventeen years after Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort both go missing on Halloween, the wizarding world is unrecognizable from what it was: Hogwarts is disbanded, the Ministry of Magic rules with an iron fist, and what remains of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix is left to occupy the fringe. While the Order rallies behind their continued belief in the missing Chosen One and the Death Eaters wait zealously for the return of the Dark Lord, there is one man who gives absolutely no fucks about any of it, focused only on securing his next meal. Fortunately or unfortunately for him, he's about to end up with a lot more than he bargained for.

On the occasion of Halloween Eve in 1981, there were two mysterious disappearances which would dominate the politics to follow. One was that of Lord Voldemort, who had caused the deaths of thousands, and whose steady increase of power had seemed virtually unstoppable until that night. Regrettably, even his absence would bring little relief. There was a difference between vanquished and dead and gone, and for now he was only the latter; for how long that would remain true, though, no one could comfortably tell.

The other disappearance was that of Harry Potter, the young son of James and Lily Potter, whose parents had both been killed by Lord Voldemort as the result of some unknowable vendetta. When Aurors arrived on the scene, searching for evidence of either the boy or his parents' killer, it seemed both had vanished without a trace.

Fearing the worst, the wizarding community went into immediate lockdown. The Ministry of Magic secured itself with heightened secrecy laws, forbidding contact between wizards and muggles. Fearing for their children's safety, parents returned to the old ways of educating their families privately, secured within the safety of their tightly enchanted homes. Gradually, the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and its board of governors were gradually dismantled by unanimous Ministry vote. Safety first, the Ministry said. Shortly afterwards, Albus Dumbledore, then-Supreme Mugwump, was removed from his position in the International Confederation of Wizards, casting him further into obscurity and effectively censoring him and his followers.

By Harry Potter's eleventh birthday, there was little for him to return to. Thus, when he ultimately failed to resurface, no one was particularly surprised. See? We were right, said the Ministry, deeming the Boy Who Lived a lost cause. The school was vacated entirely within a year, and the castle fell into disrepair shortly after.

The absence of Lord Voldemort, however remained a haunting specter. A pattern of unicorn slayings and unexplained possessions in the late 1990s brought about the rumor he was still out there somewhere; biding his time, awaiting his return. In the years he was at large, a prophecy was
revealed in whispers: There was a curse, some said. Lord Voldemort had set a curse upon the Potter bloodline, but somewhere along the line it had backfired. What did this mean? Nobody knew for sure, but Harry was alive somewhere, that much seemed plausible, and if he was alive, then so was Voldemort. The story was the kind that spread like a virus, eerie and fabled, and it remained in the public mythos until even children began to repeat it to each other, bouncing it on their tongues like a playground chant or a nursery rhyme: *Neither can live while the other survives.*

The longer one stayed away, the more passionate a requisite belief in the other. Two sides of the same coin. Find one, find the other. The Chosen One would rise again. The Dark Lord would be waiting. Eventually, they said, Harry Potter would have to come of age, perhaps returning on such occasion to fight the curse the Lord Voldemort had placed on his family. Some called it the end of days; some looked to the anniversary of the Potters' deaths with hope. Albus Dumbledore, who remained the leader of the Order of the Phoenix and the chief voice of Ministry opposition, offered one shocking announcement before he, too, disappeared without a trace: that the time of Harry Potter's return was coming. When it did, Dumbledore declared he would personally greet young Harry—by then the beacon of a vigilante cause—with open arms, along with anyone who could reunite the boy with his supporters.

It wouldn't be long before things, as they often did, took a turn. Seventeen years after the mysterious night in Godric's Hollow, the Boy Who Lived would do the unthinkable, and rise from the dead once again.

"Oi," said Theo, yanking a worn cloak from atop what appeared to be a huddled pile of laundry. "Wake up."

Nothing. Unsurprising. Some people were such honest to god princesses in the morning—or, as it were, the late afternoon. Unfortunately, Theo didn't have time to bake fresh scones or summon songbirds or whatever else it might take to entice his moderately hungover business partner with the luxury of a gentle waking.

"Oi. Wake up," Theo said again, punctuating the point with the toe of his boot. "Two suits in the Three Broomsticks said something about the Ministry demanding access to Rosmerta's Floo."

That was enough to get any hungover derelict out of bed, this one included. "Balls almighty," said his colleague, fellow grifter, and master of the con: the wanted fugitive (not unlike Theo himself, though 'murder' and 'failure to register' were, at least to an outsider, distinctly different crimes) Sirius Black. "Aurors again?"

It would make the third raid that week, not that Theo had time to fondly relive the memories. Things were always questionable around Halloween, when anarchist rebels devoted to one cause or another ("The Dark Lord will rise again," "The Chosen One will return," et cetera et cetera, so on and so forth) would unhelpfully disrupt Theo's humble intent to quietly scam his way through life. Rather than wasting much thought on whether this Halloween might be any different from the others, Theo spent his spare minutes pre-escape casting the usual concealment charms while Sirius, who hadn't actually made it *into* the bed, stumbled for his shoes, knocking into the wooden post with a groan.

"We've got to find another scam," Theo reminded him. "A more portable one than the potions, and we have to do it soon," he said firmly, to which Sirius waved a hand of yeah, yeah, I hear you from where he had collapsed on the floor, shoving his left foot into his right boot. "I don't know about you, Black, but my delicate bone structure certainly isn't up for another winter dodging Aurors in this shitty castle."
"Delicate my arse," Sirius said, struggling to resume the position of standing. He rubbed his eyes, squinting up at Theo, who tapped his foot expectantly. "There really is no rest for the wicked these days," Sirius lamented, staggering to his feet as Theo rolled his eyes.

"We can have our usual tarty banter later," Theo advised, tossing a shirt at him. "Right now, it's time to work."

Sirius pulled the shirt on backwards, sighed, and then twisted around, trying again. "You've got the potions, I take it?"

"What's left of them, yes." The trouble with distributing illegal potions was the high risk of contamination, which had unfortunately created a path straight for their whereabouts. A string of junkies suddenly oozing a mysterious blue goo wasn't as covert as Theo might have liked. He'd already made a mental note-to-self to test the ingredients they bought off seedy corner witches in Knockturn; clearly, the eyes of newt had been long expired. Worse, they may have been eyes of… something entirely else. "We'll have to destroy the evidence before we go."

"Fine. I'll hide the papers, you clear out the potions."

Typical. Theo was almost always given the task of mass destruction while Sirius got the leisurely clerical duties. Providing papers to muggleborns and halfbloods had once been a stable source of income, but sadly for both of them, that was a rapidly shrinking demographic. It had been months since anyone had come looking for Ministry papers. An unfortunate development, really, as Theo had a real talent for creating falsified patents of blood status; his calligraphy was, as Sirius regularly put it, positively breathtaking.

"Fine. Just get moving, would you? We should head back to Diagon for news."

Theo stepped away, footsteps echoing through the halls as he exited what was once the Gryffindor common room. The castle had fallen into disrepair almost immediately after its vacancy nearly a decade ago, probably the result of its sentience rebelling. A bit petulant, deciding to make itself unlivable, but that was castles for you. No such thing as hospitality without some lord or headmaster strutting around to make it so.

He sprinted down the stairs, leaping from one to the other (they'd long stopped pausing long enough to settle fully against the landings) until he made his way to the dungeons, illuminating them with a flick of the wand that was his only real possession. Even with how young he'd been when his father died, Theo had already understood that having no family meant he'd go to some fake-penitent Death Eater, or worse, into one of the Ministry's homes for disreputable children (he assumed that was what they were called). Deciding his own hands were more reliable than fate's, Theo had stolen a handful of galleons, a pocket watch, and a wand from his father's antique collection, taking his weedy eleven-year-old self on the run. He'd fed a shaggy black dog with the scraps of what remained from the last of his meals and woken up to find himself inside Hogwarts, a lanky black-haired man sitting at the foot of his bed.

"Know any magic?" asked the man who was Sirius Black. He sounded unaccustomed to speaking; his voice was gravelly and rough, clothes and hair a mangled mess that smelled unmistakably of whisky soaked in unfavorable circumstances. He was enough to scare anyone but Theo, who had long since learned looks weren't indicative of much at all.

"Aren't you wanted for murder?" asked Theo.

"Innocent," Sirius replied with a shrug. "Managed to get away—though, I am in need of some assistance, if you can keep your mouth shut and your eyes open. Bonus points if you can brew
sober-up potions in decent quantities."

Those were Theo's primary qualities. Minus the last one, but he could learn.

"I know a few things," Theo said. "All wandless."

He hadn't been old enough to learn from his father, but he'd mastered some primal bursts of juvenile magic. He could illuminate things, deluminate them. He could heal small cuts and bruises; bigger ones, too. Anything he'd needed to do while living in his father's house, he could do.

"You need a wand?" Sirius asked, and Theo shook his head, removing his father's stolen wand from his pocket. "Well, I can teach you to use it if you can help me eat something other than fucking squirrel," Sirius said, and Theo nodded, finding it to be a mutually beneficial arrangement.

It was Sirius who taught Theo the art of the con, and in turn, Theo became the guardian of Sirius' occasional jaunts into destructive behavior. They'd been partners for nearly eight years by then, with Sirius teaching Theo everything he'd learned at Hogwarts (most of which Theo had to supplement with books he stole from the library, as he got the feeling Sirius hadn't been a particularly good student pre-genocidal wizarding war) and the two of them struggling mutually to make ends meet.

They weren't exactly well off; the poverty line was something of an aspiration, which was a circumstance unlikely to change. Theo's failure to register his blood status after the death of his father marked him as a runaway until he came of age, at which point he officially became a fugitive. (Sirius had stolen a cake for the occasion.) Neither of them could hold a job, at least not in the wizarding world; Sirius, who couldn't and likely wouldn't prove his innocence, usually traveled as a dog, simply to avoid being caught by Aurors. Half of Theo's job in the arrangement was turning door knobs for Sirius' lack of thumbs.

It wasn't an easy life, but it certainly could have been worse. The only thing Theo needed more of was money, really. Enough to get a place to live, at least, and stop hiding out in this shithole of a crumbling castle.

Theo threw open the door to the cupboard containing the contaminated potions, shaking his head. They couldn't be buried without leaking into the soil; he certainly couldn't insult the merpeople by tossing them into the lake. They'd need to be burned, magically, and that was going to be a mess.

Oh well. It wasn't like the castle wasn't already falling apart.

Theo took several steps back, finding a secure spot in the stone archway from which the door had long since fallen away, and aimed his wand at the cupboard.

"Confringo," Theo said.

Then he turned, sprinting from the heat and stray shards of glass, as the base of the castle rumbled angrily from the impact of the blow.

The usual curly brown hair was visible from the front of the pub, even with her attempt to hide it. Try as she might, Hermione was never especially good at blending in with a crowd, and her too-clean, respectable-looking hoodie meant there were a number of eyes darting curiously towards her.

"Tom," she called, spotting him. Not that he was easy to miss, either. If the taped-up glasses weren't distinctive enough, then the underfed look to him probably gave him away. That or the
lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, which he grew his hair unflatteringly long to cover.

"Hey, Hermione," he said as he slid into the booth across from her, glancing over his shoulder. "Bit of a dodgy choice, don't you think?"

"Well, I've run away from home, haven't I?" Hermione replied smartly, shoving a pint of Guinness in front of him like it was a prop. "Just... try to look normal."

Normal was something neither he nor Hermione were particularly good at, hence their unlikely friendship. He was one of the scrawny kids at the woefully ill-cared for Wool's Orphanage, which had been rapidly losing their government-provided resources despite the increase in vagrants. She, on the other hand, was a pristine, Oxford-bound girl from the part of London where houses had gardens, with only her enormous hair and aggressively bookish nature to keep her from being properly posh. The one thing he and Hermione had in common was the thing that had earned him everything; his reputation, his name, and his one clue as to who he really was.

"Eerie, that one is," Mrs Cole had whispered to one of the others when he was still a child. She had long since passed, having been terrifyingly old for as long as he'd known her. "Only ever had one like him—that Tom Riddle boy, you remember him. Could do things, strange things. This one can, too."

Mrs Cole was the one who had started calling him Tom, alternating between that and 'you' until she'd finally fallen too sick to hobble up and down the stairs. On her deathbed, he'd gone in to ask her the truth about Tom Riddle, which she'd answered in some sort of delirious fever dream.


It was all so nonsensical that there was an equal chance it meant nothing, but it had stuck in Tom's brain for nearly eight years. After Mrs Cole died, he'd broken into her office and snuck through the files, finding the birth certificate for Tom Marvolo Riddle and tucking it in his pocket, carrying it around like a clue. Could this have been his father? He'd never met anyone else who could do what he could except for whoever Tom Riddle had been.

Then he'd locked the office door with a twist of his fingers, revealing nothing at all to anyone else until Hermione.

He'd been walking along the street about a year ago when he caught her glancing over her shoulder, looking nervous. He'd frowned, deciding to follow, and realized the poor girl was being stalked by a suspicious-looking man that she clearly didn't know. It was only when the bloke reached for her gruffly that Hermione had turned, frightened, and held out a hand, shoving him away from her.

The moment she touched him, the man had dropped to the ground, unmoving. She panicked, looking up and catching Tom's eye before taking off at a run, sprinting towards the river.

He managed to catch her despite her being almost inhumanly fast, pulling her aside as she insisted, teary and breathless, that she hadn't meant to hurt the stranger. "It just happens sometimes when I'm scared," she confessed at a whisper, obviously still radiating with fear, and it occurred to Tom that perhaps she might know something about the peculiarities he couldn't explain about himself.

"What else can you do?" Tom asked, and Hermione, relieved that someone actually believed her, had told him the truth: she could unlock doors. She could start fires with only her mind. More than once, she had cauterized the bleeding from a gash to her knee, her arm, paper cuts on her fingers. And this wasn't the first time she had stopped a man's heart by accident.
"I'm either a minor god or some kind of monster," she said, sounding perfectly serious, and Tom laughed, holding out his hand.

"Watch this," he said, and led her to the edge of the river. He rested a hand down against the water's edge, channeling some inconceivable stillness he could reach when he really tried, and let the surface become a shiny, reflective glass, spreading gradually across the width of the Thames until the entire thing was a bright, blinding mirror.

Then he smashed his heel down onto it, shattering it to bits, and watched the shards trickle off and disappear, carried away on the motion of the current.

"Jesus," Hermione said, exchanging a glance with him. "What did you say your name was?"

It was Hermione's idea that they both run away from home, though that was considerably easier for Tom than it was for her. It wasn't like he had any family—he didn't even have a last name; he'd simply been dropped off at Wool's Orphanage as a child and had begun working there once he became too old for free room and board—but Hermione had slipped out of her parent's house and given up her plans for university, all to try and find out what they were. She was convinced that the names Mrs Cole had given him, Dumbledore and Hogwarts, were the key to their real identities.

"My parents think I'm a freak," she told him with a grimace. "They love me, in their own way, but they think I'm… unlucky, shall we say. And hey, fair enough," she determined briskly, "but let's just say they'll file me missing and then secretly think it a relief when I'm gone."

She'd given him the minimal information she could scrape together about the three names they knew: Tom Riddle, Dumbledore, and Hogwarts. Of the three, she could only gather basic public information on Tom, who had begun attending some sort of school outside London during the fall and spring terms. After Tom Riddle turned seventeen, he never returned to the orphanage, but he never paid any taxes or bought property, either. There were no records for him at all after 1943—not even a death certificate, though there had been one for what must have been his father. As far as they could see, no one who would have known Tom Riddle as a teenager was left alive.

"I did find this," Hermione said, sliding papers she'd printed off at the library across the table to him. "Apparently someone who was at your orphanage spent several years in counseling, and then his therapist wrote a book about his patients." She tapped the page. "See? He claims the man had delusions, nightmares about something that had happened to him while at the orphanage. Something about following one of the other orphans to this strange set of bricks and watching him disappear behind it," she said, becoming increasingly excited as she spoke. "It has to be somewhere in London, right? How far could these children have possibly gotten on foot?"

"This describes the other orphan as 'vindicative and manipulative,'" Tom read aloud, frowning as he scanned the page. "The therapist calls the delusions trauma from aggressive childhood bullying, Hermione. You really think the boy in the story is Tom Riddle?"

Hermione waved a hand in apparent dismissal. "Oh, just sensationalism, I'm sure. Besides, how many times have people told you you're strange? Possessed? Even evil?" she said knowingly, and Tom shrugged. She definitely had a point. The second owner of the orphanage after Mrs Cole had strapped him to the bed, hiring a priest to attempt an exorcism after she'd watched his broken arm snap back into place. Eleven-year-old Tom, fearful of what they might do to him, had broken out of the restraints, and she'd tumbled backwards from the open window in fright. When the third owner arrived, he made a point to stay in his room.

There were other things, too. He hadn't told Hermione about the nightmares. Those, he thought, were too much to confess, even to her. The things he had either done or dreamt (no telling which)
still flashed inside his head from to time, invading him. The same red-slitted eyes he half-recognized; the screams, waking him up to a cold sweat.

Hermione already thought she was a monster. If she knew what he saw behind closed eyes, he was pretty sure she'd never speak to him again.

"Fair," Tom said uncomfortably, taking a sip of Guinness. "People are looking at us," he observed, setting down the glass, and Hermione glanced around, frowning.

In the same moment, there was a scurry of feet beneath them. Hermione jumped, startled, and in response to her panic, the table cracked in half.

"Shit," she whispered. "Let's go. This place has rats."

Tom nodded, leaving a few coins behind on the table.

"Where are we going?" he asked her, and she shrugged.

"Not sure," she said. "But according to this, I think we're looking for something called Diagon Alley."

Chapter End Notes

a/n: For my girl nymphadoraholtzmann, who lives on the dean's list! This story will update as I find time to edit it in pieces, which is… not something I can plan in advance yet. But stay tuned! I will be back with more soon.
Diagon was lousy with Aurors; something about an explosion at Hogwarts, or so Theo happened to overhear. He kept his head down and gestured for the dog at his heels to follow as he made his way past Diagon's entrance, entering muggle London.

They ducked into an alley as Sirius changed back, Theo handing him his clothes blindly from around the corner. That was mostly an apology, as Sirius was perfectly capable of procuring them himself; he'd (illegally) enchanted the collar he wore in Padfoot form to contain his things, clothes and wand included, long before Theo had come along.

"Sorry," Theo remarked half-sincerely as Sirius stepped around the corner, snapping up the collar of his old leather jacket with a pursed look of disapproval.

"You blew up half the castle," Sirius reminded him, which was as close to admonishment as he ever got. "You really couldn't have gone with something, I don't know. Smaller?"

Theo shrugged. "You told me to take care of it," he said, and Sirius rolled his eyes.

"Well, whatever. We just have to keep to this side of town until things blow over. Got any muggle money left from last time?" Sirius asked, and Theo arched a brow. "Eh, it was worth a try. Can't blame me for my optimism."

"Got my cards, though," Theo said. He hesitated before adding, "The watch, too."

"Ah, that's a thought." The Covent Garden crowds loved an old school hypnotist, though Theo did always feel a bit guilty about using the Imperius Curse on muggles. It made his skin crawl to use anything with 'curse' in the title, but it was a lot neater than a Confundus Charm.

That, and very little effort got them enough for several nights of suppers, pints, and the occasional cheap room above a filthy tavern. They could live like kings in the muggle world if they really tried; unfortunately, being a muggle king was still supremely boring compared to magic.

"Bit early to start, isn't it?" Sirius asked, gesturing for Theo to check the time.

"Could wait a bit," Theo agreed, though his stomach rumbled. Sirius usually got some scraps from various passersby as a dog, but Theo remained a bit o' rough, all skinny limbs and narrowed eyes. Hardly the sort wizarding children were encouraged to linger around.

Theo surveyed their surroundings, trying to decide whether it was worth doing a card trick from the sidewalk corner (a little, "Is this your card?" with a bit of legilimency thrown in was worth at least a Big Mac, if he chose his victim correctly) until he noticed Sirius was frowning at something over his shoulder.

Theo followed his line of sight, bemused. "What are you staring at?"

"Are you seeing that?" Sirius asked him, staring at someone crossing the street.
"What, the girl?"

"No, the boy," Sirius said, and Theo made a face.

"No way," he said. "The girl might gives us something, maybe, but—"

"No, look at him," Sirius said, and for a man who was usually drunk and rarely serious, his expression of total astonishment took Theo by surprise. "Notice anything about him?"

Theo flicked a gaze over the two who had crossed the street with their heads down, discussing something with quiet intensity. The girl was a curly-haired brunette; sort of forgettable, except for jeans that definitely retailed for over a hundred quid. The other was a skinny, dodgy-looking bloke with messy hair who didn't seem to be her boyfriend, though there was no telling. His canvas jacket, one of those military-styles that he wore over a grungy red hoodie, was either a hand-me-down or thrifted.

No money there, clearly. Certainly no food. Just a pair of harmless muggles, as far as Theo could tell.

"So?" he said, bewildered, and Sirius shook his head.

"It's James," he said.

"Who?"

"James. My best mate, James—"

"I thought I was your best mate," Theo remarked, half-joking, but before he could stop him Sirius had thrust a hand out, drawing the black-haired kid to a stop.

"Are you," Sirius began, and then stopped, realizing the girl had leapt back and was glaring at him with unveiled suspicion, obviously spooked. "Sorry," he offered, hurrying to reassure her. "Sorry, I just—here, hang on—"

He reached into his pocket, at which point the boy and the girl both took several hasty steps back.

"It's not a fucking gun," Theo informed them, irritated, and for the first time, the boy looked up.

Theo blinked, startled to realize the boy wasn't much of a boy, really, but someone at least his age. He had a hollow sort of look in his green eyes, hungry the way Theo recognized was actual, physical hunger, and he had a slice of something, a spindly lightning bolt, carved into his forehead.

Scars were something Theo knew well, too.

"What does he want, then?" the boy asked gruffly.

"I don't fucking know," Theo snapped, just as Sirius seemed to find whatever he was looking for.

"Here," Sirius said, breathlessly withdrawing a photograph from his pocket and smoothing it out, pointing. "See?" he said, muscling his way past the brunette and half-shoving the picture in the boy's face. "You look just like James," he said, triumphant. "It's uncanny, and it's… well, it's obvious, isn't it?"

Theo craned his neck, hazarding a quick glance at the photograph he'd known Sirius carried on him but had never looked closely at. It was a picture of four boys, all dressed in school uniforms, one of which was a much younger, much cleaner Sirius. There was a scarred-up boy with his arm
slung around Sirius’ waist on the right, a short, pudgy kid on the end, and then, on Sirius’ left with one arm thrown over Sirius’ shoulder, was a black-haired boy with a lazy grin and messy hair.

Aside from the eyes, Sirius was right. The boy on the street was the spitting image of the boy in the picture.

Though, there was another thing Theo noticed about the picture, and he grimaced as he realized Sirius’ mistake.

"Shit, is this picture moving?" said the boy, who was clearly looking at a magical photograph for the first time. Theo gave Sirius’ arm a yank, pulling the picture away as the girl hurried to look.

"Sorry," Theo said, attempting to drag Sirius in the opposite direction. "Never mind my uncle, he's just had too much to drink, like always—"

"That does look quite like you," the girl said, frowning as she caught a glimpse of the photo from Sirius' flailing arms. "My goodness, you could be twins. How old is this picture?"

"Is it you?" Sirius asked the boy, jerking himself from Theo's reach. "After all these years, have I finally found you?"

"Sorry, sorry," Theo said, still struggling to grab him. "Don't mean to bother y-"

"I don't think so," the boy said. He seemed to feel a bit sorry for Sirius, but surely his patience would run out soon; or, if not his patience, then definitely the girl's. "No offense, but I've never seen you before."

"But—" Sirius sputtered, half-pleading. "But you… you must be James' son, you have to be—"

"You sound like a lunatic," Theo hissed in Sirius' ear. "Calm the fuck down, would you?"

"Sorry," the boy said with a shrug. "Never heard of any James."

"We should go, Tom," the girl said, frowning at Sirius with an obvious look of distrust. "Don't want to be late for class."

There was that patience running out; she was definitely lying about class. "Come on, let it go," Theo said gruffly to Sirius, who—with a surprising, irritating strength—yanked himself free from Theo's grip one final time, hurrying to catch the other two.

"I came to find you," Sirius panted, short of breath from his struggle with Theo. "I came to find you, but it was too late… I was too late, and your crib, it was—" He broke off, shaking his head. "Did you get your Hogwarts letter, at least? Was it… have you been living with muggles, or—?"

Theo fought a groan as the boy, Tom, furrowed his brow. Another maniacal word from Sirius and they'd surely summon the muggle authorities, who were at best an unwelcome nuisance.

"Sorry," the girl told Sirius, trying to compel the boy forward and, to Theo's relief, dismissing his ranting entirely. "Good luck with whatever you're looking for," she said with obvious disdain, beckoning for a still-frowning Tom to follow and ending the exchange, or so Theo thought.

But then, out of nowhere, Sirius did something truly insane.

He stumbled forcefully into Tom, colliding with him; surely not an accident. He appeared to be shoving the young stranger into traffic, and worse, directly into the path of an oncoming taxi.
Before Theo registered what Sirius had done, Tom had already landed hard on his back in the street, looking up into the headlights and hastily trying to shield himself from unavoidable impact.

It all happened impossibly quickly; the taxi swerved into the opposite lane, swearing out the window at what appeared to be all four of them. The girl gasped, one hand flying to her mouth, and then she darted into the street, helping Tom to his feet and pulling him back to the sidewalk.

"Have you lost your bloody mind?" Theo demanded, wandlessly yanking Sirius back before he accidentally murdered a muggle. "Come on, let's get the fuck out of here before they call the police —"

But Sirius, still staring at a shaken but unharmed Tom, deflated, looking as if he'd expected more.

"Oh," he said, swallowing. "Right. Well. I suppose you couldn't be Harry Potter, my mist-

Harry Potter.

*Harry* fucking *Potter.*

Even pureblood runaways living off the land knew *that* name.

"Oh, shit," Theo realized under his breath, pausing mid-stride and piecing together why ascertaining whether someone was or wasn't *James' son* was important enough to chance a homicide. A pity the experiment hadn't worked out in their favor. Whatever—or whoever—Tom happened to resemble, his lack of magical reaction meant he was, despite everything, just a muggle.

Understandably, the girl was anxious to leave. Tom, though, was bizarrely insistent on saying something to Sirius. "Did you say Hogwarts?" he asked, brows furrowed, which wasn't exactly the response Theo would have for someone who'd just tried to kill him.

At the mention of it, the girl suddenly stopped trying to lure Tom away, coming to a sudden halt to wait for Sirius' response.

Curiouser and curiouser, it seemed.

"Well—" Sirius hesitated, having fallen into the trap of not being able to explain himself. "I mean, yes, but… but you wouldn't know anything about it, because you're not, um. You aren't—"

But Theo, who, unlike Sirius, had *not* been having a meltdown, noticed something odd about Tom's reaction. Mostly in that he seemed like he'd heard it before.

Theo turned, concealing the flick of his wrist as he cast a legilimens. He wasn't fantastic, but if something was prominent enough in someone's mind…

Ah, yes, there it was. Tom Riddle. Hogwarts.

*Dumbledore.*

Interesting.

"Give us a moment, would you?" Theo said, pulling a dumbfounded Sirius aside. "Sorry, just a second—*Black,*" he hissed to Sirius once they were a safe distance away, casting a brief *Muffliato* around them. "I swear, you're a fucking savant—"

Sirius looked groggy, glancing up at Theo through a fog. "What?"
"Black, this is it—this is the fucking scam," Theo informed him, gesturing with his chin to the boy who could have easily been Harry Potter in another life. "You saw Dumbledore's willing to give a reward to anyone who finds Harry Potter, right? And these two are looking for Dumbledore. We're talking a chance at actual money here," he pointed out, as Sirius frowned, looking doubtful. "Something we can live on, for once, not just whatever we can scrape together—and if we came bearing the Order's precious Chosen One, maybe you could finally get a shot at a fair trial—"

"Whoever that is, it can't be Harry," Sirius said, glancing up at Tom. "He may look like James, but he's clearly not a wizard. Both of them are muggles."

"So?" Theo demanded, flailing a bit at Sirius' failure to piece it together. "Look at him! He could convince Dumbledore long enough for us to get away, couldn't he?"

"That's assuming we find Dumbledore," Sirius muttered unhelpfully.

"If we brought this kid to someone—anyone—in the Order, Dumbledore would have to come out of hiding. And who knows how to find underground vigilantes better than us?" Theo pressed him, increasingly urgent. It wasn't like they had all day to decide. "Besides, even if the Order refused, wouldn't the Ministry pay a premium to get their hands on the Boy Who Lived?"

Sirius glanced over at Tom, frowning. "That can't be him," he said, sounding as if he were still trying to convince himself. "Harry didn't have a scar like that."

"So what? Maybe he got it later or something."

"He keeps touching it," Sirius observed with a frown, and Theo grimaced.

"Black, forget the scar. You said you knew James, right?"

Sirius hesitated. "Yes, but—"

"So whether he's Harry or not, we can teach him. We can make him into Harry Potter. If he knew all the right details, nobody would possibly believe otherwise, would they?"

Sirius shook his head. "Not if he can't do magic. You really think the son of James Potter could possibly be born a squib? No way, not possible," he mumbled, though even Theo could see he was taking another long look at the boy called Tom, unable to dismiss the likeness. "Besides, even if we could convince him to play along, how would we do it?"

That was good enough for Theo; he was proficient enough to figure it out as they went. "Just let me handle it. Play along," he advised, and waved the silencing charm away, gesturing for Sirius to follow before jogging back over to Tom and the girl.

"Hey," Theo called to them, "my apologies, I never properly introduced myself. I'm Theo, this is Sirius. You said something about Hogwarts?"

"Yes," the girl said quickly. "We want to, um—"

She broke off. Clearly she didn't know what Hogwarts was, or whether it was a person, an object, or one of Jupiter's moons.

"Go there?" Theo prompted, and the girl blinked.

"Yes," she said, stubbornly resolved. "Yes, we need to go there."
"Well, it's funny you say that," Theo said, gesturing between himself and Sirius. "We were actually in the middle of paying a visit to this friend of ours, Albus Dumbledore—"

"Dumbledore?" Tom echoed, precisely as Theo had hoped.

"Yes, Dumbledore," Theo confirmed. Why two such obvious muggles were looking for Dumbledore and Hogwarts he had no idea, nor did he care. Muggle secrecy was a Ministry problem, not his. "Why," he added with feigned surprise, "do you know him?"

"We're looking for him," the girl said. "You can take us to him?"

Theo glanced at Sirius, wordlessly suggesting that now would be an opportune time to participate.

"Why yes, of course," Sirius said in his best pretender's voice. "Right now, in fact."

"No, not right now," Theo interjected, regretting that he hadn't confirmed they were on the same page before inviting Sirius to the con. "We have to go to Hogwarts first, just to pick something up. Papers we need," he added with a sidelong glance at Sirius, "in order to see Dumbledore."

"Right, yes," Sirius confirmed, thankfully registering that Theo meant the false wizarding paperwork they'd hidden in the castle. "Yes, Hogwarts first, then Dumbledore—"

"There's just one thing, though," Theo said, turning to Tom. Of the two, he felt certain Tom was more likely to rise to a challenge. "It would be a lot easier if you were Harry Potter."

Tom's brow creased, accenting his lightning-shaped scar. "Why?"

"Oh, you know how bureaucracy works," Theo said with a wave of his hand. "That's who Dumbledore's looking for, and considering you look so much like him and all..."

He trailed off pointedly, and Tom frowned.

"Is this some sort of crime thing?" he asked. "You want me to be a drug mule or something?"

"No—Jesus, what? No," Theo said, repulsed. "Christ, we just—"

"You just look so much like him," Sirius cut in, and, managing a slightly more reasonable tone from his initial delirium, "What's your last name, if you don't mind me asking?"

Tom snuck a glance at the girl, then back at Sirius.

"Riddle," he said.

And then, after a moment of pause, "I think."

Theo scoffed. "You think?"

"Yes, I think," Tom snapped. "I don't know. I'm an orphan. Been in an orphanage my whole life."

At that, Theo and Sirius exchanged a glance, collectively feeling the spark of a scam finding its footing.

"Well," Sirius said, turning slowly to Tom, "then who's to say you're not Harry, hm?"

"Do you even know how you got to the orphanage?" Theo asked him.
Tom's brow stitched together in what was a resounding, perhaps life-defining 'no.'

"Even you can't deny how much you look like James," Theo reminded him. "You don't technically know what happened to you—"

"—and nobody knows what happened to Harry," Sirius contributed.

"So, if you don't actually know who you are—"

"—and nobody knows where he is—"

"—then who's to say you couldn't be him?" Theo and Sirius concluded in unison.

"Me?" Tom echoed, frowning.

"Could be. Maybe, maybe not. Either way, there's no real reason not to find out for sure, is there?" Theo posed helpfully, observing that Tom had begun to contemplate it himself, the wheels starting to turn somewhere under all that messy jet-black hair.

The girl, however, still looked tentative, gripping Tom's arm.

"Tom," she whispered. "I don't know about this."

Figured. Women were much too sensible.

"Well, better that you're both comfortable," Theo said, beckoning to Sirius and turning away. "Pity we couldn't make this work, but such is life. Thanks anyway," he called, "very best of luck to you, watch out for any errant vehicles—"

"What are you doing?" Sirius demanded, slicing a glare at Theo as he forcefully angled them away. "I thought you said you were going to handle this?"

"I am handling it," Theo assured him with a shrug, grabbing Sirius' arm before he could turn back around. "I've got this, okay? Just stay calm, I saw it on his face. We have the answers he wants," he assured Sirius, "and once he's talked his little friend into it…"

He trailed off, holding up an expectant hand and counting down the seconds.

*Three, two, one…*

"WAIT," came a voice behind them, and Theo fell to a victorious halt, sparing Sirius a wink before pivoting around, triumphant.

"Tom, you can't be serious," Hermione whispered to him, frowning as the two grubby-looking strangers walked away. "One of them nearly killed you, for one thing—and they're obviously, I don't know… vagrants," she said with a frown. "Or at the very least not especially trustworthy."

That much was undeniably true. The older one, whose age was mostly evident in the stray white stubble around his sunken, unshaven cheeks, wore a leather jacket that was less fashionable than it was probably his only article of clothing. His black jeans were exceedingly worn, ripped clean through in a handful of spots and then rubbed to faded patches in at least three others, and his too-long hair was knotted at the back of his head.

The other, far thinner and noticeably younger, consisted of similar materials: jeans, functional brown boots, an unaccented leather jacket. He had glints of things, though, odd quirks and
eccentricities that were evident in his choice of accessories; like the chain of something, possibly an old-timey pocket watch, that hung from the front pocket of his jeans. The neck of his v-neck slung low enough to reveal another thin chain, its contents hidden under his shirt, and a handful of rings flashed from his fingers, decorative accents to his fidgeting motions. His hair was short, dark, practical; no fuss except for the outline of wings that crept out from under his jacket, reaching up to the right side of his neck. Behind his left ear was another tattoo: a series of what looked like hand drawn lines. A set of four with a slash across it, then two more. Seven marks in total.

So, yeah. Not exactly the ideal conspirators.

But Tom's scar was starting to hurt again; the way it only did in his recurring dreams, in his nightmares. If this was going to be his only option about figuring out who and what he was, then he was just going to have to jump.

"You did all the research, didn't you?" Tom reminded Hermione. "Dumbledore's our only clue, and you and I both know it's a dead end on our own. If we don't go with them, we might lose our only chance to find him."

"But they want you to be someone named Harry," Hermione insisted. "That doesn't bother you?"

Tom shrugged. "Who says I'm not? I don't know who I am, and they clearly know something we don't about Hogwarts," he pointed out, and she grimaced. "Besides, it's not like they can hurt us." Nobody ever had before; Tom was fairly certain he might've exploded the oncoming taxi if he'd considered himself in real danger, but it had been a long time since he'd let fear get the better of him. "I'm pretty sure we can take care of ourselves."

"Still. I don't think we should trust them." She gave the two men another furrowed look of doubt. "Let's just… let's not tell them about our powers, okay? What we can do and all that. Let's at least keep that between us."

"Sure, fine." Tom itched to catch up with them; to make sure they didn't get away. The picture the older one had shown him had left a sensation of longing he couldn't suppress, and even if that James person wasn't his father, it was still a feeling he'd spent his whole life wanting. It was such a normal thing in his mind, so beautifully un-monstrous, to look at a family photo; to have someone comment that he had this person's hair, or this person's knobby knees. If he had to be Harry Potter to feel that way again, so be it. He could manage it for a time.

"So you agree, then?"

Hermione grimaced. "Well, if we have no other choice—"

They didn't. As far as Tom was concerned, that was good enough for a yes.

"WAIT," he called after the other two, catching them as the younger one—the one with the air of combativeness, who looked like a bike gang gypsy—turned sharply to face him. "Theo, was it?"

"That scar," Theo cut in. "You always had that?"

As far as he could remember, yes. "Yeah."
"Ever thought of covering it up?"

That, as far as Tom knew, was impossible. He'd tried. Mrs Cole had tried. In the end, they'd decided it was some sort of devil's mark that probably shouldn't be touched.

He let his hand fall, deciding it wasn't worth getting into.

"Well, anyway, we really have to be on our way," Theo mused, gesturing evasively down the road. "I mean if you're not Harry, we'll just have to keep looking for him, so…"

"You swear you can get us to Dumbledore?" Tom cut in, setting his jaw.

Theo scrutinized him a moment, which was a compulsion Tom was more than willing to reciprocate. Despite the fact that Theo was a too-skinny, hawk-eyed derelict with a distinct air of arseholery, it occurred to Tom that Theo couldn't have been much older than he was. That, and he didn't look particularly well cared for. It was something Hermione would judge, but Tom, who'd grown up feeling hungry more often than he was full, was willing to disregard.

Eventually, Theo nodded. "I can get you there. Believe me," he added, "I'll do everything in my not-inconsiderable power to make it happen."

Hermione glanced at Tom, giving him another silent look of, Are you sure?

Nope, not sure at all. But anywhere was better than nowhere, which was where he'd been headed his entire life until today.

"So. Do we have a deal?" Theo asked, thrusting out a hand for Tom's. "We'll get you to Dumbledore and in return, you'll be Harry Potter."

"What about me?" asked Hermione.

"What about you?" Theo retorted, and she scowled.

Not a promising start, obviously, but still. It would have to be this or nothing.

"Fine," Tom said, accepting Theo's grip as Hermione folded her arms over her chest, moodily resigned. "Fine. It's a deal."

---

Two sides of the same coin.

Find one, find the other.

Neither can live while the other survives.

"Master," Wormtail croaked, "are you… alright?"

I will be in good time.

They should not have been saying his name where just anyone could hear it.
Acquiring sufficient muggle currency was a simple matter of a handful of "is this your card"s until they received large enough bills to use as a base, followed by some straightforward duplication spells. A pity magical money was so recalcitrant when it came to counterfeit, as the wizarding world was where they would ultimately spend the majority of this endeavor. Still, Tom and his skeptical friend Hermione (who had not wanted to give them her full name, much to Theo's complete disinterest) would need to believe they had never actually left the muggle world, so, muggle things would need to be purchased. The train ticket, for one.

"You can't Floo," Sirius reminded Theo. "Requires blood registry."

"I know, Black." Astoundingly, it wasn't his first day.

"Can't apparate, either. No permits, and we're out of fake ones."

Something had really shaken Sirius up, it seemed. He was unusually fidgety since having met Tom, and seemed to keep reaching unconsciously for the picture he kept in his pocket. That, or for the flask Theo ultimately opted to swipe from his jeans, just to be safe. Sirius tended to be strange every year around Halloween, but this was a new record.

Odd as it was, Theo was determined not to let Sirius' agitation infect him. "You really think I can convince them they took a sleeping pill and wound up in Hogsmeade? Don't be stupid, it looks terrible on you."

"Nothing looks terrible on me," Sirius replied, a reflexive response that indicated he was at least normal enough to continue the discussion. "So what's your plan, then?"

Easy. The Hogwarts Express was still running, as it had been more costly for the Ministry to argue about dismantling it than it was to simply let it exist. The train itself hadn't functioned regularly in close to a decade, but that was an easy fix. Theo and Sirius had used it more than once on their jaunts to and from London.

"I won't be able to help you as Padfoot," Sirius warned, and Theo shrugged.

"You say that like you're any help in human form," he replied. "Now get changed, would you? We're meeting them in ten minutes."

Maneuvering dog-Sirius from King's Cross back into the wizarding world was always a bit of a hassle, as it required him to wear the service animal regalia he had to be extremely drunk to let Theo put on. He swayed slightly in place while Theo explained to a skeptical Tom and Hermione, ostensibly cat people, that Sirius had been called away overnight and would meet them upon arrival.

"So it's just you, then?" Hermione asked doubtfully, gaze flicking over Theo's appearance. He, in turn, made a point of silently condemning hers, prompting her to shrink just enough to prove his point. She'd obviously aimed for unremarkable when she'd dressed that morning, but Theo knew how to recognize money when he saw it. The sweater was wool, the nice kind. Her jacket, a trench
shape tied around her waist, wasn't cheap either. She obviously took her fashion cues from an off-duty Princess Diana.

Tom, who had his genuinely poor hands tucked into the pockets of the same jacket from yesterday, cleared his throat. "She just means—"

"I know what she means," Theo gestured briskly into the station, beckoning for them to follow. "Watch the dog," he added, as Hermione nearly tripped over a slowly ambling Sirius.

"Does he bite?" she asked, and Theo scoffed.

"Does he look like he bites?"

"Well, I don't know, I just—"

"Trust me," Theo assured her, directing them smoothly to the platforms, "he couldn't be less interested in you."

Sirius glanced up, giving Theo a dull look of _hush_. Tom, Theo noted, was busy staring around the train station, looking slightly awed.

"Never been here before?" Theo asked.

"Sure, all the time," said Hermione. Beside her, Tom nodded solemnly, apparently content to let her do most of the talking and, as far as Theo could tell, all of the lying.

"How exactly did you two meet?" Theo asked them, maneuvering a labyrinthine path through the peak hour crowds. Better that it was too busy for the muggles to focus on anything other than their feet. "You don't exactly seem like you run in the same circles."

"School," Hermione said, as Tom replied, "Work."

"Yeah, that checks out," Theo remarked, angling them both towards the wall between platforms nine and ten.

"Which platform did you say it was?" Hermione asked, glancing around with a frown. "If you just gave us the tickets, I'm sure we could—"

"Oops, sorry," Theo said, confusing them momentarily with a subtle flick of his wand before knocking them both sideways, shoving through the barrier with a stumbling Sirius at his heels. As of that morning, neither of them had been positive that whatever muggle protections previously put in place were still functioning, but worst case, Theo merely shoved them into a wall and proclaimed it an accident. Sirius had already done worse, hadn't he? That, and Theo could live with the consequences.

To his relief, though, they passed clean through to the other side, Hermione straightening with a dazed look on her face to register they were now standing on the platform.

"It's—"

"Quiet, I know," Theo said, handing Tom the leash. "Hold my dog, would you? I'll go take care of our tickets."

"Has he got a name?" Tom asked, glancing doubtfully at Sirius, who looked dumbly up at him.

"Yeah, Padfoot," Theo replied over his shoulder, jogging away as Hermione attempted to pet
Sirius' head. She'd probably pay for that later, he assumed, but for now he was focused on the matter of getting the train on its way.

Theo glanced around, checking over his shoulder to ensure Tom and Hermione were successfully distracted before darting onto the train, making his way to the engine car. Usually all it took was a little enchantment here and there; bada-bing bada-boom, ta-dah. Magical transportation was usually in a state of wanting to run, unlike castles. A little animation did the trick, delivering sufficient steam after a few short seconds, and then Theo hustled into the middle car with a whistle for Sirius, who came bounding up to the carriage with Tom and Hermione in tow.

"Quite a trained dog you have," Hermione panted, struggling with the leash. In return, Sirius slimed the leg of her pants with a glob of drool. "Oh," she said, glancing down with a look of displeasure. "Well, that's, um—"

"Why isn't anyone else on this train?" Tom asked with a suspicious glance at Theo, who shrugged.

"I'm sure they'll be along. You coming or what?"

Tom glanced at Hermione, who, much to her own detriment, had tried to remove Sirius' drool from her pants. It was now slung between her fingers like a spider's web.

"Yeah, fine," Tom muttered, easing her up by the elbow.

Sirius, who had been unsuccessfully dragging Hermione toward one of the compartments, gave the leash a swift tug, sending her lurching after him. Tom, though, paused beside Theo.

"You really think I could be this… Harry person?" he asked.

"Would I be doing any of this if I didn't?" Theo replied.

That, much to Theo's immense displeasure, was apparently insufficient.

"And he's important or something?" Tom said, frowning. "Harry, I mean."

"Important enough for Dumbledore to go looking for him," Theo offered evasively, gesturing to the compartment. "Just sit down, would you? We're about to leave."

"So Dumbledore's important, then," Tom guessed. "Must be, if you're going to all this trouble."

"What trouble?" Theo mused, shrugging. "Train ride's hardly trouble. Just sit down, have a nap, get to Hogwarts, no problem."

"Yeah, but—" Tom looked uncertain, eyeing the distance his feet would have to travel as if the floor of the train carriage might somehow explain it to him. When it didn't, he glanced up at Theo with a frown. "What's in it for you?"

"Why does there have to be something in it for me?" Theo asked. "Just doing my civic duty, that's all."

Tom's frown deepened. "But—"

Christ, he was tiresome. Worse, he was tiring.

"Are you going to sit down or not?" Theo interrupted, losing his patience and catching the wand he'd obscured in his sleeve with the heel of his hand. If that was what it took, so be it.
Tom gave Theo a look of supreme annoyance, or possibly mild loathing. Not that it mattered; so they were off on the wrong foot. So what? Once the two muggles were handed off to one of the channels of the Order, they'd all be done here. Theo could happily roll around in his galleons and pretend this entire day had never existed, and the other two...

Well, they weren't his problem, were they?

"You know," Tom said, "I'm not so sure I like you."

"Well, you wouldn't be the first," Theo assured him, waving him into the compartment.

That time, Tom miraculously obliged, tossing another narrowed look of contempt over his shoulder.

"There we go," Theo said with approval, falling into the empty seat beside Tom as Hermione, who held a snoring Sirius' head in her lap, looked down at the dog with a vague sense of repulsion.

Understandable, really. Sirius' breath wasn't so much a whiff of fresh air as it was a gust of disgusting garbage poison.

"Well, off we go, then," Theo said cheerfully, just as the train began rolling out of the station.

He can feel the boy getting closer, waking up. The Boy Who Lived is coming closer to him, coming home, and so is he.

Find one, find the other.

We have both been cursed, Harry Potter, but now we're waking up.

"My Lord." A whisper from Wormtail. "It is arranged as you have asked."

Excellent.

Welcome to the nightmare, Harry Potter. It's finally time to wake up.

Tom woke with a start, catching himself as he nodded off.

He'd been having a dream, sort of. The usual one, which was less a dream than it was a recurring scene he'd witnessed before. Red-slitted eyes. A woman's screams. Sometimes he could pause it, walk around in it, observe and catalogue the damage inside it. The body on the floor, the sound of a crying baby. He could feel his own heart beating, pulsing, a sense of finally, of resolution about to come. No matter how many times he had the dream, he never reached the promise of absolution. It was like one of those dreams people always talked about having, where you're running and running and you try—you do everything in your desperate, sluggish power to reach the place where you need to go—but you never, ever make it.

Tom shivered, wiping away the cool sweat that had formed at the back of his neck with his palm.

He glanced around the carriage, checking if anyone else had been disturbed by his restlessness, but it seemed nobody had noticed. Beside him, Theo was curled up with his arms folded, his head leaned against the compartment wall. From that angle, the tally marks on his neck were prominently visible.

Hermione had stretched out with the dog, whose head still rested heavily on her thigh. He snorted
once, loudly, and flicked at nothing with his ear.

Tom looked out the window, a flash of something catching his eye.

Nothing. Just empty countryside.

He shivered, suddenly realizing he was quite cold. The train felt empty, almost hollow. He glanced at Theo again, who twitched in his sleep.

It was eerily, uncomfortably quiet.

Tom closed his eyes again, leaning back against the seat. A little shudder ran through his limbs, vibrating around in them. What was he doing here, really? The doubt crept in like a sickness, steadily taking root: He wasn't whoever they claimed he was. His life was empty, full of wrongs. He was wrong; he was a monster with red-slitted eyes. They, none of them, had any idea what they'd invited into their lives when they'd foolishly let him in.

Tom swallowed hard, trying to force his intrusive thoughts away. What would happen when he became that monster again? The sense of dread came closer, poised to swallow him up. He tried to draw to mind Hermione's face, her look of reassurance, and only saw the tally marks on Theo's neck. The lines took the shape of a cage, and then a bone, and then a grave.

Then, without warning, he heard the sound of a terrible, piercing scream.

"Fuck," he exhaled, eyes snapping open, and beside him Theo jolted awake, startled by the sound of his voice.

"What is it? What's going on?"

"Tom?" Hermione mumbled, yawning as she struggled to sit up. "Is everything alr-"

Theo cut her off, leaping to his feet.

"Do you feel that?" he demanded.

Hermione stretched out her neck, slow to wake. "What?"

"That! The… cold," Theo said, sounding agitated, even paranoid. He had risen to his feet, throwing the compartment door open and eyeing the corridor. "The chill, and the—fuck, that… emptiness?" he asked impatiently, glancing over his shoulder at them. "The uncanny, incorporeal sense that nothing will ever be good again?"

"What?" Hermione asked, bewildered, before Theo turned helplessly to Tom.

"You feel it," he said. "Look at your face. I know you do."

Tom swallowed. "I…" He cleared his throat. "It's a bit cold, yeah."


"Dem… what?" Hermione asked, but the dog had already leapt from beside her, trotting into the train corridor.

"Come on," Theo said, and took a sharp left from the compartment. Tom, having no choice but to follow, grabbed Hermione's hand, tugging her after him.
He hadn't wanted to admit it, but whatever Theo had incoherently described, Tom was positive he felt it. It was following them now, coming closer.

It felt familiar. Terrifying, but familiar.

"Tom," Hermione huffed in his wake, "wait, our things—"

"Leave them," Theo shouted over his shoulder, shoving open the door between passenger cars and racing towards something near the engine. "Get moving!" he shouted, but Tom, feeling the sensation Theo had described begin to reach like tendrils for his lungs, glanced briefly over his shoulder.

He fought a gasp, seeing something at their heels; a figure inside a floating cloak. A ghost? The grim reaper, surely. Was it death?

Tom froze, suddenly unable to move as the creature came closer, looming over him.

"Tom, what is it? Tom, come on, run!"

Hermione's voice floated in and out of his head, a whorl of sounds.

*Take the baby and go, I'll hold him off!*

"Tom!"

*Step aside, girl, don't be a fool…*

"I said *come on,*" Theo suddenly growled in Tom's ear, taking him by the arm with a hard yank and delivering him from his temporary paralysis.

Tom blinked, stumbling over himself as Theo dragged him through what remained of the passenger compartments. Hermione was ahead of them, running with Padfoot to the engine car.

"What… where are we—?"

"Move fast enough and we'll get rid of them, just—*come on.*" Theo gave Tom one last tug that nearly removed his arm from its socket before shoving him out of the way, securely planting Tom and Hermione in the engine compartment while Theo—who had clearly gone mad—leapt down onto the link between train cars, the wind outside whipping color into his cheeks.

Tom stumbled to the edge of the engine car to stare down at the tracks, watching Theo balance precariously between them.

"What are you doing?" he shouted over the motion of the train.

"Hold on, would you?" Theo shouted back, reaching out to grip Tom's wrist. "I just have to get down and look at something!"

He leapt beneath the car using Tom for leverage, momentarily sending them both careening off-balance.

"I said HOLD ON," Theo growled, and Tom, rolling his eyes, adjusted his grip on Theo's forearm.

Theo slid out of sight, the majority of his torso disappearing beneath the train car as Tom struggled to maintain his grip.
"What exactly are you—"

There was a loud bang; a blast of something.

"—doing," Tom panted as Theo tugged at his arm, signaling that whatever idiotic thing he'd planned to do, he'd managed it. Tom dragged him up, gripping him by the shoulders and yanking him back into the car. "Did you just—"

"Blow up the train? Barely," Theo panted, rings glinting as he wiped the sweat from his temples. In front of them, the train carriages had disengaged from the engine car; the hooded figures that had floated in their wake were now hovering in the distance.

"What are those?" Tom asked, precisely as one of them lifted into the air, taking flight like a hooded specter.

"Fuck," Theo said, glancing at the dog. "Any ideas?"

Tom frowned. "Are you asking… Padfoot?"

Bizarrely, the dog appeared to shrug.

"No, I'm just—" Theo broke off, obviously frustrated. "I didn't know they could do that. I don't even know why they're here!" he ranted. "They're supposed to be… I don't know, in Azkaban or some shit—"

A slew of cloaked figures approached them from the disengaged passenger cars, the wind whipping Tom's hair into his eyes. The continuing chill was biting now, angry, and the sense of dread came over him again. The spectral fingers of the hooded figures reached for him, craving him, finding a little spark of him and grasping for it, aching to close their bony claws around it, and the closer they came, the more Tom could hear it… screaming, crying, Please, please I beg you, I'll do anything… Please, kill me instead!

He tasted blood in his mouth as Theo snatched the back of his collar, dragging him back to consciousness.

"We're going to have to jump," Theo said in his ear, barely audible over the sound of the racing train car.

"Like hell we are!" Hermione shouted from somewhere behind them, indignant as only Hermione could be, but Tom could barely move. The closer the figures came, the more he felt certain it was over… the more familiar it was, that something he desperately wanted existing just out of reach… he'd come close, but not nearly close enough… he was tired, numb, wrung out and—

"On my count," Theo yelled in his ear. "Are you ready?"

Screaming, sobbing, a burst of green light and—

HARRY!

"JUMP," Theo shouted, and all Tom could hear was the roar of the wind, delivering his wild mind to silence.
He is awake now; I can feel him.

I can feel him slipping from my grasp again.

"My Lord, please forgive me, I do not know how he escaped!"

Harry Potter must not escape me now.

If you cannot help me, I will find something more useful that will.

Dementors. Great, excellent, perfect. What next?

"Fuck," Theo said under his breath. "Aurors."

It probably shouldn't have surprised him that Hogsmeade was swarming with Ministry officials, but the leap from the train had done away with quite a bit of Theo's plan, along with most of his capacity to strategize. All the enchantment wards in the village had been activated, meaning invisibility was impossible; just what he needed, really, as if being a fugitive running around with a mass murderer and two muggles wasn't bad enough.

"What?" Hermione asked, panting a little from the trudge into the village.

Ever since they'd started walking, Hermione had been talking Theo's ear off. What were those things back there, why were they here, where are we going, are you sure you know what you're doing, why did they seem to want Tom so badly? Theo had no answers, obviously, and the constant refrains of "I don't know" were getting needlessly repetitive.

"Nothing," Theo said, glancing over his shoulder at Tom, who remained a little shaken up from the jump. He seemed to attract bad luck, like some kind of reverse talisman; if he hadn't been extremely crucial to the future of Theo's lifestyle comfort, he'd have ditched the guy long ago. "Just… try to keep up, okay?"

He led them to one of his usual haunts, weaving circuitously around buildings and darting out of sight whenever he saw the flash of an Auror badge.

"Where exactly are we?" Hermione asked, Sirius' leash wrapped around her knuckles. "Are you hiding from the police or something? Because if there's something we should know—"

"Just people I don't want to run into, that's all." Theo pulled the collar of his jacket up, making his way to the Hog's Head. "Try to keep up, would you?"

He ducked in through the open front door, hurrying Tom and Hermione in after him and then shutting it firmly behind them, opening the slot to peer around for Aurors.

"Theo," Hermione hissed. "If we're in danger, I demand you tell us th-"
"Thought I wouldn't be seeing you again for weeks, Nott," came a voice behind them as Hermione jumped, hand shooting out for Tom's. Theo turned, catching Aberforth's smirk, and scowled.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, they're saying the castle's near been destroyed," Aberforth said with a chuckle. "Any idea who else might've done that, hm?"

"You know perfectly well I'm a respectable citizen, Ab." Theo turned back to the slot in the door, grimacing. "All entrances blocked?"

"All but one," Aberforth said, gesturing behind him. "And as a reminder, it ain't free."

"Never is, dickhead." Theo glanced down at Sirius, who had at least managed to sober up from the fall. "Go get Sirius, would you?"

The dog bounded up the stairs as Hermione frowned, the leash getting yanked from her hand.

"Where's he going?" she asked, looking concerned as she peered after Padfoot, but Theo had other things to deal with.

"If you need a room, that's ten galleons," Aberforth said, and Theo scoffed.

"Like hell it is!"

"Rate's gone up, kid. Supply and demand. Economics of utility, et cetera—"

"Don't et cetera me—"

"We're staying here?" Hermione asked tentatively, which Theo ignored.

"You really think I'd pay ten galleons for this shithole?" he snapped at Aberforth. "I can get a room from Rosmerta for half that!"

"I'm sure you could," Aberforth smugly agreed, "but it wouldn't get you back into the castle, would it?"

Theo regretted how many times Sirius had had a few too many at the Hog's Head bar. Aberforth never batted an eye—certainly never turned them in—but he certainly made them pay.

"If it's a matter of money," Hermione ventured, "and Aberforth's attention swiveled to her.

"What's this you got, Nott? Muggles?"

She might not have understood the word, but his tone was unmistakable. "Excuse me," Hermione said, stepping forward. "What's that supposed to mean—"

"Jesus," Theo said under his breath, hooking a finger in Hermione's coat and dragging her back as Tom looked on, wary. "Stay here, would you? Don't talk to anyone, I've got an errand to run. We'll take the room," he said to Aberforth, who shrugged, having already guessed as much. "Just make sure they don't get mixed up with Aurors while I'm gone or you can kiss that ten galleons goodbye, you hear me?"

Hermione took one look at a slyly grinning Aberforth and grimaced, turning to Theo. "Wait," she said, feigning brightness as she hastily determined him the lesser of two evils. "If there's something we can help you with—"
"Just stay here," Theo repeated, and from the stairs, he heard Sirius' usual footfall. "Great, stay with Sirius. And make sure he doesn't drink anything," he added firmly, as Sirius emerged from the stairwell, smelling like... well, not roses, exactly. He'd be wearing the spare set of clothes he'd hidden the last time they'd used the Head to lay low, which probably meant the wafting scent of contaminated potions still clung to them. "I mean it," Theo added to Aberforth, aiming a finger over his shoulder as he shoved open the doors to the old man's private office. "You know he'll never pay his tab, Ab!"

"Sure," Aberforth said, pouring a bottle of Ogden's into a waiting glass as Theo gritted his teeth, heading for the painting of the little girl that hung behind the desk.

"Well, go on," Theo said impatiently, gesturing to her the moment he entered Aberforth's office, and she pursed her lips. "What, you want me to ask nicely?"

She scowled.

"Fine. Please go on," Theo said.

She twirled her hair around one finger, ignoring him.

"Look, I've had a shit day," Theo said. "There were dementors on the train."

Her eyes slid slowly to his, still narrowed.

"I just need to pick up something I left behind and then I'll never bother you again," he promised her. "I've finally got a real ticket out of here, okay? So just let me in and we'll never have to see each other for the rest of time."

The prospect of his absence seemed to satisfy her. She turned around, walking wherever she always walked, and gradually the tunnel from the portrait became accessible, allowing Theo to step inside the frame.

"Thanks," he called to wherever she went when she did this, making his way to the room full of shit that was usually his portal into the castle when the front door was swarmed with Aurors. Not exactly a shortcut, but it served fine enough. He made his way past the toilets and the books and the broken potion ingredients and poked his head out from the slowly materializing door, listening.

He caught the sound of an oncoming voice and leapt back, leaving it open only a crack.

"—pain in my side, like always, though I suspect there's a chance to finally be rid of him. Rumor has it he's sending someone; one of his minions, if I had to guess. Knowing Dumbledore's flair for subtlety, it'll be the bloody half-giant or the werewolf—"

That was a voice Theo knew well, though he hadn't heard it for a number of years. He slid the chain around his neck out from under his t-shirt, untwisting the vial that was usually nestled against his sternum and letting the tiny parchment fall into the palm of his hand.

"Engorgio," he whispered, and within seconds, the Marauder's Map spread out to full size. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Welcome back, dipshit, said the map, revealing the usual layout of the castle. It was something of Sirius' making, or so Theo had gathered; back when Sirius was still fairly useful he'd snuck into the castle's caretaker's office and stolen it back from when it had been confiscated during his final year of schooling. Hard to believe now that Sirius had ever been capable of making something so advanced, considering it was around Theo's neck for a reason. Sirius almost always tried to gamble
it or trade it away for firewhisky.

Theo zeroed in on where he was, glancing around at the footsteps. Yes, as predicted, he'd correctly identified the voice. The tiny letters Lucius Malfoy were making their way down the stairs beside the unsurprising name of Cornelius Fudge.

"Well, I certainly hope he won't disrupt this year's All Hallows gala," Fudge was saying apprehensively. "I don't suppose he'd show up personally, do you?"

"Dumbledore, in Godric's Hollow?" scoffed Malfoy. "Fudge, don't be ridiculous. For all those who still worship the doddering old fool, there's another half who thoroughly resent him. After all, who has he helped by going into hiding? Certainly not any Ministry constituents I know."

"True, true," Fudge said. "Why send someone, then?"

"Well, I doubt he can help himself," Malfoy sniffed. "Of course, if the Order does plan to make a scene, we'll be ready. I have my son Draco handling security in the event he does try something."

Theo blinked, startled by the name.

"Draco's a promising young Auror, Malfoy, but for something of this… magnitude?"

"He's not just an Auror, Fudge. He's well on his way to being Shacklebolt's lieutenant," Malfoy said with his usual smuggery. "He'll replace Shacklebolt, if I have anything to say about it, within the next year, mark my words. Everyone knows Shacklebolt's a Dumbledore fanatic, and his influence wanes every time his precious Chosen One fails to materialize."

"Yes, yes, well, if you're sure. What about the castle, then?"

Their voices began to fade, heading towards the dungeons.

"The whole place needs to be condemned, frankly. Clearly there've been squatters living here, so better for everyone if the whole place is demolished. Come to think of it, I could use a new country home—"

Theo waited until the two had disappeared before slipping out of the room, heading for Sirius' hiding place in Gryffindor Tower. So, Dumbledore would be sending someone to the Ministry gala, hm? That was one way to find the Order, though they'd have to find their way into the gala first.

He paused before the portrait of the Fat Lady. "Hey," he said. "Just have to get something."

"Not you again," she replied, scowling. "Every time the two of you come back, the whole place smells of whisky and anarchy. Is that mud you're tracking in my quarters?"

He glanced down at his jacket. "Just dirt," he grumbled, waving it away. "Had a rough time getting in."

"Good," said the Fat Lady.

Theo held an agitated finger to his lips. "Would you just open up? And quietly, please—"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO," she barked, though she conceded to swing open, leaving Theo to roll his eyes and dart inside, heading for the loose floorboard under one of the beds in the dormitories.
He pried it open, pulling out Sirius' usual treasures; mostly other photographs of the schoolmates he'd shown Tom along with some old empty vials, plus a handwritten letter from someone called Lily that Theo assumed was a former girlfriend and/or the reason Sirius drank so much. He reached underneath for the papers, the fake Ministry seal, and the dried up pot of ink before casting a few of the counterfeit spells, locking the enchantments in place. Then he wrote in careful letters:

*Tom Riddle*

*Hermione*

Fuck, what was her last name?

Theo shrugged. Better that he determine that for her, anyway.

*Hermione Malfoy*

There. If anyone looked closely they'd be fucked, but this was at least real enough to distract someone long enough to get away.

That was his usual scam, wasn't it? Nothing ever had to be real. It only had to be real enough that people could believe it until he was gone, untraceable and impossible to catch. He took what he needed and he left, just like he'd left his life behind seven years ago.

Theo scratched at the tattoo behind his ear, surveying the finished product.

He really had a gift for forgery.

Then he pulled the watch out of his pocket, realizing he'd been gone long enough for Sirius to give away at least four of his personal secrets, and sighed.

The sooner he was done with all of this, the better.

"I don't think you're supposed to be drinking," Hermione said to Sirius, who glanced up at her from his second half-empty pint glass.

"Believe me," he assured her, "you don't have to listen to everything Nott says."

She flushed a little pink. "Well, it's just—"

"You," Sirius said, kicking Tom's barstool and turning to him. "You want to hear about your dad?"

Tom was caught by surprise. "My dad?"

"Yeah, your dad. Harry's dad, James." Sirius slammed the glass against the counter, gesturing to the bartender. "Another Ogden's, Ab."

"That'll be another galleon," said the old man.

"Put it on the kid's tab," replied Sirius, turning back to Tom. "Anyway, where was I?"

"James," Tom said. Hermione glanced at him, frowning, but he ignored her. So what if he wanted to pretend he was whoever Harry was for a moment? It was better than thinking about the hooded creatures who'd shown up on the train. He couldn't help thinking he'd brought them there, somehow. Like he'd spirited his own nightmares to life.
“What was James like?”

“A fucking piece of work, that’s what. An arrogant little dickhead.” Sirius grinned broadly. “Best I ever saw on a broom, too. Absolute shit with women. Nearly didn’t get Lily until the end.” The bartender slid a whisky across the bar, which Sirius downed in one go. "Bastard was my best fucking friend. Thick as thieves, me and James. Right ‘til the end, I’d have died for him. With him. If he’d just…”

His expression grew tight as he set the glass back down, glancing blearily at Tom.

“You look just like him except for the eyes,” Sirius mumbled. "The eyes are your mum's."

Hermione nudged Tom's shoulder gently. "I don't think you should be doing this," she whispered to him. "He's… he's confused, and drunk, and—"

"Tell me about my mum," Tom said, and Sirius' sloppy grin returned.

"Too good for your dad, that's what she was. Angry little spitfire of a witch, and best in our year. When my parents kicked me out and I went to live with James, guess who brought me everything I needed?"

"My mum?" Tom guessed, and Sirius smacked his hand against the bar.

"Lily fucking Evans," he confirmed. "I'd have loved her my whole life if I wasn't too busy being in love with Prongs. And Moony," he said, and stared into nothing. "Fuck, I loved them all so much I don't even know which one I loved most." He glanced down at his empty glass, peering at it. "Wish they'd forgive me," he muttered. "Wish I could tell them I was wrong."

Then he let out a barking laugh, startling Tom slightly, before he glanced up with a crooked smile.


This time, Hermione's grip on Tom's arm was too urgent to ignore.

"We need to talk," she whispered, pulling him outside.

"Hermione, Theo said not t-"

"Just for a second." She ducked through the tavern doors, shivering a little as the northern autumn breeze whipped around them. "Don't you think there's something weird about these two?" she asked him, frowning. "They're running from the police, Tom. They could be more sinister than we think."

"These don't look like police," Tom said, gesturing to the strange men walking by in cloaks. They all wore badges with some sort of unrecognizable seal, but they were hardly the uniformed officers he was used to; those typically identified him as trouble and chased him out of public places on sight.

"And listen," Hermione whispered, "about those things, with the cloaks—?"

"I think I brought them," Tom admitted, and Hermione swallowed, nodding anxiously. "It had to have been me," he told her, catching her apologetic frown, as if she'd been reluctant to say so.
"Well, we've got to find Dumbledore soon," she said quietly, shivering through another gust of wind. "Hopefully Sirius and Theo don't catch onto us before we get a chance to talk to him. I can't decide which one I trust less," she added, glancing over her shoulder at where Sirius remained inside the tavern. "Sirius seems nice enough, but he did talk about killing someone. And Theo, well—"

Briefly, Tom thought of the look on Theo's face after they'd jumped from the train. 

_They're after you_, he'd said, and the look on his face hadn't been curiosity.

It was… something else. Like he was sad, or sorry.

"Are you sure we shouldn't just tell them what we are?" Tom said, interrupting whatever Hermione's thought had been. "Sometimes it seems like… I don't know. Like maybe they know something, or—"

"What? Absolutely not," Hermione said, her curls whipping into her face again as another gust went by. "Tom, don't be ridiculous. We just need them to get us to Dumbledore and then we can go from there on our own. Maybe he's, you know, some kind of Professor X-type or something—"

"Yeah, maybe," Tom said.

His mind wandered back to the creatures on the train, prompting him to fight a shudder. It seemed that ever since he'd left the orphanage, his nightmares were getting worse. They used to be intermittent, haunting him with the tolerable frequency of indigestion, but now it seemed every time he closed his eyes he could only hear the screaming, or else feel Theo's arm dragging him backwards, shouting for him to wake up.

This time, as another peal of wind went by, it dragged with it a piece of parchment that smacked into Hermione's face.

"Good lord, what the—"

She peeled it away, frowning down at it, and blinked. "Tom," she said, and he glanced down, half-listening. "Tom, look at this."

Her voice snapped him back to reality as he looked down at the page, which was some sort of wanted ad with a row of at least twenty headshots.

At the top, the most prominent:

_WANTED FOR DESTRUCTION OF PUBLIC PROPERTY, INCITEMENT, AND RESISTING ARREST: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE_

It was a picture of an old man with a white beard and a crooked nose who couldn't have looked less like someone who would resist arrest. The page was also moving, unless Tom was mistaken, precisely like the picture Sirius had shown him. Figuring that wasn't the weirdest thing he'd ever seen—certainly not even the weirdest thing he'd seen _that day_—Tom shrugged.

"So what, this is Dumbledore?"

"Not that," Hermione hissed, jabbing a finger to the bottom of the page. "That."

_WANTED FOR THE MURDER OF PETER PETTIGREW: SIRIUS BLACK_
"Oh," Tom said, though before he could focus on the page, there was someone yanking him back inside.

"Thanks for your excellent job keeping Black in line," Theo said gruffly, gesturing over his shoulder to where Sirius was snoring on the bar as Hermione quickly shoved the flyer in her coat pocket. "Did I not say to keep an eye on him?"

Tom could feel Hermione buzzing with worry beside him.

"Sorry," he said, speaking for them both, and Theo shrugged.

"Whatever. We have to get out of here anyway," he said, lifting Sirius with a surprising strength and beckoning for Tom to take his other side. "Got it? Great, let's go," he said, ducking Sirius' head from view and dragging him to the door as Hermione, chewing her lip, proceeded unwillingly to follow.

"Oi," the bartender called after them, reappearing from behind the bar as Theo was struggling to get the door open. "Nott, you little shit, you've got a tab here!"

"Fuck," Theo said, spotting one of the strange policemen from the door and darting back inside, sending Tom stumbling under Sirius' weight. "Well, that's not an option—"

"Hey," the bartender growled, pulling out a thin wooden stick. "You haven't forgotten the last time you failed to pay your bill, have you?"

"Ah, Christ." Theo glanced at Tom with frustration, seeming to make a split second decision while he was caught in the threshold, torn between two bad options. "Sorry about this."

"Sorry about wh-"

But then, before he could finish his sentence, everything went dark.

The apparition was risky—Theo figured there was approximately a 75% chance he'd get caught—but seeing as every Ministry Auror seemed to already be at Hogsmeade or Diagon and he certainly couldn't handle another of Sirius' exorbitant bar tabs, it was probably worth chancing the distance to Godric's Hollow. Theo calculated their chances to be 50/50, which was good enough to make the decision for him.

He and Sirius had hidden in Godric's Hollow before, tucked into the basement of an abandoned shack. He waited a few seconds after landing, determining the apparition successfully unnoticed, before digging some sober-up potion from the caverns of his magically expanded pocket and sitting Sirius up, prying open his jaw.

"Welcome back," Theo said as Sirius coughed himself to consciousness, dragging the back of his hand across his mouth. "You're worse than usual," he commented, and Sirius made a face, struggling to sit upright.

He frowned around the basement, glancing at the two sleeping muggles Theo had left beside him. "What'd you do, obliviate them?"

"Nah, just a stunning spell."

"You think you can explain this when they wake up?"
"Me? No," Theo said, shrugging. "I thought I'd leave that up to the responsible adult."

"Ha, ha," Sirius groaned, rising to his feet and half-stumbling towards Theo. "Why are we here?"

"Ministry gala," Theo said, taking a seat on the crumbling cot they'd dragged in from one of their other misadventures. "Heard Lucius Malfoy say that Dumbledore might be sending someone."

"Fuck Malfoy," Sirius said, shuddering at the reminder. "Hate that guy."

"Yeah, well, who doesn't." Theo rummaged around in their cupboards, hoping they'd left some food behind. Nothing, of course. "We're going to have to eat," he said, gesturing to the two muggles. "Probably have to grab something from in town."

"Mm."

Theo paused for a moment, peering at Sirius. "What's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Black."

Sirius gave him a weary glance, half-amused.

"The kid," he grudgingly admitted, gesturing to Tom. "Brings back memories, I guess. Tough ones."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"If it's too much for you—"

"It's not."

"I'm serious, Black, if you're going to be a problem—"

"I won't. It was a one time thing, I swear." He looked over at Tom again, shaking his head. "But fuck, the kid looks like James. It's..." He trailed off with a shrug. "Just fucking uncanny. Hard to keep reminding myself it's not him." He scratched at his scalp, dog-like, and shook his head. "Every now and then I see him, I forget it's not my old life, and then I remember."

He smiled thinly.

"I remember, and then I feel old, and then I remember my best mates are gone and I need a fucking drink."

"Well, you can have your old life back again, maybe," Theo said, probably too-optimistically. "If Dumbledore helps clear your name—"

Sirius shook his head. "He won't."

"He might."

"Maybe." He didn't sound like he believed it much. "Anyway, can hardly go back to eighteen, can I? Even if we do manage to find Dumbledore."
"Well," Theo said drily, "from experience, eighteen's not that great."

Sirius let out a little snort of a laugh. "You know," he said, rolling his neck out and cracking it once, "neither of us can get into that gala; certainly not with all the Ministry officials around. Unless you think Malfoy's kid won't recognize you," he said, and Theo shook his head.

"Actually, I'm banking on him knowing exactly who I am. But I figure we'll need these two regardless," he said, gesturing to the unconscious Tom and Hermione. "Assuming Malfoy can get me in, then we need whoever the Order sends to see Tom, don't we?"

"Using him as bait?"

"Fucking yeah, Black, duh."

Sirius chuckled. "I taught you well," he said, clapping a hand on Theo's shoulder and wandering over to Tom and Hermione. "Hey," he said, nudging them both. "Hey, wake up."

Theo watched Tom and Hermione slowly sit up, looking around in bewilderment. Hermione, Theo noticed, shrank back from Sirius' touch, panicked.

"We're going to need you two to help us get into a party," Sirius said.

"What happened?" Tom asked. He drew a hand up to his forehead, rubbing at his scar.

"Got into a bit of a scuffle," Theo said. "We're fine now."

"But I don't—" Hermione frowned. "I don't even remember leaving, so how did we—"

"Can you kids dance?" Sirius interrupted, straightening. Theo could see his wand slipped into his hand from his sleeve, ready to cast something if she couldn't be easily distracted. "You're going to need to. Bit of an old-fashioned soirée we'll be attending."

"Dance?" Tom echoed, glancing at Hermione, who shook her head.

"Don't look at me," she said warily. "I'm certainly not the debutante type. And listen," she added to Sirius, giving him a look, "who are you really? Because—"

"Well," Sirius interrupted, "you're going to have to learn. Come on, come here," he said, beckoning Tom to his feet before turning to Theo. "You too, Nott."

Fucking hell. "No way."

"Yes way. Unless you'd like to get caught," Sirius warned, and Theo rolled his eyes, coming to his feet with a sigh. "Alright, so Nott'll be the girl—"

"What?" Tom asked, frowning at Theo with suspicion.

Dick. "Not like I'm happy about it either," Theo informed him.

"Curtsy," Sirius told him.

"Fuck you."

"Now honestly, is that how a lady talks?"

"Fuck you," Theo said in a slightly higher register, and Tom's mouth twitched.
A smile. Maybe even a laugh.

"Go on," Sirius said, and Theo sighed, but conceded to curtsy. When it came to Sirius' whims, better to just do as they were told. "Good. Now you, Harry?"

"His name's Tom," Theo said at the same time Tom said, "I'm not Harry," but that seemed to be unimportant information to Sirius.

"You're here to be Harry, aren't you? Might as well get used to it." He gave Tom a nudge, pushing him towards Theo. "One hand on the waist, and the other in his hand."

"Just do it," Theo muttered to Tom, who still looked doubtful. "The sooner we get it over with, the sooner we're done."

Tom grimaced, but placed one hand on Theo's waist, safely above his hip and below his ribs. The other hovered in the air for a moment, reluctant, before settling in Theo's.

"And one-two-three, one-two-three—"

Tom stumbled into Theo's foot, stepping down hard. "Sorry, I just—"

"It's fine," Theo said between his teeth, resuming their positions. "Just—go this way, okay? And then this foot, and—"

"Stop leading, Nott," Sirius said. "Harry leads."

"Black, I really don't think—"

"Sorry," Tom said again, quietly this time, and Theo turned to look at him.

"For what?"

"I guess everything." It occurred to Theo that he wasn't talking about stepping on his foot. "I just… I'm sorry," Tom said, his voice so low Theo could barely hear him.

"It's fine," Theo said, clipped. Regrettably, he meant it. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"You don't know that." To his surprise, Tom's eyes were steadily on his, unwavering.

"I do know that, act-"

"Oi," Sirius said, falling beside Hermione and clapping his hands briskly in their direction. "You were dancing?"

Theo turned back to Tom, trying to relax his grip on his shoulder.

"Is this about those things on the train? Because I see things too," Theo said in a low voice, as perfunctorily as possible. Not reassurance, really. Just fact. "It's not just you."

Tom swallowed, then nodded.

"Ready?" Theo prompted. "You lead, or Black'll never let it go."

Tom glanced at their feet, then up at Theo.

His eyes were very green. They were wide and lost, and blazingly defiant.
Then he took a step, and Theo followed.

Another step, more sure, and Theo went.

*One*-two-three, *one*-two-three—

They moved easily after a while, Tom's steps more naturally placed, his hand gradually relaxing in Theo's.

"How do you know how to do this?"

"Grew up rich," Theo said. "Old money."

"Lost the family fortune in a game of chance or something?"

"Yeah." Sure. "Something like that."

Tom's hand slid up, curving around the base of his shoulder.

Theo's turn. "You really never knew who you were?"

"No, never. Not a clue. Spent most of my time in the orphanage."

"This must be strange for you, then."

"Not as strange as you might think."

Theo could feel Tom's pulse. He could see the beat of his heart beside his throat.

They danced in silence. Theo's breath increasingly became a struggle, maybe from all the motion. Spinning was making him light-headed, dizzied. He watched Tom's lips, wondering if it was only him and assuming, based on the obvious fact that this was entirely ridiculous, that it was.

"I've never had any friends besides Hermione," Tom said.

"I'm not your friend," Theo replied.

Tom gave Theo a long, discerning look.

"You take care of Sirius," he commented.

"Yeah, well, he took care of me. I owe him."

"That's the only reason?"

"Yes."

"And what are we, then?"

He meant he and Hermione we, surely. "A project."

"You take on projects often?"

"From time to time."

"Ah," Tom said.
Theo's head spun.

"Hermione thinks you're a con artist," Tom said.

His mouth was dry. "What?"

Tom's mouth was close. "She thinks I shouldn't trust you."

"Oh." No surprise there. "And do you?"

"I don't not."

"You probably shouldn't."

"You saved me on the train. Didn't you?"

"Should I have left you to die?"

"Is that what would have happened to me?"

Not exactly. "Pretty much."

"You've seen those things before, haven't you?"

A stiff nod, and a glance at his shoes. "Once."

"When?"

Tom's voice was soft.

No, not soft.

Gentle.

It was too much, and Theo shook himself, abruptly releasing him.

"You've got it now," he said, stepping away as Tom frowned, startled. "You should teach Hermione. I'll get food."

He turned to the stairs, taking them two at a time, and didn't stop to process the way Tom had looked at him, watching him in silence as he went.

To say Tom had been unsettled by his conversation with Theo was a rather underwhelming turn of phrase. It distracted him, at least, from the way the scar on his forehead (or his forehead beneath the scar, impossible to tell) had been throbbing unceasingly since they'd arrived. After he'd managed a passable waltz with Hermione, Tom made excuses to go outside and get some air, wandering down the roads of the old village as Hermione's gaze followed his back, obviously concerned. She could take care of herself, as she assured him with a sidelong glance at Sirius, but still. He didn't plan to be away any longer than it took to catch his breath.

It would have been quaint, really. Even the old churchyard was full of picturesque decay, with vines that spread over graves like covetous tendrils. There was something oddly familiar about being there, though Tom had never seen the English countryside outside of pictures in books, or the occasional cheap paintings designed to cheer the orphanage's crumbling walls.
He felt a bit like he'd been there in a dream. Astral projected there or something.

Tom followed a winding path lined with cottages, markers of lives being lived around him. In his memory, or whatever sense of déjà vu it was he kept experiencing, there was nothing; only stillness. By comparison, the kitchen sounds and flickering lights seemed out of place.

He passed an obelisk, some sort of war memorial, and continued to move past it until it shimmered from the edge of his periphery, warping in the air as he passed.

Then he took a step back, frowning.

This time, it wasn't an obelisk but a statue of three people; a man, a woman, and a baby. It was strange, and strangely familiar, like everything in this town seemed to be. Tom's scar throbbed again, stinging slightly the longer he looked, and he turned away, hurrying down the road before being unable to resist a look back over his shoulder.

Gone. He must have imagined it.

Tom shook himself, swallowing. The line between waking and dreaming was getting so thin lately. First sign of insanity, Hermione had said once, confusing real life with dreams.

So reassuring, she was.

"Hey," came a voice. Theo's voice, specifically, which was dry and distinctly annoyed. He was carrying a bag of what looked like fish and chips. "What are you doing out here?"

"Just wanted to look around, I guess." Tom turned, changing direction to fall in step with Theo, who barely paused to accommodate his pace. "It's nice here," he added, attempting to make what he assumed was normal conversation. "Different."

Theo looked skeptical. "Never been to a shithole village before?"

"No, actually." They walked in silence, gravel crunching beneath their feet. "Never really left the orphanage before yesterday."

"Shit," said Theo. "That's it?"

"Nowhere to go."

"Literally or metaphorically?"

"Both, I guess."

He slid a glance at Theo, who was contemplating something in silence.

"Listen, about earlier," Tom said. "I'm sorry if I made you feel—"

He trailed off, unsure what to say.

"What?" Theo's voice was rigid, snappish. "Made me feel what?"

Safe, Tom thought.

Whole.

Like maybe the world wouldn't fall apart if they just held on.
"I didn't mean to pry," Tom amended, and Theo's mouth tightened, but he seemed to accept that.

"Just… don't get confused, okay? We're not friends," Theo reminded him. "We're temporary business partners. I'm doing my job, you're doing yours. It's not complicated."

"Right," said Tom.

Theo turned to him with something like a scowl of frustration, pausing as they arrived back at the house on the outskirts of the village.

"It's nothing personal," Theo said, setting his jaw. "I just prefer if I don't get—"

"Attached?" Tom said.

He'd noticed Theo's eyes when they were dancing. They had looked too-sharp and dark at first, almost black and generally buried beneath furrowed brows or embedded in narrow slits, but they had changed somehow when Tom looked closer, evolving until they clung to undertones of green. Tom noticed that chameleonic quality again now; the way Theo's eyes went from accusatory to mistrusting to deeply, unquestionably loathing, and then they softened to saddened, slid to anger, and cooled their way back again, landing somewhere near irritated.

"Come on," Theo said gruffly, shoving open the broken latch and gesturing Tom inside. "Let's eat."

At long last, the Boy Who Lived has returned to where it all began.

Welcome home, Harry Potter. Let's see if we can jog your memory.
Theo had not spoken to Tom again, choosing instead to turn in early. Within minutes, he was snoring intermittently from a cot in the corner of the basement while Hermione and Tom sat with Sirius, who looked piningly at his soda as if he wished he could turn it to whisky.

Tom didn't mention he had done so once. Well, not soda to whisky. Water to wine. Just to see if he could.

"James Potter was the son of Fleamont and Euphemia Potter," Sirius was telling Tom, reciting facts about not-him in a low voice; apparently, Sirius was the dossier. "James was the inheritor of his father's company, Sleekeazy's. They make hair potions."

"What, like mousse?" asked Hermione.

"Never saw a moose myself, but couldn't rule it out." Sirius took a sip of his Coke, making a face, and set it down. "As for Lily, she was—"

He broke off, stumbling to a halt. Tom watched his attention flick to Theo's sleeping form, then back.

"Well, I don't know much about her parents," Sirius admitted after a moment. "In any case, there should be quite a lot of money involved in your return. The Potters were quite well off."

"I don't care about money," Tom said. After a lifetime of having none, it was no great detriment not to expect any. "Where did they live? We, I mean," he amended quickly. He seemed to get more information out of Sirius when he played along. "Where did we live when I was a baby?"

"Here," Sirius said, expression going tight for a moment.

"What, here?" Hermione asked, glancing around the basement with shock, and Sirius rolled his eyes.

"No, just here. In the village." He eventually gave up on the soda, turning his full attention to Tom. "There was a cottage here no one else knew about." Tom watched Sirius' jaw clench for a moment as he added, "I came to get you, but it was too late."

"Too late how?"

It seemed to be too much for Sirius.

"I always wonder who could have gotten to you first," he said, mumbling it under his breath. "Clearly it wasn't Dumbledore, like it should have been. I always come back at least once a year, you know, just in case. Curse or no curse, they say lost things always find their way back to the source." He drummed his fingers against the floor. "I thought old Bathilda would know," he said, recounting his old theories, "but she was half batty already, according to Lily."

"Bathilda?" Hermione asked.
"Bagshot. The author." Sirius rubbed at his eyes. "She lives here still. I've searched the place more than once, looking for god knows what, but she's got nothing, no clues. Just old books and moldy dishes." Tom could see Sirius' eyes were misty, troubled with memory. "That's enough for tonight," he said gruffly, clearing his throat and gathering the refuse from their dinner.

Hermione leaned into Tom, whispering in his ear. "Do you think he might have murdered them?" she asked, frowning as Sirius disappeared upstairs for a moment. "He seems to have an awful lot of guilt, and he clearly can't discuss what happened."

Guilt was definitely the right word for Sirius. "I don't know," Tom said. "I don't think so."

Hermione looked troubled. "Maybe we should leave."

"And go where?" She grimaced. "There's nowhere to go, Hermione. It's this or nothing. Besides," Tom added, not wanting to get into the hallucination he'd had of the statue in the village, "I think there might be some clues here."

"Sure, maybe, but——"

They heard the sound of Sirius returning and Tom beckoned to the sleeping bags Theo had unrolled for them in the opposite corner. Hermione crept after him, hesitantly slipping into the one beside his.

"Just… be careful," she said softly.

Tom nodded, and Hermione quickly closed her eyes, pretending to sleep as Sirius reappeared.

Tom heard Sirius turn out the flickering light above them, removing his boots and grunting himself into his rickety cot before covering up with his jacket. He tossed one way, then the other, and then settled into a noisy, muttering pattern of rhythmic breathing.

Tom closed his eyes, letting the sensation of sleep drift over him. It wasn't difficult; the basement was surprisingly warm, despite not having a heat source, and he'd had worse sleeps in the orphanage.

Eventually, a sense of calm stole over him, drifting up his tired limbs.

"Harry," said a voice in his ear. "Harry Potter."

It was a woman, calling him softly. "Harry," she said again, and Tom sat up with confusion, turning in the direction of the basement stairs.

"Lily?" he asked. She shook her head, and he saw in the glimpse of light that slid in from somewhere outside that she was much, much older.

He frowned. "Bathilda?" he guessed, and she smiled.

"Harry," she said again, and beckoned him up the stairs.

He disentangled himself from the sleeping bag, rising groggily to follow her. She moved up the stairs easily for her age, almost floating over them. Was it a dream? If it was, at least it was different than the usual. Tom followed her out of the house, through the gate.

"Is it you?" he asked her. She angled her chin over her shoulder, smiling at him.

"Harry," she said.
He frowned, but kept walking.

She led him to another cottage covered with climbing vines, the door seeming to open by magic. She hadn't touched it, and neither had he. He felt the usual heart-pounding sense of fruition in his bones; the indefinable portent of something coming. It felt wrong, but also right. He was going somewhere. He was going to get answers.

Still, something about the house warned him that if he went inside, he would never be able to turn back.

"What am I?" he asked her, hesitating. "Just tell me that."

"See for yourself," she said. He heard the slightest drag on the word *see*.

*Ssssee.*

Tom stared into the darkened house, uncertain. Between what pulled him forward and what held him back, though, the instinct to keep going, to put one foot in front of the other, was far stronger.

His scar sent a jab through his skull, momentarily throwing him. For half a second, he wondered if he should stop; turn back; run.

But then—

"Come inssssside," said the old woman. She disappeared once she entered the house's shadows, swallowed up by an enigmatic dark and leaving the night air to lift the hairs at the back of his neck, hinting at something to come.

So Tom followed after her, one foot in front of the other.

Theo's eyes snapped open when he heard the creak on the stairs, his entire body reflexively shooting upright at the possibility of intrusion. Sirius was sleeping soundly, that much was obvious, and Hermione was equally out of commission beside his cot, curled up in a little frizzy ball like a snoozing kitten. The sleeping bag next to hers was empty, and in the precise moment Theo registered Tom's absence, he heard the door above them slowly wrench open.

Something didn't feel right.

Theo sat up quietly, conjuring a silencing spell to muffle the sound of his footfall as he made his way carefully up the stairs, obscuring the little scurry of rats he'd long since grown to ignore. He'd been struggling with a strange suspicion that Tom was keeping something from all of them, even Hermione. There was no mistaking the haunted look on his face as he'd passed the place the Potters' house had been; almost as if he could sense the disturbance that had always been there. The first time Theo had seen it, he'd stared up at the statue Tom surely couldn't see, wondering what had happened to the little boy who would have been the same age he was then, about to attend a Hogwarts that didn't exist. He didn't blame Tom for looking spooked.

Not that Theo gave a damn what Tom did. He just didn't want his entire future resting on something that slipped out in the night.

The ground was damp, muddy with tracks through autumn frost making slush of gravel, and Theo shivered, chilled by the night air. Tom's footsteps led unsteadily down the path, as if he'd stumbled as he walked. Theo frowned, folding his arms tightly across his chest, and hurried to follow.
He caught sight of Tom pausing on the threshold of a rickety old house, resting one bare foot on the step. Theo ducked behind a tree, watching with bemusement. What the fuck was he doing? His eyes were closed, arms red from cold. People who planned to take leisurely nocturnal strolls were usually clever enough to take a jacket. Or shoes.

Theo strained to hear what was going on. Was Tom talking to someone? He trained his ears on the silence, waiting, until the sound of something finally expelled from inside the house.

Not a voice. The sound of a snake hissing.

A large snake. A *specific* snake. The kind, Theo realized with a shudder, that he only heard in his nightmares.

"Shit," Theo exhaled, watching Tom take a step over the threshold.

Whatever was going on, Theo was certain it wasn't good—as if dementors weren't bad enough for one day. He darted out from his hiding spot and sprinted for the door, both palms hitting it with frustration as it slammed in his face.

"Shit, shit, shit," he muttered, jiggling the handle and swearing under his breath as he touched it. The knob had frozen to ice, breaking off in his hand, and he tossed it aside, pounding a fist against the door. "Tom!" he shouted, slamming the wood with an open hand. "Open the fucking door!"

He pressed an ear to the wood, waiting. No answer.

Not good.

Theo grimaced, aiming his wand at the door and taking three running steps back. "*Expulso,*" he said, dodging the predictable launch of flying shards and rushing inside, coughing up dust from where the door had been.

The house smelled of mold and decay, broken glass shattered on the floor. Theo dodged most of the wreckage, shouting again for Tom.

"Where the fuck are you?"

He cast a wordless *Lumos*, peering into the dark.

"Tom," he said, and waited, his breath letting out a puff of white in the house's cold, stilted air. "Tom," he said, louder, "can you hear me?"

Theo caught the sound of something behind him; a little rustle of something, like fabric.

"Tom?"

He whipped around, wand extended, just in time to hear a heavy slither on the floor.

"Come closssssssser," the old woman was whispering in Tom's ear. Her face was familiar, like something he'd seen in a dream, only it wasn't the usual one. He saw it floating above him, blurry, smiling. *Lily, what a lovely baby!*

Something in his memory voiced its opposition. It was her eyes, he thought. Something about them was discomfiting now; different. They'd been wider than this, brown instead of amber, a little dotty and distracted but still—familiar, comforting.
Harry, sweet boy, don't cry!

Safe.

Come with me, he heard in his ear, I'll take you somewhere safe—

There was a piercing sound from somewhere else; someone calling out in distress. Tom turned, trying to see what it was, and the old woman seethed something at him.

"Come, come closer—"

He heard the sound again, something foggily outside the realm of his thoughts. His scar burned, more painful now, and he felt something both foreign and innate; unnatural, and yet born from something inside him. A burst of anger, rage, was boiling in his veins, only it wasn't his. It seemed to struggle violently beside his growing sense of confusion, disorientation.

"TOM!"

Somewhere in his head, he knew that voice. He tried to turn towards it, to see what was wrong, and the old woman warped where she stood; flickering, becoming someone else. A much younger woman, with red hair and green eyes, full of fear. Tom felt it again, the sense of something impending. This woman, she was in his way. She needed to get out of his way, and then he would have what he wanted.

He took a step and the scene changed again, becoming the room from his dreams; his scar seared with pain, temporarily blinding him. The room went white and returned, only this time, Tom felt his heart pound with anticipation, the red-slitted eyes returning as he gasped and stumbled backwards, a sharp jab jolting him awake.

He'd stepped on something; a piece of glass. The pain shot up his foot and he caught himself, braced from an impending fall against the peeling wallpaper of an unfamiliar house. Had he been sleepwalking? He was suddenly acutely conscious, though he failed to recognize his surroundings, panting for breath until he remembered something recent; something known, something anchoring. He caught the sound of a loud yell, whipping towards it.

It registered with a hitch of clarity.

"Theo," Tom slid through his teeth, yanking the glass shard from his foot and running—hobbling—for the sound of Theo's voice.

He skidded to a halt as he saw it. A snake, the biggest he'd ever seen, shot forward from an explosion, a cloud of smoke. A gun? No, Theo was holding a thin piece of wood, aiming it like a sword. No, not like a sword.

Another explosion shot out, hitting the floorboards beside the snake.

"You have no business here, son of Nott," the snake said, angry now. It lunged for Theo, who aimed the thin stick down at it again, just missing it.

"Stop it," Tom said, and the snake went rigid, turning to glance at him with narrowed eyes.

Eyes. Those eyes.

The woman, the one he'd been following in his dreams… was it possible?
Another explosion from the stick in Theo's hand dragged Tom's mind back to the present as the snake, apparently tiring of the lanky young man in its path, shot forward, sending Theo stumbling to land against a bookshelf behind him, the books tumbling out. It curled around Theo's legs, throwing him off balance, and as he slammed into the floor, the piece of wood went flying from his hand.

The snake gave a hiss of triumph, tightening to render a struggling Theo red-faced and immobile before rearing back to strike, teeth bared.

"No," Tom said without thinking, lurching forward and throwing out a hand.

Then, once again, there was a dazzling force of light, burning the backs of his eyelids as everything in the room turned a blinding shade of green.

Theo woke with a gasp to find Tom's face floating above him, dark brow furrowed with concern.

"Holy shit," Theo gasped, launching upright so rapidly they nearly collided. "What happened? The last thing I saw was… that snake, it fucking—it was about to kill me, and then—"

He broke off, noticing the smear of blood across one lens of Tom's glasses.

Then he blinked, turning his attention to the rest of the room.

Books lay on the ground, an entire shelf overturned. Glass from the shattered windows was scattered everywhere. His own head was pounding, racing, adrenaline rushing from some kind of impact.

And beside him—

Theo shrank back, stunned.

"Did you kill that snake?"

"I—" Tom cleared his throat, unable to meet Theo's eye. "I didn't want you to die."

Theo glanced down at his torn clothes, the scrapes of fangs that had narrowly missed crucial arteries, and the splatter of blood across his own haphazardly chest. There was blood on Tom's knuckles, his palms, and the torn material of his shirt, but he looked… otherwise unharmed.

Suddenly, with enormous delay, it occurred to Theo.

The blood on Tom's glasses didn't belong to the snake. It was Theo's.

"You saved my life," Theo realized, and then, in a rush, it came back to him. "You saved my life with a killing curse," he said, and blinked, scrambling backwards. "Fucking Christ, did you cast a killing curse without a wand?"

Tom blinked. "A what?"

"How did you even—? How—?" Theo stammered to a halt, staring at him. "You can do magic?" he demanded, suddenly enraged by his epiphanic moment of clarity. "Why didn't you fucking say something?"

Theo rose to his feet, spotting his wand on the floor and snatching it up, retreating a few steps from Tom to leave room for disbelief, for astonishment. For gratitude, for relief. For some wild
combination of things he wasn't ready to feel.

Easier, then, to focus on the simplest of them.

"Do you realize," Theo hissed, embracing his frustration, "that everything would have been about ten thousand times easier if you'd just said that?"

To his surprise, Tom merely stared at him, bemused.

"You don't," he began, and stopped, swallowing. "You don't think… I'm a freak? Or like, possessed or anything?"

"Do you—" In response, Theo gaped helplessly back. "Do you not even know what you are?"

It dawned on him too late that fuck, of course not.

Fucking of course Tom didn't know. What muggleborn would?

"Jesus," Theo said, collapsing slowly beside Tom. He turned to look at him, everything rearranging itself more clearly in his head. "You had no idea you were a wizard?"

"A what?"

Fuck, he was going to have to start from the beginning. "A wizard," Theo repeated. Possibly without much patience. "Someone who can do magic?"

Tom frowned. "You're one?"

"Fucking—yes, obviously," Theo growled. "Do you think I'm just making this shit up?"

Tom's gaze drifted to Theo's wand.

"Wand," Theo supplied in explanation, holding it up between two fingers. Tom continued to stare at it, while Theo caught another revolting glimpse of dead snake from his periphery. "You've done that before," Theo realized, slightly unsettled as he kicked the snake away. "You do realize killing curses are illegal, right?"

That snapped Tom's attention back to him. "I figured," he said drily.

"But you've done it before?"

Tom shrugged. "Sirius killed someone."

"No he didn-" Theo broke off. "What?"

"Hermione and I saw the wanted ad," Tom said. "I know he killed someone. Was it James and Lily?" he pressed, more curious than concerned. "Harry's parents, did he kill them?"

" Fucking hell," Theo swore under his breath. "You've just been tagging along with us this whole time convinced Sirius was some kind of murderer? What the fuck were you thinking?"

"What was I supposed to do?" Tom demanded, apparently defensive of his lunacy. "You said you could take me to Dumbledore. He's the only clue I've got."

"But—" Theo's head spun. "Never mind. You think Sirius killed—"
He lifted a hand, massaging his aching temple. Where to start?

"Lord Voldemort killed the Potters," he decided, and Tom's brow twitched with confusion. "He's… it's hard to explain, but he's a dark wizard, the most powerful one there's ever been. Most people are afraid to say his name." He watched Tom process this, wheels slowly turning. "He disappeared the same night he murdered the Potters. They say the Potter bloodline's cursed or some shit—it's why Dumbledore wants to find Harry."

"But I thought Harry was just a baby," Tom said with a frown.

"Well, yeah, but he's also the only person to ever survive a killing curse. If he even survived," Theo said with a shrug, "but there's no proof he didn't. He just—poof. Disappeared."

"And Lord… Voldy-thing?"

"Also gone. Though, there've been rumors he's alive somewhere." Theo glanced again at Tom, trying to figure out what he might have been thinking. "You said Dumbledore was your only clue?"

Tom nodded. "There was someone at the orphanage before me who could do… what I can do. I'm pretty sure." He paused, hesitating a moment, and then confessed, "The owner of the orphanage told me that someone came for the other Tom Riddle once. A man named Dumbledore, who said something about Hogwarts."

"Oh." Theo blinked. "Well, Hogwarts was a school for witches and wizards, so yeah. Whoever that Tom Riddle was, he must have been a wizard."

Tom nodded slowly, processing that. "He never came back. Never did anything. Even Hermione can't find him."

"Well, that Tom must have been muggleborn too," Theo said, grimacing, "so…" He cleared his throat. "It's possible Voldemort killed him. He's not a big fan of people who are, you know. Outsiders. Muggle blood. That sort of thing," he said, suddenly feeling deeply uncomfortable.

"Like me?" Tom's gaze slid to his. "And Hermione?"

"Hermione too?" Theo asked, surprised.

Tom nodded.

"Oh," Theo said, and then, "Yeah."

Tom was quiet for a moment before turning to look at him. "That… lord guy," he said. "I thought you said people were afraid to say his name?"

Theo shrugged. "He killed a lot of people. Understandably, he's not considered polite conversation."

"But you've said his name more than once." Tom sounded curious.

"Yeah, well. Guess I've got more things to worry about than whether or not I should be scared of some fucker's name," Theo said.

The side of Tom's mouth twitched. Amused, or pleased.

"You've got some dark shit, don't you?" he said wryly, and Theo rolled his eyes. "Some angst and shit."
"Shut up, dickhead." Theo kicked his legs out, leaning against the bookcase, and let his head loll in Tom's direction. "So," he said. "Magic."

Tom looked thoughtful. "Magic?"

"Yes, magic. What did you think it was?"

"I don't know." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Is it weird if I just… thought I was a monster?"

"Doesn't take magic to wonder that," Theo said.

Tom dragged his contemplative gaze up to Theo's, the green filling with something.

If Theo had to guess, it would have been relief. Or gratitude. Things he, too, was unfamiliar with. And genuinely hated to feel.

"You're not a monster," Theo said gruffly. "In case that was unclear."

Tom's tongue slid over his lip, shaking his head. "You don't actually know me."

"True."

"We're not even friends."

"No," Theo agreed, "we're not friends."

Tom's attention drifted briefly to Theo's wand again, darting guiltily away.

Theo, catching it, held the wand up, offering it to him. "Try it," he said. "It won't work as well for you as your own wand would, but still, it's something." His fingers brushed Tom's as he passed it over to him, resting it in his palm. "It's sort of a swish and flick motion," he said, gesturing. "Usually you say an incantation, like, uh—"

"Lumos," Theo suggested. "Just… swish the wand a bit and say—"

"Lumos," Tom said, flicking the wand lightly.

Immediately, the entire house was engulfed in light, so bright it stung the backs of Theo's eyelids. Tom, too, cast his head aside, startled, and Theo reached over, grabbing his hand around the knuckles to wave the spell away, delivering them safely to darkness.

"Gentler," Theo said, and then hesitated. "Not with the wand, but with—"

He gritted his teeth, trying to figure out how to explain it.

"The wand… it channels your energy, right?" he asked, and Tom nodded tentatively. "So… don't ask for so much. Don't… crave the spell, just…" Fuck, it was hard to put in words. Sirius had been a much better teacher. "Imagine that there's a certain amount of power in the world, right?" Theo asked, and Tom nodded. "And it's all yours to access, but you can't use it all at once. You can't waste it on anger or desperation, you have to portion it out, take only what you need."

He realized he was still gripping Tom's hand, holding it steady.
"You have to want the light," he said, "but you can't ask it for too much, you can't waste a drop of it. You don't want all the world's light," he added firmly, "but... just enough. Just enough for you to see clearly."

He released Tom's knuckles, gesturing to empty air.

"Again," he said, and Tom nodded, brows knitted in concentration.

"Lumos," he said.

This time, the wand emitted a glow that illuminated the room softly, stretching out to fill the space. A faint incandescence at first, it burned brighter the longer Tom held the spell, his fingers gradually loosening on the wand as he grew comfortable with controlling the sensation.

Then he waved it away, staring at the point of the wand.

"Holy shit," he said.

"I know," Theo replied.

Then, before Theo could say anything else, Tom had shifted, the wand gripped tightly in one hand as the other shot out, closing around Theo's cheek and dragging him closer.

Tom's mouth was on his before Theo registered what was happening. He lurched away, one hand shoved between them on the bloodied fabric of Tom's t-shirt.

"What the—"

He broke off, seeing Tom's expression of astonishment.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Tom said, blinking as he sat back, face pale. "I just—it was just, using that spell, I felt—" A swallow. "I didn't mean t-"

Fucking hell.

"Shut up," Theo said, tightening his grip on Tom's shirt and yanking him back, closing the distance between them to find, breathless, that Tom's lips had parted instantly, with all the desperation Theo had just advised him not to feel.

The kiss was unexpected, searing-hot, Theo's clammy skin pressed to the warmth that radiated from Tom while his inadvisable blood loss cours ed too-fast through his limbs, lending him a shiver. It manifested in an exhalation, a breath Tom stole from his mouth, and then Theo was forcing Tom on his back, the wand clattering to the floor beside them.

Theo could feel his pulse raging; paralyzed with fear, and then triumphant with it. Tom's hands were under his shirt, nails scraping at the skin beside his spine, digging in with all the frustration he must have felt for a lifetime. It was like Tom was anchoring himself to the answers he'd never gotten; to the knowledge he'd never been allowed to possess. He shimmied his quick fingers up to Theo's ribs and stole up to his shoulders, tongue darting over Theo's bottom lip, and Theo, braced on his elbows, slowed the kiss to manage a heavy swallow, forehead falling raggedly against Tom's.

"We should get back," he said hoarsely.

He could feel Tom's lungs filling beneath his chest, pulse racing.
He was certain Tom could feel the same from him.

Tom's hands slid from his shirt and Theo shut his eyes, hating himself. He wanted to go back to five minutes ago, to the exhilaration of kissing Tom, to replaying it on a constant loop. He wanted to be sure he never did it again, going back in time to unkiss him, untouch him, unfeel the sensation of wanting him. He wanted, cruelly, to do neither, to do both. To move forward and pretend it never happened at all.

Tom's hand closed around the back of his neck, tracing the spot below his ear.

"What are the tally marks for?" Tom asked, too softly. Gently.

He should let go, Theo thought. He should shove Tom away, release him, back away for the distance of a lifetime. He should get to his feet and run. He should leave and never look back.

"Seven marks," he said. "Seven years."

He was so fucking good at running. There was a mark for each year he'd been someone else.

Tom slid slowly out from under him, sitting himself carefully upright. Theo shifted away, about to be the first to turn and leave, but Tom caught him by the collar, yanking him back.

"Let's go," Tom said, and then, in a motion so quick even Theo didn't see it coming, he pressed a final kiss to Theo's mouth and dragged him up, launching them both to their feet.

It was a petty dare; a parting challenge.

So Theo nodded, one hand pressed to his lips, and followed in silence as Tom picked his way through the rubble, heading toward the faint glow of the broadening horizon.

Wormtail was hesitant, frightened.

"My Lord… Nagini, she is—"

_Gone. I felt her go._

_You may have won this time, but I can feel myself getting stronger. The closer you come to knowing who you are, the more my power resurrects._

_Two sides of the same coin._

_Find one, find the other._

_The Boy Who Lived may rise, but so will I._

_You can run from me all you like, Harry Potter, but we only come closer in the end._
"I knew it," Sirius exclaimed, "he's Harry. He *has* to be," he said, triumphant. "He can't possibly be the son of muggles—"

"But I am," Hermione said, frowning as she exchanged a glance with Tom. "I'm positive my parents aren't magic."

The knowledge that his logic might have been flawed seemed to deflate Sirius, but only for a moment. "Maybe you're adopted," he suggested brightly, and Hermione shook her head.

"I collected DNA samples from my parents when I was ten," she said matter-of-factly. "I know my parentage with less than 0.5% margin of error." At Tom's arched glance, she shrugged. "What? I can't claim perfect certainty, but still. That's statistically significant, even with the numerous sensitivity factors involved in determining DN-"

"Yeah, fine, we get it," Theo said, rising listlessly to his feet. "You're going to need these," he said, removing two slips of parchment from his pocket. "Regardless of who your parents are, wizards have to be registered with the Ministry, which you aren't. They're not perfect," he added, turning to Tom, "but they'll do the job."

Their fingers brushed by accident as the paperwork changed hands, and Tom looked up, catching Theo's eye. He caught the traces of half a smirk, which were quickly swept away from Theo's features as he turned to Hermione.

"Hermione… Malfoy?" she asked, frowning, and Sirius looked up. "Who's that?"

"Arbitrary choice of surname," Theo said loftily, and true, Tom didn't know him particularly well, but even he was sure that was a lie.

"Nott," Sirius warned in a low voice. "What are you doing?"

"Hm? Nothing," he said. "Anyway, we'd better get going, shouldn't we? Fashionably late is one thing, but total inconsideration I simply will not abide."

"Balls," Sirius muttered, and then, to Tom's utter confusion, he began… shrinking.

No, expanding.

No, neither, he was—

"Padfoot?" Hermione gasped, and the big black dog shook himself of Sirius' clothes, giving Theo a strangely human look of impatience, a la, *Happy now?* "But," Hermione sputtered. "But he was… but I—"

"Shall we?" Theo said, summoning Sirius' clothes from the floor and shrinking them into a collar
he fastened around the dog's neck. Now that the secret was out, Tom could see just how frequently
the other two used their wands, which was... pretty much reflexive. "Come on, with a sense of
urgency," Theo told a still-gaping Hermione, nudging her to the stairs until the dog trotted over and
nipped at his heels. "Ouch, you buggering—" Theo broke off, brow furrowing, as Sirius motioned
with his snout to Hermione. "Ah, right."

He frowned, considering something, and said, "Pink or blue?"

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Would you prefer pink," Theo repeated with painful slowness, "or blue?"

"Pink or blue what—"

"Periwinkle it is," Theo determined, and flicked his wand.

Immediately, Hermione's jacket and jeans morphed into an evening gown with corresponding cape,
the denim stretching out and floating briefly before snapping into a tight, glimmering silk that
came in at the waist and flowed out, settling against the floor. Hermione frowned, hitching a foot
out from under the skirt, and eyed her shoes.

"Are those glass slippers?"

"If the shoe fits," Theo said.

"Is this supposed to be a costume, or…?"

"It's Halloween, isn't it?" Theo told her impatiently, and turned to Tom. "Ready?"

"I'll take pink," Tom said.

Theo smiled thinly. "Oh, so he's clever, then."

Another flick of the wand turned Tom's outfit to something of an old-fashioned tuxedo, or what
Tom would have considered old-fashioned, having never seen one in real life before. It was a
simple black and white, which Theo then duplicated on himself with minor differences: an untied
bow tie, for one, and a green silk lining on his jacket. Then he removed two of his rings, one silver
and one brass, and transformed them into two masks, similar in design. He handed one to Tom, a
brass Roman design that was so thinly woven Tom could scarcely believe it had ever been metal,
while Theo put on the other, a silver Venetian mask accented with a delicately braided wreath.

"Don't wear it," Theo warned, pausing Tom mid-motion as he shifted to put on his mask, confused
whether to put it below or above his glasses. "Just, you know... hold onto it."

"Why wouldn't I wear i-"

"Shall we?" Theo interrupted, offering Hermione his arm. She made a face, still in opposition to
the shoes, but ultimately permitted Theo to lead her up the stairs behind a trotting dog-shaped
Sirius as Tom followed, hiding his amusement and securing the mask atop his head.

Theo led them down the same path Tom had taken the day before, strolling at a leisurely pace.
There were other people out and about in the village; Tom assumed the three of them would
prompt some stares, given their formal outerwear, but nobody who passed them seemed to be
interested in them at all. Instead, everyone seemed to look directly through them, and by the time
Theo finally came to a stop, Tom was convinced the passersby were not only uninterested in seeing
them, they were incapable.

"Here we are," Theo announced.

Where yesterday there had been nothing, there was now a massive, glittering mansion that stood at a distance, separated from the road by a lush, expansive lawn. The entry to the gardens featured two opulent fountains and a small pond, out of which a fish leapt to dazzle briefly in the sun.

"It's all an illusion," Theo assured them, releasing an awed Hermione's arm. "Probably a tent they expanded and transformed for the occasion. Wait here," he added, glancing around at the men and women who were starting to materialize from thin air, or who slid in from the sky, riding—to Tom's great bewilderment—on brooms. "Just have to fetch our invitations," Theo said, tipping a hat he hadn't previously been wearing in Tom's direction before strutting off to a small stand marked BROOM CHAUFFEUR, dog-Sirius at his heels.

Hermione leaned closer to Tom, glancing apprehensively around. "What are the chances he actually has an invitation?"

Tom watched Theo subtly flick his wand, then glance around before perching on the chauffeur's counter and sliding to the other side.

"Almost none," he said, fighting a laugh. "But you have to hand it to him, he's resourceful."

"I still don't trust him," Hermione said, lips pursed. She folded her arms over her chest, glancing down at the neckline of her gown. "I mean, don't you think he could have made this less revealing?"

"I think you look great." That, and he wasn't too worried about Theo's interest in her breasts. "Have you come around on Sirius?"

"What? Of course not." She gave Tom a reproachful look. "He may have murdered someone, Tom. Just because he seems nice enough doesn't mean we should trust him implicitly."

"Theo says he's innocent," Tom said, observing Theo from afar. He had an interesting way with people, pulling on a successful mask of pleasantries that Tom could see, even through an actual mask. Theo seemed perfectly comfortable with each arriving guest, chameleonic each time his audience changed. Contrary to his eccentric first impression, all evidence pointed to the likelihood that when Theo wanted to blend, he could blend. Nobody seemed to consider him out of place.

"Oh, so we're just going to take the con man at his word?" Hermione scoffed. "Please."

"Do you really think he's a con man?" Tom asked, watching Theo take a broom from someone dressed as a mythological figure while summoning something from their pocket, handing it off to the dog waiting behind him.

"Well, he's certainly not an upstanding citizen," Hermione grumbled, though she softened slightly. "Though it is rather nice to know we're not... abnormal."

Tom watched a woman soar in on a broomstick, leaping delicately to her feet in a gossamer gown and cloak of scarlet red.

"I suppose not," he said, watching Theo again. This time, Theo kissed the woman's hand, slipping the invitation from her coat pocket with a little motion of his fingers.

Tom recalled, briefly, the feeling of those fingers twisted in his shirt.
"Well, hopefully Dumbledore is here," Hermione said, apprehensive. "It'd be nice to speak to someone respectable, for once."

Tom turned to her, arching a brow. "Respectable?"

"Oh, you know what I mean," she sighed, waving a hand at the arriving guests. "Theo and Sirius aren't particularly conventional, are they? Even for wizarding society, by the looks of it." She glanced around again, adding with a frown, "Is Theo even properly trained? He didn't sound as if he'd ever actually attended Hogwarts."

Tom thought of his magic lesson with Theo the previous night. "If he isn't, he's very smart."

"Well—" She hesitated, giving Tom a wistful look of apology. "I don't mean to imply that education is everything, of course," she said, seeming to remember that Tom himself had once been (and in fact, still was) something of an undesirable member of society, "but—"

"You'd rather talk to someone else," Tom supplied neutrally. "I understand."

She seemed to register her mistake. "Tom, I didn't mean t-"

"Here we are," Theo said, materializing in front of them again before handing them each an invitation. "Ah, one second," he said, and tapped his wand against each one, changing the scripted lettering from Gilderoy Lockhart and Rita Skeeter to Tom Riddle and Hermione Malfoy. "There we are," he said, giving Hermione his arm again. "Shall we?"

"Where's S-" Hermione broke off, frowning. "Where's Padfoot?"

"Oh, I can hardly bring my dog to the party, can I? He'll keep watch from outside. Come along, then," he said, nudging her off down the path and into the manor house. "By the way," he said with a sidelong glance at her, "you don't happen to speak French, do you?"

"I took it in school," Hermione said, which Tom could see was information that appeared to confirm Theo's suspicions. "Why do you a-"

"Hello," Theo said to the man at the door, taking Hermione's invitation from her hand and passing it off in greeting. "Apologies for the delay, awful traffic on the Floo, you know how it is getting into the countryside during peak hours—"

"Malfoy," the man at the door read doubtfully, flicking a glance up at Hermione. "You're telling me this is a Malfoy?"

"Ah, my apologies, I forgot you may not be familiar," Theo said. "She's one of the French cousins—une cousine de Bordeaux. N'es-tu pas, ma chérie?" he said without a trace of an accent, giving her a sharp nudge to the ribs.

"Ah, um… oui," Hermione said weakly.

"See? There you go," Theo said. "If you have any doubts, you can always confirm with Draco. He is managing security for this event, is he not?"

The man's eyes narrowed.

"Auror Malfoy," he said into his tie clip. "There's someone here claiming to be a cousin of yours. From—"
"Bordeaux," Theo supplied, still smiling.

"Bordeaux," the man echoed into the tie clip.

"What?" barked a voice on the other end. "Dear god, no—wait there."

There was a loud crack as a young man with pale blond hair suddenly materialized in place, wearing a tuxedo not dissimilar from Theo's. His, however, was an entirely emerald green jacket with black lapels, the garment made of fine, gleaming velvet. He wore a signet ring on one hand, marked by some sort of noble crest, and if there was one thing obvious from his appearance, it was money. His mask was secured just below the high bones of his cheeks and then up like vines above his brows, tendrils of silver serving as decorative embellishments to his skull rather than concealment, as if he hadn't actually cared to obscure his identity.

The rich man who apparently oversaw security turned to Hermione. "Wait a minute," he said with a puzzled frown, "you're not Hort-

He broke off as he noticed Theo, who had nudged his mask up on his head.

"—not what I expected," the man hastily amended, clearing his throat. He seemed to be addressing Theo alone, his attention flicking back and forth between him and Hermione. "I didn't realize you'd, um. Well—"

He seemed flustered, which the man at the door appeared to notice.

"We're fine here," the blond man said hastily. "I'll just… I'll show them inside myself," he said, pulling Theo after him. Tom hurried to follow as Hermione threw a panicked glance over her shoulder, never one to enjoy being unwillingly caught up in someone else's plan.

Theo, however, seemed perfectly at ease, even when the blond rounded on him with what appeared to be abject fury.

"You absolute motherfucker," said the blond. "You shitbag of epic proportions."

"Yes, hello," Theo replied. "Lovely to see you, Draco, it's been far too long."

"It's been SEVEN FUCKING YEARS," said the blond, briefly attracting the attention of the guests around them before he hurried to lower his voice, curling one hand to a fist.

"Has it? Hm," Theo said. "Well, you know how life gets in the way. You look good," he added, patting the blond, Draco, on the shoulder until the latter swatted his hand aside. "Auror, really? An odd choice, though with Lucius so high up in the Ministry I suppose the 'exam' must have been rather straightforward—"

"What on earth are you doing here?" Draco hissed, before seeming to recall Hermione's presence. "Sorry," he told her curtly, attempting to collect himself as he snuck another overlong glance at her. "Your name, again? Seeing as you are not my cousin."

"It's… Hermione," she said, looking as if she'd forgotten it herself for a moment. "And this, um." She glanced at Tom, frowning. "Well, this is Tom, and—"

"I need your help with something," Theo said, snapping his fingers in Draco's face. "Got a minute?"

"Did you have a minute?" Draco demanded, his attention landing back on Theo with a scowl. "Did
you have one bloody minute at any point over the last seven years to tell me that you weren't dead, or was that too much to ask?"

"Well, I'm here now, aren't I?" Theo countered, which did not particularly thrill Draco. "You two should probably go enjoy the party," he said, turning to Tom and Hermione. "You know, have a drink, dance, carouse, so on and so forth."

He seemed insistent on speaking to Draco alone, going so far as to give Tom a look of prompting when Hermione looked as if she might argue.

"But we just got here—"

"I'm sure Draco will show you around later," Theo assured her, giving Draco a look. "Right?"

The blond didn't seem any less bothered, but he nodded gruffly, softening just enough to reassure her.

"Fine. Then let's talk," he said, taking Theo's arm and leading him away.

In their wake, Hermione frowned, chewing lightly on her lip as the blond disappeared with Theo, the sound of a loud crack echoing through the ballroom as they went.

"What was that about?" she asked, and Tom, who hadn't the slightest idea, shook his head.

"Don't know," he said, and wandered into the ballroom, permitting himself to be distracted by the floating candles, the sky-resembling canopy of stars, and the silver platters of champagne. "But I'm thinking we should probably get a drink."

Draco's grip on Theo's arm did not relent until he had apparated them outside, where, if he wished, he was free to shout at his leisure.

Which he did not hesitate to do.

"—AND THEN, WITHOUT EVEN A NOTE, YOU'RE JUST GONE! JUST… GONE! POOF! DISAPPEARED WITHOUT A TRACE! AND I THOUGHT SURELY HE'LL SAY SOMETHING, MAYBE HE'S WAITING FOR THE SEARCH TO DIE DOWN BUT OBVIOUSLY HE'LL SAY SOMETHING, YOUR BEST FRIEND WOULDN'T JUST DISAPPEAR AND LEAVE YOU WITHOUT A WORD—"

"Okay, so you're upset," Theo judged, at which point Draco's mouth snapped shut with fury. "I hear you, but—"

"YOU HEAR ME? THEO, I—"

"To be clear, everyone hears you," Theo said, stepping forward and clapping a hand over Draco's mouth. "Quiet down, would you? I'm happy to explain," he clarified to Draco's muffled yell, "but I can hardly do that over the sound of all this shrieking."

Draco's eyes narrowed, no less enraged, but he was at least clever enough to stop shouting. Theo released him, disengaging with a shrug.

"I wanted to say something," Theo said. "But also, I didn't."

Draco glared at him, folding his arms petulantly over his chest. "There better be more to it."
"What was I supposed to tell you?" Theo demanded. "If Lucius had found out—"

Draco looked taken aback. "You thought I would tell my father?"

"You tell your father everything," Theo said. "Don't you?"

"I'm a grown man, Theodore, I hardly need t-"

"Well, we were eleven then," Theo reminded him succinctly. "Specifically, I was eleven, and uninterested in being caught by the Ministry. And you were doing well enough without me, so—"

"Hang on," Draco said, frowning. "How would you know that?"

Theo sighed, exasperated. "Do you really think I'd have left my best friend alone?" he demanded, and Draco's expression stiffened. Then, gradually, it softened. Marginally.

"What do you want now, then?" Draco asked.

Well, huffed. But it was at least an improvement.

"I haven't exactly been… legally compliant," Theo said. "My existence over the past seven years has diminished to something of a chaotic path."

Draco's pale brow furrowed. "Okay, and…?"

"And I've got one final con," Theo said. "One big one, and then I'm done. I'm going to leave England, leave all this behind. But I need your help."

Draco's mouth stiffened. "You want my help just so you can leave again?"

Theo shrugged. "I can't really come back, can I? You know who my father is," he reminded Draco. "He was headed for Azkaban and so am I, for different reasons."

"But I could help you," Draco said.

"Yes, you can," Theo agreed, "and that's why I'm asking you for help."

Draco grimaced. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"But—"

"Are you my best friend or not?"

"I have no fucking idea," Draco replied hotly.

"Well, then I suppose we're at an impasse."

The two of them looked at each other for a long time, each gauging the other. Draco had always been a bit pointy, in Theo's opinion, but now that he was older it had softened him a little, making him sleeker, angular but less haughty. The conceit was there, of course, in the way his hair was slicked back and his jacket was undeniably ostentatious, but age had rendered him a less saturated mirror of Theo.
"I really didn't think I'd even recognize you," Draco said in a low voice. He circled Theo for a moment, warily considering him from different angles. "I remember thinking when I was thirteen or fourteen that my god, I wouldn't even know him anymore. If I bumped into him in Diagon I wouldn't even know I'd done it."

He paused in front of Theo, scrutinizing him.

"But you're you," Draco said after a moment, seeming to say it more to himself than to Theo. "You look completely different and exactly the same. You still look like I could tell you all my secrets and you'd take them to the grave, just like you did when we were kids."

He paused, pinching the bridge of his nose, and sighed.

"What do you want?" he said irritably, and Theo leapt to take advantage of his opening.

"I have to find Dumbledore," he said, and at Draco's scoff, he clarified, "Any member of the Order will do."

"What?" Draco demanded. "If I could find Dumbledore, don't you think I'd have arrested him by now?"

"I heard your father say he was sending someone to this party," Theo said, and Draco frowned.

"How do you know that?"

"What, I've been gone for seven years and now you want to focus on unnecessary details?" Theo scoffed. "Honestly, Draco, where are your priorities—"

"What do you need Dumbledore for?" Draco cut in. "He's not going to be any quicker to forgive you than the Ministry."

"I don't need Dumbledore, I need to bring something to Dumbledore," Theo said. "Did you get a good look at the skinny little miscreant I brought with me?"

"The girl? She's not a miscreant. Kind of pretty, actually—"

"Not the girl, Casanova, the boy. You didn't notice him?"

Draco frowned. "What, with the glasses? And the scar?"

"Yes, that's the one, good work having eyes—"

"What about him?" Draco asked, and Theo leaned forward, conspiratorial.

"What if I told you," he began, heightening the sense of mystique, "he was really… Harry Potter?"

No one hearing that name could do so with any less than utter dramatics.

"No." Draco leapt back, alarmed. "Seriously? Him?"

"Maybe," Theo said, shrugging. "Who's to say, really?"

Draco stared at him, disbelieving.
Then, after a moment, he rolled his eyes, groaning.

"It's a con," he said tartly.

"Excellent deduction, Auror Malfoy, you've correctly detected mischief afoot," Theo said, toasting him with an imaginary glass.

"Jesus," Draco said, turning away. "I'm on track to become Head Auror, Nott. I'm not going to help you commit a crime—"


He was pleased to see the meter added to Draco's height hadn't diminished his acute sense of opportunity. "Oh."

"Yes, 'oh' indeed," Theo agreed. "Appealing, isn't it?"

Draco hesitated. "Even if I could help," he said uncertainly, "I don't know how I would. I have no idea who Dumbledore is sending."

Theo shrugged. "Well, they're inside somewhere, aren't they? It's a simple matter of using those working eyes of yours, I imagine."

"That's assuming I'll find them before you do," Draco said.

"Well, you've already demonstrated your excellent capacity for deduction, haven't you?"

Draco cut him a glare. "And if you find them before me?"

Ah, so it would be teamwork, then. Hardly Theo's specialty over the last seven years, but it wasn't as if Draco had to know that.

"You help me find Dumbledore, I'll help you turn him in," Theo said, extending a hand. "I'll take the reward money, you can have the fame and Daddy's everlasting approval," he suggested neutrally, and to Draco's lack of opposition, he added, "Do we have a deal?"

Draco considered it a moment, then gave in, clasping his hand around Theo's.

"Deal," he said, apparating them back inside.

Hermione may not have liked the dress Theo had chosen for her, but the other wizards at the gala certainly did. Within minutes, a rather large man had approached, asking for a dance.

"Oh, um, I'm not sure if—"

"Vat is your name?" asked the man, who seemed to be some sort of Bulgarian athletic type. He was wearing a mask that looked more like a birdcage.

"Hermione, but—"

"Herm-ow-ninny?"

"Her-my-oh-knee," Hermione said, "but like I said, I…"
She trailed off as the not-particularly-fluent Bulgarian kissed her hand, a flush materializing to rise in her cheeks.

"Just go," Tom advised her, amused. "Put those waltz rehearsals to use."

She gave him a pained look, already being led away. "But—"

"Have fun," Tom called after her, turning back to a floating platter of champagne before suddenly locking eyes with someone across the room.

He felt a little nudge of something unpleasant as a black haired man in a serpentine mask approached him, wading through the crowd. Tom glanced over his shoulder, hoping the man was looking for someone else, but unfortunately he swooped across the room to stop directly in front of Tom, peering at him with narrowed contemplation over a noticeably hooked nose.

"Those eyes," the man murmured, and his voice was low, unpracticed. Slippery with something. Condescension, maybe, though he seemed to be talking more to himself than to Tom. "They're her eyes," he said, staring discomfitingly at Tom, and then, abruptly, he seemed to snap from a trance. "Who are you?"

Who was he seemed to be the better question, but Tom would have done anything to get away almost the second he started speaking. "I'm Tom."

"Tom what?"

"Tom Riddle." He glanced around, looking for Theo, but there was no sign of him yet. "Do I know you?"

The man's already narrowed eyes became slits. "Tom Riddle?"

"Yeah, I—" Tom glanced around again, looking for the pompous blond. "Right, well, I should probably go—"

"Go where?" the man demanded. "How did you get here?"

"I—" Tom broke off, suffering a searing heat to the scar on his forehead beneath his mask. "I have to go," he said, pressing a hand to his temple and turning away. "Sorry—"

"Wait," the man called after him, launching forward, but Tom slipped through the crowd, rushing away.

His scar was paining him again, as it seemed to be doing incessantly since leaving the orphanage. It burned intensely now, stinging with a radiating pain, and Tom only came to a halt the moment he slammed into someone, ricocheting clumsily away.

"Sorry, sorry—"

"Tom." The glint of a silver Venetian mask flashed in his periphery as Theo's cool hands slid to either side of his forehead, lifting his gaze. "What's happening?"

Through the fog of pain, Tom registered the sound of Theo's concern.

"It's nothing," he said, forcing himself to straighten. Even through the mask he could see Theo's brow was furrowed, one hand still resting on his shoulder. "Did you get what you needed?"

"Hm? Yeah. Yes, sort of. What's going on?"
"Nothing, my scar—it does this sometimes. Where's Hermione?"

Theo waved a hand. "I sent Draco over to her. They'll either fall in love or keep an eye on the party, whichever comes first. Do you need help?" he asked, frowning. "I can try to ease the pain. Sirius almost always needs a headache spell, his hangovers are fucking deadly—"

"No, it'll pass." It was passing already. Tom blinked a couple of times, clearing his vision. "Did you see that weird guy in the cape?" he asked, turning over his shoulder and seeking out the man who'd spoken to him. "The snake mask, with the hooked nose—?"

"Were you by chance recently concussed?" Theo asked drily, gaze flicking rapidly over the rest of the room. Tom was pretty sure whatever else Theo was, he was incredibly observant. If such a man had been present, Theo would have seen him. "Maybe we should leave, get some sleep."

"I don't need sleep." Tom spotted Hermione in the center of the room, dancing with Draco now. She seemed a little more nervous than she had with the Bulgarian, though it was clear that Draco, whatever else he was, was a far better dancer. He swept her across the floor with rehearsed precision, effortless, and her cheeks were flushed from either motion or what Tom guessed to be his aristocratic charm. "That guy," Tom said, gesturing with his chin. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"Draco?" Theo shrugged. "Sort of."

Tom slid another look at him. Draco was… posh, clearly. The type of boy Hermione probably would have dated had she gone to Oxford. If Theo had known Draco in some prior iteration of his life, that would explain the little glimpses of things Hermione had missed about him; the knowing how to dance, how to dress. The perfect manners, when he wanted to have them. The strangely accessible French. "Sort of?"

He turned back to find a slow smile creeping over Theo's face.

"What?" Tom said, bristling, and Theo laughed.

"You're jealous," he observed, and Tom felt a little uprising of humiliation.

"I'm not jealous, I'm just saying, it's not as if you've ever been forthcoming—"

"You're fucking jealous," Theo cut in, "and it's fine. It's funny." He chewed the thought for a second, still half-laughing, before sliding another look at Tom. "It's fucking hilarious is what it is."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Don't get carried away, dickhead. It was one kiss."

"Yeah?" Theo stepped forward, as if he were going to speak in Tom's ear. "Interesting," he said, and Tom swallowed, feeling the little brush of unshaven hair from Theo's cheek. "One kiss and you're already worried I'm going to run off with the first pretentious pureblood I see."

Tom struggled not to show the way his pulse thrilled. "Pureblood?"

"Means there's no muggle anywhere. Witches and wizards all down the line for generations."

"Oh." Theo hadn't moved away; instead, he reached down for the champagne glass in Tom's hand, bringing it to his lips and taking a sip. "What about you?" Tom began, and angled his head to the side. He could play this game. "Are you a pureblood too?"

Theo chuckled, his lips moist from the champagne as his eyes flicked over the distance from Tom's mouth to his. "Do I look like a pureblood to you?"
"Yes, actually. You hid it well," Tom congratulated him neutrally, "but you can't hide it here. I know a silver spoon when I see it, and you told me yourself you grew up rich."

"I see." Abruptly, Theo pulled away, easing distance between them as he looked up at Draco. "I've got him looking for someone," Theo explained, raising the champagne to his lips again as he gestured to the center of the ballroom. "They say there's supposed to be someone from the Order here tonight."

Tom shook off the hollow sensation of Theo's absence. "The Order?"

"Dumbledore's organization." He drained the rest of his champagne, sidling up to a nearby tray of glasses at the same moment Draco led Hermione away from the dance floor. "Hasn't seen anyone, by the looks of it."

Draco approached with Hermione on his arm, picking up a glass from the tray beside Theo.

"Nothing," Draco said in a low voice, making it look as if he were speaking to Hermione. "I can keep looking, but I doubt anyone else would arrive this late."

"Laugh," Theo said, facing the opposite direction.

"What?" Draco asked.

"Not you. Her," Theo said, turning to face Tom as Hermione made a slightly uncomfortable sound, feigning conversation with Draco. "Your father just walked in."

Tom scanned the room, identifying a formally dressed man that was clearly an older version of Draco. Rather than a mask, he wore some sort of laurel circlet, a crown with leaves of thin silver filigree.

"Shit," Draco said, picking up a second glass and handing it to Hermione. "You'd better go."

"Fine. You stay here," Theo told Hermione out of the side of his mouth. "Padfoot will meet you outside."

She nearly turned to give him a look of surprise. "You want me to stay?"

"You've got a reason not to fuck me over, don't you?" Theo told her, locking eyes with Tom to make a point. "Doesn't she?" he asked Tom coolly.

Tom frowned. "I can't just leave her," he said.

"Nonsense," Theo assured him, "she's in good hands."

Tom flicked a doubtful glance at Draco, then back to Theo, who smiled thinly.

"Up to you," Theo said. "Stay or go, your choice." He leaned forward, setting his glass on the tray before murmuring in Tom's ear, "It was only one kiss."

Then he turned and walked away, tucking his hands into his pockets as he went.

Tom stared after him, uncertain, and glanced at Hermione.

"Are you going to be alright?" he asked her.

She nodded. "I'm fine," she assured him. "Draco and I will keep an eye out. Theo's right," she
added, voice a little high with pretense, though it was calculated kind. The kind that meant she was working an angle.

From his periphery, Tom watched Theo slip out the doors of the enchanted ballroom, disappearing.

"Go," Hermione said over her shoulder, smiling for a moment at Draco before permitting herself to be led back to the ballroom floor.

Then Tom pivoted sharply and dodged through the crowd, hurrying after Theo.

Chapter End Notes

a/n: Reminder that this is the rare instance where the whole story is already written, I'm just posting as I find time to edit. Should wrap up in about ten parts total quite soon. Thank you for being here! I have a soft spot for this film, so naturally the AU was irresistible.
Theo caught the sound of footsteps behind him on the gravel road back to the house in Godric's Hollow, not bothering to turn around. Eventually, as Theo predicted, Tom caught up and fell into step beside him, moderately winded.

Neither of them said anything. They walked in silence through the village, the path crunching beneath their feet, until Theo suddenly changed direction.

"This way," he said, leading them off the path.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere quiet."

He led Tom to the spot he frequented when Sirius was busy drowning his sorrows, or his memories, or whatever else it was Sirius was trying to put to rest in Godric's Hollow. Just beyond the churchyard were the beginnings of some farmland and the outskirts of a secluded wood.

"Going to murder me?" Tom said drily.

Theo didn't answer.

Instead, he waited until they were out of sight from the village before coming to a halt, pivoting around to trap Tom against his chest.

"Maybe later," Theo said, pulling Tom's mouth to his.

Tom, who wasn't totally an idiot, was ready for him, snatching Theo's mask first and then his own, and what started as a kiss became an artless fumble, progressing until Tom had wrestled him back against a tree. Theo gave Tom a shove in return, just for fun—just because—and Tom shoved him back, pinning his shoulders to the bark. The leaves rustled beneath their feet and Theo yanked at Tom's jacket, tugging it from his shoulders and depositing it carelessly on the ground.

"Pureblood, huh?" Tom said in Theo's mouth. His fingers lingered near the clasp of Theo's trousers, toying with the zipper, and then he slid his palm down, catching Theo's groan between his teeth. "Interesting."

"Doesn't mean shit anymore," Theo replied, unbuttoning Tom's shirt. Tom was wiry and lean, the presence of muscle unavoidable for lack of comforts like proper meals, and Theo thrilled a little at the feel of him, bony and sharp and clearly not for everyone.

Not for everyone, but here, now, for him.

Tom's mouth slid to Theo's jaw, leaving a trail down the side of his neck as his hands scraped over the roots of Theo's hair, gripping the back of his skull. He slipped his tongue over the tattoo that stretched up from Theo's shoulder, tugging at the collar of his shirt.

"What's this?"
"Fucking… bird," Theo mumbled, "I don't know, who gives a shit—"

Tom peeled away the buttons carefully, giving Theo another hard shove when he tried to speed things along. "I want to see it," Tom said, green eyes flicking over him as Theo chewed at his lip; impatient, frustrated, desperate.

Theo's jaw clenched in tacit resignation, teeth locked together to keep from something fucking stupid like saying 'please,' and Tom's lips flicked up in a smile. He drew a careful, deliberate line with the tip of his finger, following the shape of Theo's tattoo. It revealed itself in pieces as he went: jaw, neck, shoulder, traveling down the length of his arms until Tom had removed Theo's shirt entirely, leaving the whole thing exposed.

"Did it hurt?" Tom asked, brushing the pad of his thumb over the shape of it. A falcon, a snake pulled taut between its talons, wings outstretched to reach from the side of Theo's neck to the bone of his shoulder.

"No." A lie. Of course it fucking hurt, not that Theo was going to admit that.

Tom's fingers hovered down the falcon's talons to the snake that draped across his clavicle. Then he leaned forward, placing a kiss to the hollow of Theo's throat.

Then to the left side, traveling west.

Tom's lips followed a careful path to the base of Theo's jaw as his hand stole up to cup the back of Theo's head, curving around the nape of his neck.

"The tally marks," Tom said. He scraped his teeth across them, lightly. "You ran away seven years ago?"

Tom's other hand stole down Theo's torso, smoothing over the front of his trousers and then flicking the clasp undone, followed by the zipper.

"Answer," Tom said, biting at the lobe of Theo's ear, "or I won't keep going."

Theo jerked his hips against Tom's hand, and he pulled back.

"Nope," Tom said.

"Asshole," Theo gritted out.

Tom lifted his palm, holding it up for Theo's inspection. "Tell me," he said.

Theo grimaced, half loathing him.

"My dad," Theo said gruffly. As a reward, Tom lowered his palm, resting it on the outside of Theo's trousers. "He… wasn't a good guy. Was a pretty shit guy, actually." Tom's thumb stroked the outline of Theo's cock. "Fuck," Theo exhaled, coughing it up.

"Keep going," Tom said.

Theo swallowed, tearing at his lip with his teeth. "He worked for the man I told you about. The Dark Lord," he said, as Tom's fingers slid under the band of his pants. "Lord Voldemort," hissed out from his teeth.

"Yeah?" Tom's hand wrapped around his cock, easing over his shaft.
"Yeah, he—" Theo's head fell back as Tom slid down to his knees, breath hot against the bare skin of his torso. He shivered, managing, "My dad, he… died. I—"

Tom's lips slid over him, tongue pressed to the fabric of his underwear.

"Fuck, I—"

"Keep going," Tom said.

"I… fuck, I ran," Theo choked out. Tom swirled his tongue gently over his tip, sucking at him through the fabric. "It was… he was on his way to Azkaban, I didn't want to wait to see what the Ministry would do to me—"

"Azkaban?"

"Wizard prison." Theo exhaled raggedly, flakes of bark scraping loose against his head. "I ran away. Met Sirius. Been on the run ever since."

"And?"

Shit, fuck, fucking Christ—"And what?"

Tom looked up.

"What are you counting?" he said neutrally, tugging Theo's trousers down lower. Fuck, Theo was going to have scrapes everywhere, fucking nature and shit in his hair, fuck it. Fuck everything but this, Tom's mouth, his hands, his eyes.

"I don't know," Theo said, desperately trying not to beg. "Years until I find it."

"Find what?"

Theo let out a haggard breath as Tom slid his lips over him.

"Something that feels like home," he said to the autumn air, tangling his fingers in Tom's hair as he let out a moan of something wordless, like a stab to his fucking heart.

It wasn't that Tom was some sort of sadist. He simply saw an opening, realizing Theo might actually want him; that in fact, Theo might want him more than anyone had ever wanted him, Hermione included. Theo didn't want his secrets, didn't want his powers, didn't want him for who he resembled or who his parents might be. Theo wanted him, and maybe there was some pleasure in that for Tom. Maybe he wanted to know more about Theo than what his tattoos were, or what the vial contained around his neck. He wanted to know those things too, obviously, to build a library of information about every embellishment of Theo's form, but he wanted other things more. To know how Theo tasted, how he sounded when he came. To know what Theo looked like when he was weak, when his knees buckled, when he broke down and told the truth. He wanted to memorialize the look on Theo's face when it was frozen in ecstasy, twisted in confession. He wanted to possess every detail of Theo's form and commemorate them with his hands, his teeth, his hips.

It was almost all a fumble, imprecise and too-rough, and if it was the rarity of Theo's softness that had ever made Tom look twice, then it was Theo's fury, his defiance, that made Tom want a taste. This was a con man, a liar, a fake. This was a man whose blood ran pure and who had cast himself down to nothing instead, sacrificing privilege for freedom. This was a man seeking as profoundly
and as hollowly as Tom was seeking; as hungrily and as desperately, too. It was near and out of reach, close and insurmountable, and when Theo pulled him down to the ground Tom didn't resist, lighting the match that struck for every inch of contact between them.

Theo had him on his back, leaves in his hair, spine arched from the ground with his hips framed by the shapes of Theo's fingers, Theo's tongue dragging over him like he never wanted to have anything less worthy pass through his lips again. He came with a blinding, excruciating sense of anguish, displaced from the bones of his limbs, and then reached blindly for Theo without a word, dragging him up until Theo had collapsed on his side beside him, dropping like a stone.

They stayed like that for several minutes. Fucking freezing, not that it mattered. Tom would have frozen to death rather than moved. His scar burned, a cool sweat plastered to his temples, but fuck, this close to Theo he could feel his heart beating.

This close, he could feel the beat of Theo's heart.

"I have these nightmares," Tom said before he realized he intended to speak, and Theo shifted to look down at him, waiting. "I'm in this house," Tom explained in a low voice, "someplace familiar. It's the same every time—I'm walking up the stairs, looking for something. I have this feeling of… I don't know. Relief. Something's going to be over soon. Something I want, badly. Something I need."

He closed his eyes, fighting the sting from his scar.

"Then I hear a scream," he said, and Theo shifted, fingers finding the curve of Tom's jaw. The rings on Theo's fingers were cold against his skin, but the brush against his cheek was incongruously soft; airy, delicate, floating. "A man yells something about a baby, and then a woman screams."

Theo's nails scraped up the back of Tom's neck, darting up to his scalp. If they kissed now, Tom would taste himself on Theo's lips. He shivered at the prospect of it, dissolving once again to bittersweetness; to the acrid taste of his confession, coaxed out by Theo's honeyed touch.

"I see this… man. This thing with red eyes," Tom said, swallowing, "so it's not exactly a man. I mean, he is," he amended, "but… there's something wrong with him. Sometimes I think it's me—I can feel his emotions and his thoughts," he explained, letting Theo tap mindlessly along the bones of his vertebrae, "but sometimes, I'm the one looking at him. And sometimes, I see him coming—his eyes, first, they're glowing—and then his…" He closed his eyes. "Then his face comes into focus, and then—"

"Wait." Theo went rigid, his grip suddenly tightening around Tom's neck. "Did you say a man with red eyes?"

Tom opened his eyes, watching Theo's expression change.

"Yeah," Tom said, shifting toward him with a frown. "Why?"

"Like… red slits?" Theo asked him. He looked unsettled; possibly even fearful, the way he had when they'd been attacked on the train. "Narrow, cold, cruel—?"

"Yeah," Tom confirmed, a little breathless. It was the only time he'd ever told anyone about his dreams, gambling on the idea that Theo might not consider him a monster, but he hadn't expected Theo to react with… recognition. "He takes a step towards me," Tom said, and backed away, keeping his distance in the event Theo's look of panic turned to coldness—or worse, to horror. "He
comes for me, and I'm—"

He shook himself. Some things were too difficult to explain, and Theo still looked rattled.

"There's something after, too. A woman. The one—the snake," Tom said, and Theo blinked. "I thought at first the snake was her, but then—"

"You said the man comes for you?" Theo cut him off, propping himself upright. With the few inches between them, Tom could see his pulse quicken. "What does he do?"

"There's—" Tom strained to remember. "There's a green light," he said, trying to recount the events of the dream in the proper order. "It's blinding for a second, and then when I open my eyes again it's a blur, but the man, he's gone—"

"Jesus, fuck," Theo unexpectedly swore, stumbling to his feet and reaching for their clothes, yanking his jacket from the dirt. He tossed Tom his pile of trousers and jacket, scraping a many-ringed hand against his scalp as Tom staggered to his feet, taken aback. "Shit, Tom, you're—"

Theo broke off, staring for a moment at Tom.

Tentatively, he reached forward. His motions were robotic, almost clumsy, as he took Tom's face in both hands, disbelieving.

Then his eyes traveled to the scar on Tom's forehead, fingers hovering over it in silence.


Tom blinked with confusion, swallowing hard.

"Theo," he said, but Theo was shaking his head, hurrying to fasten his trousers.

"Come on," Theo said. "We have to get back to Sirius. Right now."

It's him.

The reality slammed into Theo's chest, vibrating through his limbs.

It's actually fucking him.

The red eyes, the green light. That could be no one else but Voldemort; no other spell but an Avada Kedavra.

Tom had survived the killing curse. He was the Boy Who Lived.

Tom wasn't some James Potter lookalike who'd wandered by just when Theo was desperate enough to do something mind-numbingly stupid.

He was fucking Harry Potter—the one person on earth Lord Voldemort couldn't kill.

"What's going on?" Tom asked, hurrying to keep up with him. He sounded concerned, but Theo needed to tell Sirius first; needed to tell him they'd done it.

They'd fucking found him. What were the odds? Theo wasn't good enough at math to even begin to comprehend them. There wasn't a goddamn witch or wizard who didn't know the name Harry Potter and somehow, they'd fucking found him.
The black dog met them outside the house, trotting apprehensively along the village's main artery until he saw Theo approaching.

"I need to talk to you," Theo said flatly. "Human you. Now."

"Theo," Tom said, still reaching for him with confusion, but Theo shook his head.

"Go see if Hermione's inside," he said, before turning back to Sirius. "Change back, Black. Now, right now."

Tom slipped away, ducking his head and making his way into the basement as Sirius, hidden behind the shack, stretched out to his usual form of a slightly alcoholic but probably reasonable adult man.

"The son of Lucius fucking Malfoy is here," Sirius growled, reaching for his clothes and tugging on a pair of his worn trousers. "Couldn't you have mentioned you were going to ask for his help?"

"It's him," Theo said, as Sirius continued ranting, struggling to pull on a shirt.

"Where have you even been, Nott? You shouldn't have left him alone with her," he snapped. "I've been listening to him talk to that girl and trust me, she's a better actress than she looks, or there's something about her th-"

"It's him," Theo said again, grabbing hold of Sirius' shoulders the moment he was dressed and forcing him to pay attention. "Tom—it's him, you were right. He's Harry," he said, as Sirius went rigid and then frowned, his posture melting further the more he registered what Theo was saying. "He can describe the whole thing, Black, right down to the way Voldemort looks. He remembers the Avada. It must be where the scar comes from," he said, suddenly feeling sick. "He must have gotten it when he survived the curse, but—"

"My god." Sirius dragged a hand to his mouth, disbelieving. "He's… it's him, you're sure? It's really him?"

"Yes." Theo, suddenly needing to sit down, collapsed down onto the ground, shaking his head. "We fucking found Harry Potter, Black. We found the savior of the wizarding world and he doesn't even know—"

Sirius' attention snapped to Theo. "You didn't tell him?"

"Do I look like I told him?"

"Nott," Sirius growled, "are you joking? After all this, you didn't even s-"

"Say what?" Theo demanded, cutting him off in retort. "What was I supposed to say? How do I even begin to explain that this entire world he just fucking discovered has been waiting decades for him to surface? He doesn't know how to use magic," Theo reminded Sirius with a grimace, "and for fuck's sake, he still thinks he's a monster, he doesn't even realize th-"

"Ah," came a voice behind them, as Theo and Sirius both went rigid. "I should have known it would be you, Black."

"—all it is, you're sure?"

"It's… been a long time," the voice replied hesitantly. "I admit, he might have other reasons, but as
far as I know—"

"Tom," Hermione said, whipping around to face him as he made his way into the basement. "We
have to go."

Tom, who hadn't quite recovered from Theo's abrupt dismissal, found himself caught off guard a
second time. "What?"

"Sirius and Theo," Hermione insisted, stomping over to him, "they're criminals. You're just part of
some... some con. They don't even know where Dumbledore is, they're just trying to get
him arrested—and that murder Sirius is accused of? It's not just that," she said, dropping her voice
to a hushed tone of conspiracy. "Haven't you wondered why he's so desperate to believe you're
Harry? He needs you, Tom, because he has to finish the job! He's the reason the Potters are dead."

Tom opened his mouth to deny it, but then stopped short.

Admittedly, there had always been something strange about Sirius' guilt.

He shook himself. "But Theo, he's—"

"He's lying to you," Hermione told Tom fiercely. "I know you like him," she added, softening a bit
in sympathy, "but can't you see that's just part of his plan? Sirius wants to use you, to bring you
back to some Dark Lord, and as for Theo—" She broke off, frustrated. "We're just a paycheck for
him, Tom!"

The idea that what he'd just done with Theo might have meant nothing to one of them seemed to
stick in Tom's brain like a thorn.

"Hermione, I—"

"Draco will help us," Hermione said firmly, turning to the blond behind her. "Won't you? He
works for the Ministry of Magic," she added, turning back to explain the situation to Tom. "If
anyone's going to get us to Dumbledore, it's going to be him."

Tom's gaze flicked from her to Draco, who seemed torn, but still grimly determined.

"I didn't realize Theo was working with Black," Draco said, grey eyes shifting to Hermione. "He's a
notorious follower of You-Know-Who, and he once murdered a man in public—in broad daylight.
And Theo hasn't explained how dangerous it is, either, the two of you being here," he added,
looking solemn. "If you were to get caught—"

The you in this scenario that was cause for concern seemed, to Tom, to be Hermione.

"—you'd be arrested, sent to Azkaban. You already ran afoul of some dementors," he said with a
glance at Hermione, as Tom tried not to wince at the memory of the hooded figures. "You need
protection, which I can actually provide, and I can help you find Dumbledore—"

"Or," came a cold voice at the top of the stairs, "I can take you to Dumbledore right now."

Tom swiveled around to find the same man who had been at the party, recognizable by his voice,
his nose. Behind him, Theo and Sirius were bound by illuminated rope, floating down the stairs in
his wake.

"Snape?" Draco asked, astounded. "What are y-"
But he was cut off as the man shot a rapid spell from a wand he produced from nowhere, hitting Draco square in the chest. The blond dropped instantly, collapsing in a pile at Hermione's feet.

"Draco!" she gasped, hurriedly dropping to her knees to revive him.

"Hey," Tom said, turning back to the hook-nosed man; a little spark of anger erupted in his palm as he saw Theo struggling against his restraints. "What do you think you're doing with them?"

"These men," said the hooked-nose man, "are criminals. This one," he said, jerking his head to Theo, "is the son of one of the most ruthless Death Eaters of all time, and this one," with a nod to Sirius this time, "is the murder of Peter Pettigrew, responsible for the deaths of James Potter and Lily Evans. No doubt these two have both been conspiring to turn you over to the Dark Lord since the moment they found you."

Tom blinked.

"What? But—"

"These two have never known how to find Dumbledore," the man said with a sneer over his shoulder at Theo and Sirius, "but I can take you to him now."

"There will be no need for that, Severus," came another voice, materializing from the shadows of the basement to startle Hermione into a gasp. "I am already here."
Death of a Con Man, Part VIII

Death of a Con Man, Part VIII

Cont'd.

Theo had seen Albus Dumbledore once or twice, though never up close. Usually on the cover of the *Daily Prophet*, which never seemed able to make up its mind about whether Dumbledore was a hero or a villain. Anti-establishment for sure, and a little foreboding. Sort of a guerrilla hero, one of those cult-types, or so Theo would have said if he'd been asked before today.

Which was maybe why he was a little underwhelmed to find a heavily robed, Gandalf-style man with a long white beard.

A little gasp of, "Fuck," escaped Sirius under his breath, which Theo thought was a bit of an overreaction. Given that Sirius had been ripping into whoever Snivellus Snape was not five minutes earlier—calling him obscenities Theo wasn't even sure were technically obscenities because they were so violently incomprehensible from rage—it seemed unlikely that the presence of an old man should merit something so dramatic. Theo strained around, trying to glance questioningly at Sirius (he did not want to look at Tom, who was now Harry, who had been staring at Theo as if Tom-Harry-whoever-he-was had been… fuck, wounded or something) when he noticed the mutterance had been delivered not in response to Dumbledore, but to the others who were apparating into the basement, one by one.

Nearly all of them were faces Theo had seen from time to time, either because they were Ministry workers or, alternatively, because they were wanted by the Ministry for crimes of incitement; little misdemeanors of rabble-rousing from time to time. Extremists, mostly, who lived the cult of the Chosen One. They saw themselves as Robin Hoods, vigilantes, while the Ministry mostly saw them as headaches, nuisances, little more than the opposite side of the spectrum from the former Death Eaters who were just as troublesome, albeit more likely to be violent. Dumbledore's followers were, like Dumbledore himself, not exactly amoral, but devoted to a reality Theo had considered far out of reach before knowing, as they were about to find out, that they'd been right all along.

Most of them seemed to have caught on already, victory settling into their faces while Hermione and Tom-Harry, unsure what was happening, stood closer to each other, shoulder to shoulder once Hermione rose up from Draco's stunned form on the ground. But while the others were staring, wide-eyed, at the man they now knew to be Harry Potter, one, Theo noticed, was looking directly at Sirius. His face, scarred and sallow, was particularly haunted, and even the sandy colorlessness of his hair looked electrified with shock.

He also looked vaguely like the boy who had been in Sirius' picture; one of the four in Gryffindor uniforms, though with noticeably more scars.

"Padfoot," he croaked. "Is that… are you—"

"Moony."

It was something Theo had heard Sirius say many times in his sleep, muttering it to himself or even shouting it, waking up in a sweat while Theo, usually somewhere in the vicinity, would pretend to sleep through it. He knew perfectly well the kind of torment that name had brought Sirius; he
anticipated that whatever else this reunion was, it would be, at very least, a relief of some sort.

Or perhaps not.

"You fucking bastard," the scarred man suddenly growled, advancing toward Sirius with his wand out only to be stopped by Snape, the man who had an almost-familiar, not-entirely-a-stranger face Theo couldn't quite place.

"If anyone's going to have the honor of dispatching Sirius Black, it's going to be me," said Snape, as Theo struggled pointlessly against his restraints to disagree. "The death of Lily Evans is on his hands, and—"

"Oh, bugger off, Severus," snarled the scarred man, whom Theo was surprised to see had shoved the greasier man away in favor of digging the tip of his wand into Sirius' forehead. "You traitor," the man was seething, practically salivating with rage. "You betrayed them! All of them! And now you have the bloody nerve to take their son—"

"Remus, please. Harry is what's important," Dumbledore said calmly, but Sirius didn't move.

"It wasn't me," Sirius said, his voice a low, solemn rasp. "It was my fault, yes, but Remus, it wasn't me, it was Wormt-

"YOU KILLED WORMTAIL!"

"I didn't," Sirius snapped, "though if I had, I would have been fully justified, wouldn't I? Ask him," he said, and from Theo's strained vantage point, Sirius seemed to be talking about Dumbledore. "I wasn't their secret-keeper, Moony, it wasn't me. It was Wormtail, not me." He was a little winded with desperation, struggling with his confession, which even Theo had not heard prior to that evening. He had never asked about the circumstances behind Sirius' run from the law, merely trusting that he was innocent.

"Moony," Sirius said again, "it wasn't me." His voice softened, and Remus' eyes, glowing and amber, slowly widened. "It wasn't me," Sirius said again, his voice pained, "but my god, Moony, I wish it had been. Every fucking day I wish it had been me instead of James."

Theo watched Remus' hand shake on his wand, teeth gritted.

"You can't honestly believe him," Snape scoffed from behind them, eyes narrowed. "If he were innocent, why would he have run?"

"They were taking me to Azkaban," Sirius said, speaking exclusively to Remus and ignoring Snape altogether. "You know I wouldn't have gotten a fair trial. They would have looked at me, at my family and my name, and convicted me on the spot. I tried to reach you, but—"

"I was underground," Remus realized, brow furrowing. "I was organizing the werewolves, you couldn't have reached me."

"Yes," Sirius said with a nod, "and I didn't know if I could trust him." His gaze flicked to Dumbledore then, who said nothing. "To be honest with you, Moony, I still don't."

All eyes were on Remus, who seemed frozen, paralyzed with indecision.

Then, slowly, Remus lowered his wand from Sirius' forehead, taking a slow, staggered step back.

"Release them, would you, Severus?" Dumbledore said coolly, despite the greasy man's look of
astonishment that he would suggest something so positively unpalatable. "Of course we're all willing to hear Sirius' side of the story. After all, Harry is unharmed, is he not?" he asked, turning to Tom-Harry with a warm, paternal smile. "We owe Sirius a debt of gratitude for leading us to the Chosen One, whatever his intentions."

Snape scowled, but flicked his wand as he was bidden, removing the restraints that had bound Theo and Sirius. Theo turned to find Tom-Harry still staring at him; still accusatory. He shifted away, averting his gaze to where Sirius and Remus were standing at a wary distance from each other.

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore said, turning to Tom-Harry. "We have so very much to talk about."

Tom-Harry numbly shook his head. "I'm not him, sir," he said, gaze flicking back to Theo as he spoke. "I… I can't be this… this Chosen One. Whoever that is, I'm sorry, but I just can't be the one you're looking for."

That, it seemed, was finally enough for Sirius to snap out of his Remus trance.

"Actually, you are," he said, and then, perhaps remembering that he was delivering some weighty news, Sirius took a few steps towards him. "Listen," Sirius said quietly, "I knew the moment I saw you that I had known you once, and I was right. I was—I am—your godfather," he explained, half-smiling, half-teary, finally able to confess what Theo had been so desperate to tell him only moments ago. "Harry, you are exactly who we've all been looking for. You're the spitting image of James Potter, my best friend, except for your eyes." Sirius gave a tentative, shaky smile, and said, " Those belong to Lily Evans, the brightest witch of her age. Your mother."

So that was it, then. Now he knew.

Now he knew he was Harry Potter, the son of two war heroes, not Tom the abandoned muggle orphan. He would leave here and be Harry Potter, the savior of the Wizarding World, who did not know Theo Nott, con man and son of a murderer, and who never would.

"You and I," Sirius said to Harry, "we're the only family either of us has left."

Theo swallowed, fixing his attention somewhere near his boots.

"You should join us, of course," Dumbledore interrupted, stepping beside Sirius. "You're more than welcome. And you, as well," he told Hermione, smiling genially at her. "Are you a witch, my dear?"

She seemed hesitant to answer. "Yes," she said, and then glanced down at Draco. "But if I go, he goes."

"Of course," said Dumbledore, unbothered. "The more the merrier. In fact, we should celebrate. We have finally found our Harry Potter—and on Halloween, of all nights!" he announced, beckoning to the others, who must have been relieved to know their cause for seventeen years had not been in vain. "Harry, my boy, you're finally home," Dumbledore told him, and with that, the swarms of other Order members came closer, including Remus.

"I was one of your father's closest friends," Remus told Harry gently, with a cautious glance at Sirius. Those two, Theo thought, would have plenty to discuss among themselves. It was obvious Sirius planned to go with them, wherever the Order's headquarters were.

Theo's throat tightened.
Wherever that was, it was none of his business.

He stepped away, turning to Snape, who had hung back from the others.

"My fucking wand, please?" Theo said under his breath, and astoundingly, Snape's eyes managed to narrow further. "I'm not going to do anything, dickhead. I just need it to leave."

"I know who you are, you know. I know who your father is."

Abruptly, Theo placed him, remembering that nose beneath a dark hood, obscured by a sinister mask.

"You," he said, blinking. "But you're... you're one of—"

"Do you really think I'd be here if I were? Just take the wand and go," Snape said coldly, shoving it into Theo's hands. "You clearly understand nothing."

Hints of his Dark Mark were visible from Snape's forearm and Theo blinked away the memory of his own father's Mark, accepting the wand with a curt, dismissive nod.

He raced up the stairs, ignoring the usual scurry of vermin beneath them and making his way to the village road. The sun would be down soon, and he would need to find somewhere to sleep, which wouldn't be here. If there was one thing he was sure of, it was that he would not be returning to Godric's Hollow again.

"Theo. Theo, wait!"

Theo flinched, stopping in his tracks, and schooled his expression before turning to find Harry Potter there, standing breathless in his wake.

"What?" Theo snapped, and Harry blinked.

Frowned.

"You knew it was really me," Harry said. "You knew, didn't you? How long?"

"The whole time," Theo lied, and waved a hand, turning away. "Tell Dumbledore I'll be in touch for my payment."

"Wait a minute—"

Harry snatched at Theo's arm, tugging him back, and Theo slid his gaze away.

"That's it?" Harry said, lips pressed thinly. "I was just a payout to you? Nothing else?"

It was a window, it seemed. But what was Theo supposed to say to the Chosen One? I'll worship you? I'll give up everything for you? It was nothing the others wouldn't have already said to him, promising him far more than Theo had to offer. Harry would shortly know how many of them had already given their lives for him without Theo adding himself to the list of devotees.

In the end, Harry Potter would be better off without the son of a Death Eater.

"I told you from the beginning," Theo said. "You were always a job. That's it."

Harry blinked.
"Let go of me, Harry," Theo said, and watched him register the name: *Harry*. Not Tom.

He released Theo with a grimace, taking a step back. Making them strangers again, as Theo had tacitly demanded.

"Nott," came Sirius' voice, jogging after them with a look of confusion. "Nott, where the fuck are you going?"

Theo flicked his gaze to Sirius, then back to Harry. "Make sure Sirius doesn't drink too much," he said in a low voice. "And tell him to bathe. He's around polite company now."

Harry said nothing, and Theo turned away.

"Nott, what the—*Theo*," Sirius panted, reaching him and frowning as Harry turned away, heading back to the basement. "What are you doing?"

"I have other engagements," Theo said. "A garden party, et cetera—"

"Nott, don't be stupid, I'm begging you—"

"Don't beg, Black, it's unbecoming."

"Nott, don't—" Sirius grabbed his arm again, admonishing him this time. "Theo, you stubborn arse, if you leave now—"

"He'll forget me," Theo supplied coolly. "He'll go onto bigger things, better ones. He'll be the hero everyone wants him to be. And he'll be with you," he reminded Sirius, clapping a hand on his shoulder, "and you'll be back where you belong, too. So…"

He trailed off with a shrug, gesturing to the road before him, and Sirius sighed.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Theo nodded. "I'll be fine, Black. Just—" Another dismissive wave. "Go."

Sirius glanced over his shoulder to where Remus stood outside the door, waiting.

Harry had already disappeared.

"If you need me, you can find me at the Burrow," Sirius said, turning back to Theo. "Okay? It's their safehouse, it belongs to Molly and Arthur Weasley."

"You'd better return Draco to his father," Theo said, and Sirius waved a hand.

"Yeah, yeah, eventually. But you—"

"I'll be fine," Theo said. "Really." A shrug. "We always knew this would come to an end, didn't we?" he prompted, forcing some warped version of his usual irreverent smirk. "The student was always going to surpass the master, and anyway, I'm out of sober-up."

Sirius gave him a wistful look, tapping the tally marks on the side of Theo's neck.

"I really hoped you wouldn't make it to eight," Sirius commented, shaking his head.

Theo merely shrugged. "Take care of yourself, Black," he said.
Then he turned away, taking the village path and following it into the autumn sunset.

"My Lord, they have found him!"

Excellent, Wormtail. Fetch me a cloak, and procure my wand.

It is only fitting that my reunion with Harry Potter be tonight.

Tom, who was somehow Harry, rubbed at the sting of his scar, which only seemed to be getting worse as the night progressed. He was careful not to admit it to the others, trying to hide the motion each time he raised his hand reflexively to the source of his discomfort, but he wished he could have told Theo about it; or about how the visions, the red-slitted eyes, kept reappearing in his mind, even though he was awake.

He wished, mostly, that Theo had been… different, somehow.

That everything had been different, somehow.

He rose from where he was sitting in the Burrow, where he had been introduced to what seemed like countless redheaded siblings and at least a dozen other people who kept shaking his hand, telling him how long they'd been waiting for him. One man, Doge or something, had tried kissing his knuckles before Tom (no, he reminded himself, Harry) had hurried away, trying to find Hermione.

She was sitting beside Draco, who was awake now, in one of the house's cramped bedrooms.

"You won't turn them in, will you?" she was whispering to him. "Please, you can't. I know we've just met, but—" She reached out, tentatively permitting her hand to hover above his knuckles. "Please," she said softly, "if Dumbledore can really help T-" A pause. "If he can help Harry, then… please." A breathy exhale. "Don't turn these people in."

Draco's grey eyes fixed on hers, considering her for a moment.

"Is that really all you want from me?" he asked her, and Harry watched her breath quicken. "Or," Draco said, sitting upright to lean towards her, "is there some other reason you're here with me instead of out there with them?"

Hermione swallowed, hesitant. "Draco, I…"

But Harry, noticing that Draco had taken her face gently between his hands, slipped away, trying to find solace in some other corner of the bustling house.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Sirius asked, spotting him as he passed and pausing him with a hand on his shoulder. He and Remus had been deep in conversation, presumably covering the events of their seventeen years apart. "Something wrong?"

Harry shook his head, spying Dumbledore's silhouette outside the window.

"I think I'll just have a chat with Dumbledore," he said, feigning normality as Sirius nodded, releasing him and turning back to Remus.

It was hard to believe Albus Dumbledore's face in real life was the same vaguely menacing one Harry had first seen on the wanted poster near Hogwarts. In fact, all he could remember thinking
from Dumbledore's first appearance was that he was not at all what Harry had expected. This was the man who had shown up to take Tom Riddle from the orphanage?

"Ah, there you are," Dumbledore said, smiling pleasantly as he noticed Harry's presence. "Quite a temperate evening, isn't it?"

It was getting late quickly, already a touch before midnight. Out here in the country, there were more stars in the sky than Harry had ever seen in London.

"You can see, I'm sure, how much you mean to everyone," Dumbledore continued, waving his hand at the party going on inside. "There isn't a witch or wizard alive who doesn't know your name."

Theo had known it, then. Theo had known precisely how valuable he was.

That was all he had ever been.

Harry swallowed it down, turning to Dumbledore. "Can you tell me about Tom Riddle?" he asked, and Dumbledore blinked. "That's what I was called before, back at the orphanage. Mrs Cole named me Tom, after a boy who lived there before me. She's the one who told me to find you."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "An orphanage, hm? Ah, Bathilda," he sighed, shaking his head. "I always suspected she'd taken you somewhere, but even legilimency was no use. Her mind was already going even before you were born." He stared grimly out into the night sky. "That wasn't part of the plan, you know."

Harry frowned. "The… plan?"

Dumbledore paused a moment, tilting his head in thought, and then turned to Harry.

"Do you know the significance of Halloween?" he asked, and Harry shook his head. "Magically speaking, the veil between the living and the dead is thinnest at midnight on this precise day. It's a time of death and rebirth, resurrection." He placed a fraternal hand on Harry's shoulder, adding, "It is also the night Lord Voldemort killed your parents; and, I presume, the night he left you that scar."

Harry touched a hand to it, relieved to have an excuse to do so. "This?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "It's quite an unusual scar. Only a curse like Avada could have done it."

"Avada?"

"Avada Kedavra, the Killing Curse. Its use is unforgivable, of course, rarely used. Lord Voldemort was… quite free with it."

The red-slitted eyes flashed behind Harry's eyelids again. For a moment, as Harry looked at Dumbledore, his vision seemed to spark and warp, filling him with a rush of loathing.

Then he blinked it away, painfully unclenching his fists.

"Are you alright?" Dumbledore asked, frowning at him.

"Yes, I'm… I'm fine," Harry said. "But about Tom—"

"Oh, Tom Riddle is long gone, my boy. Lord Voldemort killed him long ago," Dumbledore tutted softly, adding, "He has killed many people, Harry. Your parents, of course—"
A scream.

*Lily, take the baby and go!*

"—but countless others, as well. He is without empathy, you know. Incapable of love."

*Harry, Harry my sweet boy.*

"He has caused so much damage to this world, which was once so free, so beautiful. I deeply regret that you were never able to know life at Hogwarts the way your mother and father did."

*Harry, Daddy loves you—*

"You would have loved this world, Harry."

—*Mama loves you!*

"It should never have become like this."

A flash of red eyes, a scream.

*Lily, take the baby and go! It's him! I'll hold him off—*

*Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy...*

*Please... I'll do anything!*

"And if we'd had more time, perhaps I could have made you understand why this was all necessary —"

*Step aside, girl, don't be a fool—*

The red eyes. They weren't *Harry's* red eyes, he realized, suddenly able to place himself in the dream. They had always been someone else's. The eyes, the rage he felt coursing in his bones… those were someone else's, too. It wasn't a dream at all; not a monster living inside his head, but a memory of one.

That was it, Harry suddenly realized.

That was how Theo had known.

It hadn't been the whole time. It had only been when Harry confessed that he, too, had seen Lord Voldemort that Theo had recognized him for what he truly was. Theo had known he was Harry because they had shared the same nightmares, the same fears. Because for a lifetime, they had been haunted by the same ghosts.

He had lied, yes, but not about everything. He'd lied to see Harry free, then; to cut him loose.

An idea formed in Harry's head, solidifying like a pulse: He had to find Theo. He wasn't what these people thought he was. He wasn't a hero, and he had to leave here, leave all of this before it was too late, and—

"Unfortunately," Dumbledore said with a sigh, "this has all gone on long enough."

Harry blinked, Dumbledore's hand tightening sharply on his shoulder.
"What?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Harry," Dumbledore said kindly, "but I'm afraid neither can live while the other survives."

Then, before Harry could say a word, he felt himself sucked into the vacuum of the night sky, hurtling out of orbit to free-fall madly into space.
Death of a Con Man, Part IX

Theo stumbled a little out of the pub, a bit more capable now of understanding Sirius' incurable proclivity for drink. Sure, maybe it wasn't the best use of time, but it certainly did something. Turned the volume down. Made the sharpness of the pain duller until he felt nothing, or at least a little less.

He licked some spilled firewhisky from his wrist, tasting Tom's skin beneath his tongue. Harry, whatever. No, he'd remember him as Tom. Tom, yes, god. Tom was very, very good. He tasted better than this whisky. He tasted like the first time Theo had run from Aurors, or like how it felt to rob a rich man blind. He tasted precisely like the sensation of proving someone wrong or discovering a lucky break. Like the sickle he'd forgotten he'd left in his pocket when his belly was empty, or the vacant alley that could lend an escape. Tom wasn't the opulence Theo had been born with; not the decadence his father had known. Tom tasted like the bittersweet fortune of this is it, I finally have nothing—only to find the universe had offered up one more reason to keep going. One more trick up its sleeve.

Fuck, Theo loved the con. He loved it. It tasted like freedom. Tom, Tom, don't stop.

No, his brain cells reminded him, tragically left alive despite his fervent attempt to poison them. Not Tom. Harry.

Theo looked up at the night sky, kicking aimlessly at it.

"I found him," he said loudly. Elsewhere, someone pulled their coat tighter around them, hurrying away from the delirious vagrant who was yelling at the sky. "HEY!" Theo shouted to the stars. "Did you hear me? I found him," he said, stumbling on a rock to land flat on his back, staring blearily up.

"I found Harry Potter," he muttered to himself. "The Chosen One." He nearly swallowed his tongue, or some other lump in his throat. "He will rise again," he mumbled, before resuming his attention on the night sky.

He drew over the stars, squinting one eye and tracing shapes. Sirius had known all the constellations and resented teaching them, but he had done it at Theo's insistence.

"He will rise again," Theo said, connecting the dots of Ursa Major, Orion's belt. "The Dark Lord will be waiting," he said, and then stopped.

_The Dark Lord will be waiting._ His father said in his mind, snarling it in his usual mania. _Find one, find the other—_

_Just wait, Nott Senior ranted in his son's ear. Just wait, Theodore! It will be Samhain, when the veil is thin, and the Dark Lord will be waiting._

_Find one, find the other._

"Neither can live while the other survives," Theo registered from his father's voice, and
immediately shot upright.

"Keep back, sweetheart," cautioned a passerby, nudging his frightened girlfriend away from Theo. "People always go mad on Halloween, I don't know what it is about it—"

"Fuck," Theo said, stumbling to his feet and nearly knocking into the man on the road. "It's fucking Halloween, isn't it?"

"You're drunk," the man said disapprovingly, and Theo shook his head.

"Not for much longer," he determined, digging in his coat pocket for the vial of sober-up he'd so lyingly claimed not to have before apparating out with a pop.

When the tightness left Harry's chest, he straightened to find himself on soft earth. Too soft. His knees buckled slightly and he struggled in his lingering vertigo to turn towards Dumbledore, who had released him, peering around.

"I thought for certain he would be here," Dumbledore murmured, holding out his wand. "All the prophecies suggested it would be in this place, on this night."

"Where are we?" Harry asked him, uneasy now. "Is this…"

He trailed off, registering the presence of headstones, and shivered.

Okay, so. The old man had taken him to a cemetery.

That was…

Not ideal.

His scar seared with pain as a voice inside his head registered with a high, clear sound.

"Kill the spare."

Dumbledore whipped around, pivoting with his wand out, but it was too late. There was a flash of green light, so quick Harry barely processed it, and then Dumbledore fell to the ground in a heap, glassy eyes unblinking.

"Jesus fuck," said Harry, leaping back and falling onto the sodden earth, scrambling back in a panic.

"Ah, reunited at last," said a voice, the sound of it so familiar Harry might have thought it was his own. "And now you finally know the truth."

Harry struggled to his feet, or tried to, but found himself unable to move, locating a hooded figure coming towards him with a bundle in his arms. The man, or whatever it was, set the bundle down carefully beside a headstone and flicked his wand, illuminating the name on the stone.

**TOM RIDDLE**

Harry swallowed, uncertain, as the next motion from the hooded figure shot out like rope, binding Harry's limbs to the stone. He seemed in a hurry to accomplish something; after ascertaining that Harry was secured in place, the figure in the cloak—who was panting, shallowly—rolled out an enormous cauldron, beginning to prepare something. A stew? Were wizards cannibals?
"Who are you?" Harry asked, and the face beneath the cloak—ratlike, but somehow familiar—looked up, and then quickly away. "Wait a minute—it's you," Harry registered, frowning. "You're… you're in the picture, the one Sirius has, with J—" He stopped. "With my… my dad—"

But the hooded man rushed back to the bundle on the ground, ignoring him altogether.

"It is ready, My Lord," the man said, and then Harry heard the voice again; high and cold, and resonating from somewhere inside his head.

"Do it now, Wormtail."

The man unrolled the cloak, revealing its contents, and Harry fought the compulsion to vomit. It was hairless and scaly-looking; a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face, flat and snakelike, had a set of gleaming, red-slitted eyes.

A man with red eyes? Theo asked in Harry's head. Narrow, cold, cruel?

Step aside, girl, don't be a fool—

Lord Voldemort.

This…

Harry frowned.

This was Lord Voldemort?

It couldn't move on its own, whatever it was. Wormtail, who seemed to be a servant of some kind, placed it in the cauldron, obviously up to something troubling. He removed a bone from the grave, mumbling some sort of chant to himself; then he took a knife, the glint of it reflective with moonlight, before slicing at his own arm, and delivered an entire hand into the cauldron as Harry bit back a mouthful of bile, certain he was going to be sick.

Wormtail turned to him with the knife and Harry fought the ropes, skin singeing where they touched. How many times had his instincts reacted when he was in danger? Almost always, but against someone with a wand, they seemed to be of no use. He struggled, unexpectedly powerless, while Wormtail sliced at his arm, careful not to lose the blood before he could drip it into the cauldron.

Even with a literal stab wound, it was difficult to focus on the pain of his arm compared to the pain in his skull, which was ricocheting around in his head. His scar was excruciatingly painful, growing more so, and Harry felt rather than heard himself scream as Wormtail shouted, zealous with devotion, "BLOOD OF THE ENEMY, FORCIBLY TAKEN, YOU WILL RESURRECT YOUR FOE!"

It was blinding, deafening; sparks emanated from the cauldron to shoot towards the blackened night sky, glinting like starlight and then dissipating into a thin, hazy mist. Harry's head pounded, the pressure so painful he felt certain his own skull was about to burst open, and then, abruptly, the haze of enchantment cleared.

Rising through the fog was a man, tall and skeletally thin, emerging from within the cauldron. His silhouette only seemed human for lack of other species for comparison; from a distance, only one thing was clearly visible.

A pair of red-slitted eyes.
"Lord Voldemort," Harry choked out, tearing the name from his lungs, and the thing—the man, whatever it was—gave a smile so cold it stopped his breath in his throat.

"Welcome back from the dead, Harry Potter."

"Hey," Theo said, apparating into the Burrow on Sirius' instructions and looking around wildly for Harry. "Where is he? Is he still here?"

The crowd of celebrating people around him turned with obvious suspicion, eyes narrowing as they registered his identity.

"Well?" Theo demanded, and regrettably, it was Snape who pushed toward him through the crowd.

"You're not welcome here, Nott," Snape warned in his lifeless monotone, but Sirius was quick to shove him aside, reaching Theo with a look of concern.

"Nott, what are you doing?"

"Where is he? Where's T-" Theo broke off, shaking himself. "Harry, where is he?"

"Harry? He's just—" Sirius glanced outside, then frowned. "He was just outside with Dumbledore, but I suppose they must've wandered off—"

"He's with Dumbledore?"

Theo's heart pounded. Of course it was Dumbledore. He didn't want Harry Potter back, he wanted Lord Voldemort dead. There was a difference, and he would have only needed one to unlock the mystery of the other.

How had he done it?

"Theo?" came Draco's voice, reaching Sirius with Hermione at his side. "Where've you been? I thought—"

"Why Tom Riddle?" Theo said suddenly, turning to Hermione, who looked startled. "He was fixated on that name, wasn't he? Why him?"

Hermione frowned. "Well, he was the only wizard that T- Harry knew about, wasn't he? So, naturally it was—"

"What did you know about him?" Theo pressed her. The others, gauging Theo mostly uninteresting, had returned to their revelry; only he seemed to feel the urgency at hand.

"Dumbledore, Hogwarts—was that all he knew?"

"Essentially, yes," Hermione said, doing Theo the favor of at least concentrating on his request while the others wandered away. "He disappeared when he was a teenager, that's all we know. Though, we did find his m-" She stopped, looking at Draco. "Muggle?" she asked. He nodded, and she continued chattering away. "Right, so, his muggle birth certificate, and his father—he was named after his father, did I mention that?—anyway, we found his father's death certificate, too. His full name was Tom Marvolo Riddle—"

"Marvolo," Theo echoed, and Sirius set a hand on his shoulder.

"Nott, you reek of whisky," he said under his breath. "What's going on?"
But Theo was thoroughly distracted.

"What a bizarre fucking name," he muttered. *Tom Marvolo Riddle.* "Not Thomas?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I thought that was a bit strange, too, but it was all strange, so—"

"Marvolo's the name of that Gaunt fellow," Draco said. "It's in the book, isn't it?"

"Book?" Hermione asked him, curious.

"Yes, the book. Every pureblood family has one. The last of the Gaunt line ends there," Draco explained, "and his son, Morfin, died in Azkaban."

"Does that actually help, though?" Theo asked doubtfully, and Draco shrugged.

"Too weird a name to be a coincidence," he said.

"Regardless of what you suspect, the boy is with Dumbledore," Snape cut in, which Theo ignored. Unfortunate but predictable that Snape didn't seem to be the partying type, choosing instead to intervene where his hooked nose didn't belong. "He couldn't possibly be in safer hands, so if that's all—"

"What could Lord Voldemort have to do with Tom Riddle?" Theo interrupted, turning to Hermione. She hadn't liked him much, but at least she wasn't an idiot. "There must have been some reason all this led you here. Anything you can think of?"

Hermione considered it. "Only that it sounds like a bit like an anagram," she remarked, tilting her head. "The two have all the same letters."

Theo waved a hand, dismissing it. "That definitely doesn't h-"

Theo broke off, blinking.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Did you say his father's death certificate?"

Lord Voldemort advanced toward Harry, who recognized the sensation from his nightmares; the impending victory, the buzzing sense of triumph.

"At last," he murmured, and Harry struggled again to find a weakness in his restraints, hoping that some friction or tension might leave room for some magical reaction, or possibly a magic-less escape. "We finally meet again, Harry Potter."

His red eyes flicked down to Dumbledore. "Pity," he sighed, "I'd have liked to do that myself. Still, it's what he deserves. An unceremonious death for an unremarkable man."

Then he turned back to Harry, tilting his head.

"So, you're the boy who survived my killing curse," Lord Voldemort murmured. "I've seen inside your head so many times I've often wondered what you might actually look like."

"I thought I was possessed," Harry said. An odd time for confession, but it was at least a distraction.

"Well, muggles have a way of understanding absolutely nothing," replied Lord Voldemort, giving Harry another once-over and then flicking his attention to the grave, which Harry followed. "So,"
Lord Voldemort said, fixing his eyes on the corpse below their feet. "You called yourself Tom Riddle, I hear."

"I know you killed him," Harry said, struggling not to recall who lay in the grave, and to his surprise, Lord Voldemort gave another high, cold laugh.

"No, no, you stupid boy. I mean yes, I did, but not the one you're thinking of."

He flicked his wand.

"Don't you see?" he murmured, conjuring the letters TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE in the air and then waving his wand, enchanting them. "You and I have been two sides of the same coin for so long, Harry Potter," he mused, permitting the letters to rearrange themselves.

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

It hit Harry with repulsion so strong he gagged.

"You mean I—" It was bitter, impossible to swallow. "All these years, I've been—"

"Using the name of the man who killed your parents? Yes. A delightful irony, isn't it?" Lord Voldemort said, laughing again, and this time, Wormtail, his servant, laughed uncomfortably beside him. "And now, of course—"

He slashed his wand, freeing Harry from the ropes until he stumbled forward, landing on his hands and knees in the dirt.

"—look how we've ended up," Lord Voldemort murmured, raising his wand the way Harry had seen it so many times inside his head; outstretched, held steady, followed by the green light. The same green light that had struck Dumbledore minutes before. The same green light that had killed his parents.

"Goodbye, Harry Potter," said Lord Voldemort, aiming his wand as Harry hastily rose to his feet, staggering to the side and struggling to run.

Then, to his surprise, there was the sound of a low, audible pop.

"Hey, motherfucker!" came a voice, followed by a yelp from Wormtail. "That skinny dickhead is mine."

Theo wasn't sure what it said about the wizarding world that Hermione Granger's ability (remarkable, if a bit mundanely muggle) to identify about twenty anagrams for any given word was the reason for his arrival at the elder Tom Riddle's grave in time. The others, Sirius and Snape included, had been arguing amongst themselves about Dumbledore's unquestionable authority, but Theo wasn't about to linger unnecessarily on what felt like a highly irrelevant detail. He stunned the cloaked man the moment he apparated and hurried to reach Harry, shouting the first thing that came to his head.

"You," hissed Lord Voldemort, who looked somehow slightly more disgusting than Theo remembered, but basically the same. "You're Nott's son!"

Theo aimed a curse that dissipated mid-air, suggesting, much to his dismay, that perhaps the Dark Lord had not become so powerful for lack of duelling skills.
"Your father would be ashamed of what you've become—"

"Oh, good, excellent," Theo said, dodging the green light that shot towards him. "That was rather my aim, actually—"

Voldemort threw another curse and Theo ducked behind a grave, conjuring a hasty shield charm as the rubble of stone rained down overhead.

He heard another spell aimed somewhere else; probably at Harry.

"HARRY," Theo shouted blindly, "RUN!"

His shield charm was blasted through with another spell; he barely managed to roll away in time, out of breath already. He raised his wand again, conjuring the most explosive thing he could think of.

"Confr—"

"Avada Kedavra!"

Theo scrambled away, army-crawling on his knees and elbows before managing to gain the momentum for a running start, panting as he floundered upright. A blast directly in front of him sent his wand flying out of his hand and he cursed aloud, caught by a spell that singed the side of his coat.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck—"

"You're a disgrace to everything your father was, Nott. Now, step aside and let me finish this—"

"No," came Harry's voice, and in the moment the smoke cleared, Theo looked up to find Harry's silhouette standing in front of him, blocking him from the path of Lord Voldemort's wand. "If it's me you want, then kill me. Leave Theo alone."

Theo's breath caught; he spotted his wand and lunged for it.

"No, wait," he gasped, scrambling to his feet to shove Harry aside and aiming a spell, any spell, for any place Voldemort was or might have been. "Harry, don't—"

But it was too late.

There was a flash of green light, and for a moment, Harry Potter seemed to float.

Then he fell limply backwards, collapsing into Theo's disbelieving arms.

Harry tumbled backwards for a long time before he realized he was flying, or something like it. Acting on instinct, he managed to slow his fall, controlling it, before landing gently on his back, finding himself once again inside the room from his dreams, his nightmares.

His memories.

The face of a woman with red hair appeared above him, her green eyes lighting up at the sight of him. Beside her, a man appeared, his black hair rumpled, glasses crooked. Harry realized he was lying inside some sort of child's cot.

"Harry," said the woman, reaching down to touch his cheek. "You brave boy."
Harry blinked, struggling to sit up, and frowned between his parents, unsure what he was doing there.

"Am I…"

He stopped, shrinking back as he realized there was something in the cot beside him. It was thin and huddled up for warmth, shriveling to a grotesquely bundled mass of skin and bone where it lay whimpering beside him.

"Fucking shit," Harry said, scrambling out of the cot until he spilled over onto the floor, where Lily and James Potter cheerfully sat down beside him.

"He's definitely your son," James said to Lily. "Got your mouth, doesn't he?"

"Shut up, James," Lily replied, turning back to Harry. "Are you alright, sweetheart?"

"Uh," Harry said, frowning. "Well, that depends."

"Are you worried you might be dead?" Lily asked sympathetically, and beside her, James gave a comforting nod. "It's okay to talk about it if you like."

"Well, it's just, um. It'd be sort of unfortunate if I were dead… currently. Don't get me wrong, I'd love to chat with you," Harry hurried to assure them, "it's just…"

"Well, seeing as you're maybe deceased, it's probably an emergent situation wherever you popped in from," James guessed. "Right?"

"Right," Harry confirmed. "I just got murdered, maybe."

"Oh no," Lily said, frowning. "Voldemort?"

"Yeah," Harry said, as Lily and James exchanged a look. "So anyway, am I dead?"

"I don't think so," James told him, shaking his head. "It seems like you're in some sort of in-between place, actually."

"Really? Weird," Harry said. "So I could just…?"

"Go backwards? I think you could, yes," Lily said. "Assuming you're James' son, you're probably stubborn enough to insist the universe send you back, anyway."

"Assuming he's my son?" James echoed indignantly, which Lily and Harry both ignored.

"Okay, it's just that I have to save Theo somehow," Harry explained to her. "But—"

He stopped, taking a long, hungry look at her.

"But I'd really like to talk to you," he confessed, turning to James. "Both of you."

"Eh, plenty of time for that later," James assured him. "Tell Pads and Moony to behave, and stab Wormtail for us."

Lily reached out, taking Harry's face between her hands, and smiled widely.

"Mummy loves you," she said, stroking his cheek. "Dad does, too, but that's less important."
"Thank you, Evans," James said, "but she's right. We're very proud of you, Harry."

Harry was fairly certain that if he spent one more second with them he wasn't going to be able to leave. He tore himself away, heading for the door and the stairs he knew so nightmarishly well.

"Oh, wait," he recalled, pausing in the door frame to look over his shoulder with a frown. "I don't exactly know how to use any magic, and I don't have access to a wand. Any ideas about how to kill a Dark Lord?"

"Wing it," James suggested. "See how it goes."


They waved back, James' arm slipped around Lily's shoulders, and Harry took off down the stairs, throwing the front door open and permitting himself to be swallowed up by the starlit sky outside.

The moment Theo caught Harry's unmoving body in his arms, he felt a roar of fury leave his lungs, his wand rising of its own accord.

"You bastard—"

The green light flashed from the edge of his wand, ricocheting from whatever defensive spell Voldemort had used against him. The Dark Lord returned with something else, something meant to keep him at bay, like a body-bind curse or leg-locking; Theo stumbled, but only long enough for Harry to fall from his arms. Within seconds, he had regained use of his limbs, taking off at a run.

He dove, sliding, behind another of the headstones, aiming a curse as he went. That time, Voldemort struggled to repel it. The angrier Theo got—unable to process the idea that Harry could possibly gone; unwilling to believe those lungs had emptied, and in Theo's own arms—the more potent his magic seemed to be. Not that it was any easier to duel; Voldemort threw spell after spell, curse after curse. For whatever reason, be it Theo's rage or something else, nothing stuck for long, and Voldemort let out a roar of frustration, shattering headstones at random as he went and sending Theo flying backwards from the force of his explosions. Theo's wand, the victim of an errant spell, flew from his hand and was immediately crushed under heavy stone, leaving Theo to swear quietly, seeking out some other weapon.

There were no hiding places left by the time Voldemort had finished his destructive tantrum, sending every headstone shattering within the circumference of his fury. Theo sprinted back to where Harry was—determined, at least, to prevent Voldemort from doing any further damage—but skidded to a halt, discovering with alarm that the body was no longer where he had left it.

"What the—"

Behind him, there was a loud, piercing scream, and Theo pivoted sharply, finding that Harry Potter, somehow alive and upright despite dying in Theo's arms, was burying a knife into the side of Lord Voldemort's neck.

Voldemort staggered away, clawing at the handle, and collapsed to his knees, leaving Harry to stand above him, staring coldly down.

"That was for my family," Harry said, waiting until Voldemort had fallen onto the crimson-stained ground before yanking the knife free.

"This," Harry said, eyeing the blade for a moment before looking up at Theo, "is for him."
He drove it into Voldemort's chest, puncturing a lung.

"And this," Harry said, dropping to his knees and holding up Voldemort's head, watching his eyes struggle to remain open. "This is for me."

He took the knife, tilting his head to look at Voldemort's face, and carved a thin, unmistakable lightning bolt into the side of the Dark Lord's temple.

"Goodbye, Tom," Harry Potter said quietly.

Then, as he released the Dark Lord's body to let it collapse motionless to the ground, the Boy Who Lived rose slowly to his feet, the knife glinting like a scepter in his hand.
Death of a Con Man, Part X

Concluded.

Harry matched Theo's stride to cross the rest of the distance in what remained of the graveyard, meeting him between the triangle of bodies that was Wormtail, Lord Voldemort, and Albus Dumbledore.

"Sweet knife," Theo said, and Harry glanced down at it, shrugging before tossing it away.

"Pulled it from that one," he said, pointing to Wormtail. A fairly simple task in the moment, really. Nobody ever expected a dead man to rise.

"Used it on him first, I see," Theo observed.

"Yeah. It's possible I might be a murderer now," Harry said, holding up one hand to eye the blood staining his knuckles, saturating his skin in a viscous red-black. "Sort of unfortunate news, really," he remarked, smearing the back of his hand over his jeans until the mess of crimson became mostly unidentifiable, blending with pre-existing filth. "Can't be good for my reputation."

"What," Theo guessed, "as Chosen One?"

"No," Harry said. "I meant more like law-abiding citizen."

"Ah," Theo said, clearing his throat. "Well, that's something I've never been, so…"

"So you could probably teach me a few things."

Theo blinked, betraying a rare glimpse of surprise, before permitting his mouth to stretch slowly to a smile.

"Interested in the art of the con, Harry Potter?" Theo mused. "An interesting career choice for the Boy Who Lived, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, say I wasn't the Boy Who Lived, then," Harry suggested. "Maybe I could be the Boy Who Lived Just Conveniently Long Enough Until He Died."

"Catchy," Theo said.

"You know, if you think about it," Harry said, "the whole thing was kind of a con, wasn't it? I've been living a lie for seventeen years. Feels at least a little con-adjacent."

"It's pretty elaborate, I'll give you that," Theo commented. "Though, I think faking your death would be the real con, if that's what you actually have in mind."

"It is." And it was.

"Planning to go somewhere?"
"Well, you're a fugitive," Harry pointed out. "Coincidentally, I happen to be one, too."

He watched the green in Theo's eyes travel from astonishment to relief, then back to its perfunctory state of nonchalance.

"Ah," Theo said. "So this is a partnership, then?"

The motherfucker was going to make him say it. Typical.

"You're down a partner," Harry pointed out, "aren't you?"

"True. Though," Theo said, shrugging, "speaking of accomplices, he might come looking for me soon. I rushed off in a bit of a hurry."

"Ah. Well." Harry stepped forward, reaching out to brush his thumb over the tally marks on the side of Theo's neck, then traced the bird's wing down the ripped material of his shirt, following it to his shoulder. "I don't suppose there's any chance you want company, is there?"

He expected a gratuitously vague remark; sure, if I must, but don't get carried away, we're still not friends.

But was Theo who took the step Harry had been sure he'd have to be the one to take.

"I should just let you go," Theo growled, but in the end, one stride was all it took. Theo kissed him, half-gasping into his mouth when he pulled Harry closer, and the two of them stumbled over the rubble of broken headstones, graceless with haste. "I should tell you to go off and be whatever the fuck you're supposed to be in this world without having me around to cock it up, but god, fuck, I just—"

Theo broke off, swallowing as he met Harry's forehead with his.

"I can't," he managed to confess, shaking his head. "I couldn't leave you, and fuck it, I don't want to."

If Harry Potter knew one thing, it was that Theo Nott would never add to the tally on the side of his neck so long as he could help it.

"I saved your life twice already," Harry reminded him, tightening a hand around the back of Theo's head to drag his lips up a second time, resuming the kiss that had finally proven him wanted. "Far as I can tell, what I'm supposed to be doing is keeping your dumb arse alive."

"Yeah, well, if we make it to tomorrow, remind me to thank you," Theo muttered. His hands gripped tightly to Harry's hips, devoted in his irreverence, and Harry rolled his eyes, curling his palm possessively around the unshaven bone of Theo's cheek before shoving him brusquely away.

"Come on," Harry said, beckoning to the road. "Let's get out of here before we're convicted for something. Property damage or some shit."

Theo considered it for a moment before bending to pick up Voldemort's wand, using it to leave a sprawled message over the shattered graves.

"Technically," Theo informed him, "I think we'd be strong contenders for desecration, which is new for me."

"Impressive," Harry said, observing him with interest. "Missing any of the other big
transgressions?"

"Eh, bit of a germaphobe, so lots of the unsanitary crimes are out. Plus, I try to avoid collusion. Don't play well with others, et cetera," Theo said, rising to his feet to cast some sort of symbol overhead.

Harry pointed to the wand. "Theft?"

"Been there, done that, and I certainly don't fucking want this one," Theo scoffed, tossing the wand back down beside Voldemort. "Just alerting Aurors."

"Responsible," Harry remarked. "Even, dare I say… exemplary?"

"I have my moments. Hey, ever used magic for a card trick?" Theo asked tangentially, gesturing Harry to the road and picking his way through the rubble. "Seeing as I have recently lost my wand, I'm somewhat limited," he clarified, adopting a reasonably brisk pace, "but if we do it for long enough in Covent Garden I can buy you dinner."

"Depends what the card trick is," Harry replied, falling into step beside him. "I once set one on fire with my mind."

"Well, duh, easy. That's a non-verbal *Incendio*.

"It has a name?"

"Of course it does," Theo said. "There's so much to teach you."

The road was stretched out in front of them, the sun beginning to break over the tops of the nearby village.

"Well," Harry said, the tips of his fingers brushing Theo's knuckles, "I've got time to learn."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Draco asked, turning to Hermione as they approached the graveyard. It was swarmed with Investigatory Aurors; she probably wasn't allowed to be at an active crime scene, but what was the point of being in charge if he couldn't bend the rules a little from time to time?

"It's pretty gruesome," he warned.

She gave him a stunningly doubtful glance. "I'm not afraid of gruesome."

Unsurprising. He'd come to understand she wasn't afraid of much at all.

"Well, still. Watch your step," Draco advised, lifting the enchantments around the cemetery and beckoning her forward. "There's rubble everywhere."

Hermione nodded, gingerly stepping over one of the broken headstones. "Did you find Harry?" she asked, following him, and Draco shook his head.

"No. Not Theo, either. Though, someone had to have cast the Auror charm, so…" He trailed off with a shrug. "I assume I'll run into Theo again at a party seven years from now or something."

"Did they leave anything behind?"

She wobbled unexpectedly on the uneven ground, hand shooting out for stability, and Draco caught
her arm.

"Just this," he said, gesturing to the message on the shattered headstones.

**IN THE FACE OF DARKNESS, THE CHOSEN ONE WILL ALWAYS RISE**

"Keeping the myth alive?" Hermione guessed, tilting her head.

"Something like that. There was a bit more, too," Draco said, bending down to reference something he'd removed before the others arrived. "Sort of a lengthy manifesto about how Sirius Black was disavowed by the Dark Lord and therefore innocent, et cetera, et cetera. Plus one or two things about my ineptitude as an Auror."

"Naturally," Hermione agreed, nodding.

"But," Draco said, rising to his feet and turning to her, "in any case, they made sure the world would be a different place than they found it. Or, at least, it will be someday, anyway."

"Ah, so it's a perfect ending for the saga of the Chosen One, then," Hermione remarked, stepping over the open grave to reach him.

She had been remarkably easy to fall for, all things considered. It was highly possible Theo had known as much when he arranged their meeting, or had at least suspected Draco of being the sort of Auror who'd fall for someone so clearly made of trouble. Already, Draco had observed the countless things Hermione could do without a wand when she thought he wasn't looking, proving her dangerous enough he suspected he ought to keep an eye on her.

Both eyes, in fact, as a matter of public safety.

And both hands, when the situation called for it.

He kissed her, obliging his investigatory talents, and slid an arm around her shoulders, surveying the unrepentant mess Theo had left behind.

A perfect ending? Perfect was a strong word, as was ending.

"Nah," Draco said, brushing his lips against her forehead. "It's a perfect beginning."

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Chapter End Notes

a/n: Thank you for reading! A lot coming soon: The Commoner's Guide to Bedding a Royal is ending and a new dramione, a soul scars AU with a very prominent side pairing you may recognize, will soon begin. In personal news, my next collection of fairytales will be released with the start of summer. You can find mermaids and devils and Bachelor murder on my website or tumblr, and I will probably be back here soon! More Disney AUs to come, plus a VLT sequel for le Tour.
Le Vélo Pour Deux

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Le Vélo Pour Deux

Pairing: Mulcibery (Darian Mulciber x Caleb Avery), Nottpott (Theo Nott x Harry Potter)

Universe: sequel to Vive Le Tour (Ch. 75)

Rating: M for language, sex

Summary: When his impulsive public retirement from professional cycling prompts accusations of suspected doping, six-time Tour de France winner Darian Mulciber returns for a final season as the lead for Team Slytherin, unceremoniously replacing his former teammate-turned-rival, Caleb Avery. Despite their previous reconciliation, Caleb's demotion as a result of Darian's return prompts conflict once again, pitting the two against each other as unexpected contenders for the yellow jersey. Meanwhile, Team Slytherin sprinter Theo Nott is back for redemption, but an up-and-coming Team TMR rider threatens to take what's rightfully his: Harry Potter's green jersey, along with Harry Potter himself.

(Mr Blake has requested I continue drawing attention to the sport of professional cycling, so... here we are! In honor of the first day of the Vuelta de España. Thank you for continuing to indulge my niche sport AUs, as they do not appear to be stopping anytime soon.)

STAGE ONE:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Ladies and Gentlemen, hello and welcome to this year's Tour de France broadcast, hosted once again by myself, Lee Jordan, and my colleague, Luna Lovegood!"

Luna: "Wisdom is for those who seek it!"

Lee: "Absolutely on the money, Luna, as always! Ever an epicenter of excitement in the cycling world, this year's Tour is particularly controversial. Even more so than last year, Luna, wouldn't you agree?"

Luna: "Does a thestral have horns?"

Lee: "I have absolutely no idea! However, I can say that the sudden return of Darian Mulciber to Team Slytherin has been quite the shocking development. For those who were not aware, Mulciber abruptly announced his retirement from the sport of professional cycling at the end of last year's Tour, when he clinched the coveted yellow jersey for his sixth Tour de France win. Unfortunately, due to a variety of suspicions, Mulciber's retirement was ultimately thought to be the result of rising allegations of doping; specifically, the use of salbutamol, a stimulant designed to treat asthma, as well as suspected transfusions, which increase white blood cell counts for maximized recovery. Any thoughts on the scrutiny of Mulciber's blood, Luna?"

Luna: "Genocide is not the answer!"
Lee: "So true! In any case, Mulciber's effort to disprove his critics while performing amid frequent voluntary blood tests has led to his pursuit of the grand tour triple crown: the pink jersey of the Giro d'Italia, the yellow jersey of the Tour de France, and red jersey of the Vuelta de España. Having already won this year's Giro, Mulciber is here seeking his record-breaking seventh Tour win—the second and most coveted jewel in the crown of professional cycling."

Luna: "Be vigilant with talking crowns!"

Lee: "Always, Luna, always! Adding to the controversy surrounding Mulciber is, once again, Caleb Avery. Mulciber's former Team Slytherin domestique-turned-rival, Avery is, astoundingly, Mulciber's teammate once again."

Luna: "I ship it!"

Lee: "Naturally, ships ahoy—though, we can expect that the position of domestique, the official term for a rider seeking exclusively to aid his team's leader rather than winning the Tour outright, is not a position that will satisfy Avery for long. After a celebrated win in last year's UCI World Championship, rumor has it Avery expected to be Team Slytherin's lead for the first time in his career, only to be replaced by Mulciber's quest for redemption. After sitting out the Giro in favor of recovering from his celebrated classics season, this will be Avery's first appearance as Mulciber's teammate after nearly four years. A spot of trouble for them, eh, Luna?"

Luna: "Never tickle a sleeping dragon!"

Lee: "Yes, quite right, so true. Meanwhile, the sprinters have their own battle for the green jersey, don't they? Returning this year is the incumbent points winner Harry Potter of Phoenix-Hogwarts, along with a particularly hungry Theo Nott of Team Slytherin, who recently won the coveted title of Paris-Roubaix champion during the spring classics. Of course, the most interesting new contender for the points competition is young Draco Malfoy of Tom Riddle's Team TMR, don't you think?"

Luna: "Don't say his name!"

Lee: "Hard not to, considering all the buzz around Malfoy's unprecedented transition to professional road racing! Already a World Cup champion in cyclocross, a discipline of bike racing that shares more parallels with mountain biking and criterium racing than with road, Malfoy is a new favorite for the green jersey, given his impressive technique and talent for sprinting. He'll certainly be one to watch for—and even, dare I say, Potter's primary competition? What do you think, Luna?"

Luna: "I think Malfoy is up to something!"

Lee: "Ah, well, aren't we all, Luna! Aren't we all."

OoO

I can feel Caleb's anger radiating at my back like waves; little or not-so-little ripples of loathing, resentment that waxes and wanes like tides. I've come to know every inch of him, every modulation of his mood, every timbre of his thoughts, and I would be an idiot or a monster not to see the rage he aims at me in silence, conserved in all his aching limbs.

I know how hard he trained. I was there; beneath him, above him, beside him. In bed with him, for all those nights. I know all his soreness, all his pain. I was there, and now he's here, and neither of
us can forget that in the time between it was me, and my choices, that brought us to where we are today.

He hasn’t spoken to me in months. I raced the Giro alone. I used to wake up to the sight of Caleb’s golden hair and his grinning face, but now his voice is reserved for perfunctory replies; little barbs of spite nobody but us knows how to translate. It’s even lonelier, really. Even now, only Caleb understands me.

They put us in a room together again, misunderstanding everything; knowing how close we used to be and presuming we’d keep up the myth—teammates to rivals and back again. Everyone loves a good story, and we are undoubtedly that. People cheered from the crowd when they saw us, the two coveted Brits, Caleb with his Welsh flag and me with my Union Jack. It was the first time anyone has cheered for me since one year ago, when I last wore the yellow jersey of the Tour de France.

Caleb doesn’t understand what the last year has cost me; it comes down to that. He doesn’t understand, and how could he? He wasn’t the one slandered and ridiculed, left sleepless and emptied at night. No one called Caleb a liar. No one threatened to take Caleb’s hard-fought wins away. The blood Caleb shed and the muscle he burned are still safely his, because only champions deserve the venom of undisguised hatred. He doesn’t understand that, so is it my fault? Yes, maybe, I don’t know. I just know that I can’t take it anymore; the disintegration of the legacy I built. It’s like taking from the marrow of my bones, or the anchors of my soul, or the beat of my dispirited heart.

I can feel his frustration with me; I can lick it, bittersweet, from the tip of my sorry tongue, because I know what I’ve done to him. I know what I’ve done just as well as I know how he tastes, so maybe for that, he’ll forgive me. Maybe he won’t.

But what Caleb doesn’t understand is that I will end this race in yellow if I have to drag my broken body across the finish line myself.

-oO-

Eleven Months Ago

"Watts for days," Caleb said, falling onto the sofa in Darian's flat and gleaming up at him, eyes closed, face coated in a sheen of sweat. "King of the mountain," he declared, ostensibly about himself.

"These are the watts of a king?" Darian asked drily, lifting Caleb's hand to glance at the bike computer held between his fingers. "Personally, I have my doubts."

Caleb smiled without glancing up. "Will you not bend the knee, Darian Mulciber?"

"I will not," Darian informed him, letting Caleb's arm fall with a roll of his eyes. "If I were still racing, you'd be in trouble." A pause, and then, "Though I suppose no one else would believe it."

He moved to step away, heading for the kitchen when Caleb's hand stopped him, sliding around his calf. "You're still letting it get to you," Caleb observed, one blue eye floating open. "You promised you wouldn't."

Darian permitted himself to pause, watching Caleb's hand float under his shorts, reaching up the fibers of his hamstring. "Letting what get to me?"
"Darian." Caleb shifted, resting his lips against Darian's thigh. "You've been tested for drugs a million times. We all have."

"I know." It came out more gruffly than he intended. Yes, he hadn't technically failed a test, but neither had plenty of other cyclists who were later revealed to be doping. Lance Armstrong wasn't reviled for cheating, but for lying.

And that's what they thought Darian was doing now.

"They're dropping the salbutamol case," Caleb reminded him.

"I know." An inhaler, for fuck's sake. All of this was over a fucking inhaler.

Well, that, along with anecdotal behavior some people called suspicious. Times Darian would not let other people in his hotel room, for instance. But unfortunately, that part wasn't a truth to which they were entitled, and neither was it something Darian had the liberty to reveal.

"All your teammates can attest to it, Darian," Caleb continued. "And the transfusions case will—"

"Get dropped eventually, I know." Even so, there would always be enough doubt to cast his career in the shadows. People would whisper *yeah, he won, but... did he?* And they would have no reason not to. The denial of an athlete had meant nothing countless times before. "I know."

"Then why...?"

"I'm not, Caleb. I'm just—" Darian broke off, trying not to lose his temper. Again. God, all he wanted to do was get on the trainer and ride until his legs went numb, or his pedals fell off. One or the other. "I don't want to talk about it, Caleb, I'm just saying. I turned over all my training numbers, and—" Another pause. "I just don't know what else to do."

Not exactly.

*Darian, it's Armando again; listen, give me a call back—*

"You've already done everything you can, Darian."

Again, not exactly.

*With all this unpleasantness going around, I think I've got a way to help us both.*

Darian sighed, and Caleb sat up, tugging him down.

"Come here," Caleb said, his voice too rough for a whisper, and yes, he was sweaty from his training ride, and yes, he tasted like diluted Powerade and salt, but Darian still went limp at the familiar shape of his mouth, letting himself be pulled down to the sofa.

"It'll pass," Caleb said, and god, fuck, damn it, why did he taste so good? What magic did he have that Darian could never fight? He wanted to sulk, to throw things, at best to calmly discuss in rational tones that it wouldn't just *pass*—but Caleb's golden curls were slick beneath his fingers and Darian was ravenous, bone-weary and starved.

He kissed Caleb back and stopped talking, as Caleb had clearly wanted him to do, and then he slid down Caleb's torso, letting his breath saturate the thin material of Caleb's kit.

*It's not that we're not sure about Avery. But Darian, he's not you.*
Later, Darian would tell himself that was why he hadn't told Caleb about the phone call. His mouth was busy doing other things.

**STAGE TWO:**
Flat Stage
*Audio Broadcast*

Lee: "Well, day two is certainly off to an interesting start, what with a surprising stage win by Alexander Poliakoff of Team Durmstrang! All eyes are on Darian Mulciber and Team Slytherin, of course, where leadout man Caleb Avery has set Team Slytherin on a path to victory. I daresay it's sure to be a fascinating road to Paris!"

Luna: "Bouillabaisse!"

Lee: "Bless you! Ah, that never gets old, does it? Well, once again we have a long ride through the French countryside, and—OH, MY! OH MY WORD, DAY TWO OF THE TOUR AND ALREADY HARRY POTTER IS ON THE BREAKAWAY!"

Luna: "The Boy Who Broke Away!"

Lee: "My god, and… yes, yes it is, it's Draco Malfoy right behind him, followed by Theo Nott! Team Slytherin will have to work hard for this one, and—AND THERE GOES AVERY, taking off behind Nott in his World Champion stripes! But where is Darian Mulciber?"

Luna: "Denial!"

Lee: "Not a river in Egypt, that's for certain! It appears Mulciber is blocked in by the members of Team TMR, left behind by his domestiques as Avery slips away to join the chase with the sprinters. My, my, this is quite an interesting turn indeed!"

**oOo**

"Avery, what are you doing?" Dippet's voice crackled from his earpiece. "Nott's going for the sprint points and you left Mulciber behind you. He's boxed in."

As if Caleb had ever not known where Darian was. "I'm protecting the team lead, Dippet. That's my job."

The response was predictable. "Your job is to ride for the team lead, Avery. Nott doesn't need your help."

"I'm not here to help Nott, I'm here to make sure Lestrange loses." He glanced up at Theo's back, riding in his narrow slipstream until the time came to switch places. Caleb had no interest in winning a sprint, but it was obvious already that he had the legs and Darian didn't. If Darian was still tired from the Giro, that was on him. Caleb had trained for this, and trained hard. He had something to prove that Darian's six wins and countless lies weren't going to take from him. "What do you care, Dippet?" he muttered into the radio. "So long as someone crosses the finish line in your logo, it's just more publicity for you."

To that, Dippet couldn't disagree. "Fine. Stay with Nott if you're going to stay up there," he said. "And you'll be the one to explain this to Mulciber."

"I won't have to," Caleb said, unzipping his jersey and preparing to take his turn at the front of the
breakaway; leaving the peloton, and Darian Mulciber, behind. "He already knows why."

oOo

I fell in love with Darian Mulciber because he's a winner. I fell out of love with him for the same reason. For other men, winning is something they do, but for Darian, it's all that he is. He defines himself by it, and I didn't understand until now what that truly meant, though I should have. In the end, Darian will never love anything as much as he loves winning, and for that I have taught myself to despise him. I learn it a little more painfully every day.

It's not as if I can't understand him. I know what he is, and that he takes his value from the championships tied to his name. I'm not so blind that I can't see the way who he is and what he's accomplished are inseverable from one another, but still; I thought I fit in there, somewhere. I thought after everything I'd done, one day he would return the favor. For every win I earned for him, I felt sure he'd repay me somewhere down the line. I thought it would be soon, if I'm being honest. If I'm being really honest, I thought it would be now.

But it turns out everything I thought was wrong.

I thought he loved me. Sometimes, the way he looks at me, I thought I was more valuable to him than anything else he'd ever held. He has a gift that way, a sense of focus he transmits with a glance, with a brush of his fingers, and in his hands I was everything, infinite. Not a cyclist, not even World Champion, but the actual world itself, the universe as a whole. That's how deluded I was, or how persuasive his touch is. With Darian Mulciber's hands on you, you feel like you're where everything begins and ends; and I was that, until I wasn't.

The truth is uncomplicated, stunning in its simplicity: I loved him and he lied to me. I thought he loved me more than cycling, more than the Tour, but that was just another lie among so many others. No wonder it was so surreal, loving him and being loved by him. No wonder it felt like a fog, like a sun-soaked daydream, awash in a gleaming haze of white sheets and tangled limbs. Nothing I had with him was ever what I thought it was, though I understand now that I should have seen that sooner. I've always known what he was.

That I was ever anything to him at all was only in my imagination.

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**STAGE THREE:**
Team Time Trial
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "The team trials are always an interesting event to watch, particularly given the conflicts within Team Slytherin! While all time trials are a race against the clock, the team trials allow for the best individual riders to carry the team as a whole. Of the seven permitted team members, the time goes to the fifth member—meaning that while two members are allowed to get dropped by the rest of the team, the first five will all receive the same time."

Luna: "The Sorting Hat decides!"

Lee: "Yes, without a doubt! The strongest sprinters will typically carry the team at first, leading the other members and dropping out as the riders with more endurance continue on to the finish. In the case of Team Slytherin, we would expect to see sprinter Theo Nott lead out in advance, eventually dropping off to let stronger GC riders like Darian Mulciber pull to the finish."

Luna: "The end is nigh!"
Lee: "Too true, and of course there's typically no telling what will become of Caleb Avery, a GC contender known to struggle with time trials. But it looks like there's a fire under him today as he takes over Nott's lead, and... yes, despite an excellent performance from Team TMR and Team Phoenix-Hogwarts, it looks like Team Slytherin will have the day! A predictable outcome, perhaps, though there's some drama off the road, isn't there?"

Luna: "The game of love is afoot!"

Lee: "Well, who's to say for sure, but it certainly looks that way, doesn't it? A curious rumor has been spreading about Team TMR newcomer Draco Malfoy and early points leader Harry Potter, who do seem... particularly combative, don't you think?"

Luna: "They should meet for a midnight duel!"

Lee: "Right after Mulciber and Avery, who don't look especially thrilled with their win! Avery keeps his yellow jersey from yesterday's breakaway, but we all expect to see a smashing return from Mulciber once we reach the mountain stages."

"You know," came a voice behind Theo, "maybe instead of heroically getting dropped by your teammates you could try actually winning one of these things for yourself."

Theo didn't have to turn to know it was Harry Potter's voice lingering at his back, so he continued scrutinizing his derailleur. "I'm sorry, didn't your team lose the time trial, Potter? Weird flex, but okay," he said, rising to his feet.

At that precise moment, of course, Draco Malfoy chose to saunter by, blond hair slicked back with his jersey half undone. "Nott," he acknowledged, nodding to Theo before turning with an irreverent smirk to Harry. "Potter," he said, and while it was technically no different from his greeting to Theo, there was a definite sense of mockery to it, as if Harry's entire entity were something laughable.

Theo watched Harry stiffen. "Malfoy. Not much of a showing today, was it?"

"Resting for a real sprint tomorrow," Draco explained with a shrug, turning to walk backwards away from them. "That win yesterday was narrow, Potter. If you ask me, you've finally met your match," he added, and jogged away with a laugh, prompting Theo to bristle.

"What a smug motherfucker," Harry muttered under his breath, green eyes on Draco until long after he'd disappeared. "Who is he?"

Theo's old training partner, not that it mattered. "CX guy," Theo said. "He's won three Cyclocross World Cups in the last three years."

"Yeah, but no grand tours." Harry frowned, still staring after Draco. "You know him, then?"

"Sort of." They had been close once, though they hadn't spoken much since Theo made the switch to road four years ago.

"Well, he's a fuckin' asshole," Harry said, turning back with the look of supreme irritation that used to be reserved for Theo, though why he suddenly felt such a nostalgia for it was completely incomprehensible. "Anyway," Harry continued, leaning against the Slytherin trailer and bending down to speak near Theo's ear, "are you planning to actually race me this year, Nott, or should I..."
just plan to leave the green jersey on while I wine and dine you in Paris?"

For some reason, something in Theo that usually danced when Harry spoke snapped instead.

"I should get some sleep," he said gruffly, locking the derailleur back in place and rising so sharply he nearly knocked into Harry's chin. "In case you forgot," he snapped, "there's more than one sprint contender for you to worry about tomorrow."

Then he turned away, forcing himself not to look over his shoulder as he went.

 oOo

I want it to bother me less, seeing Caleb in yellow. This isn't the first time he's worn that jersey before I took the lead, and I've never begrudged him those stage wins in the past. I should be proud of him—in fact, I am proud of him. But something in my soul wants that jersey like I've never wanted it before; something in me needs it, compulsively, and that sense of craving is mixing in with something so much worse.

All I can think about when I see Caleb standing there in yellow isn't how hard I've worked to earn that jersey, even though I can feel in my bones how much it has already cost me and how much it will cost me still. It isn't the jersey itself that distracts me; that blinds me and enrages me and fuels me. I wish it were, but it's not.

With Caleb's back to me, all I can taste is the bitterness of knowing it's him I don't deserve.

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STAGE FOUR:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Today's big event is the finishing sprint, where we can expect to see Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter battle it out for a stage win. The sprinters are already taking their respective positions; you can see Nott on the left of the screen making his way to slip past Potter's elbow—but OH, LOOK! AVERY IS JOINING THE SPRINT!"

Luna: "Stop fighting Mum and Dad!"

Lee: "My, my, what a controversial choice, leaving team Slytherin leader Mulciber behind for the second time this Tour! Certainly we know Avery's a talented sprinter but still, I didn't expect… LOOK AT THAT, IT'S A PHOTO FINISH! Nott blocks Malfoy from the win, very questionable sportsmanship there but AVERY AND POTTER ARE BATTLING IT OUT, AND… YES, IT'S AVERY! CALEB AVERY TAKES THE STAGE BY A HAIR FROM HARRY POTTER!"

 oOo

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Caleb let out a tight-lipped sigh, turning at the sound of Darian's voice. "I had the legs, Mulciber —"

"Of course you had the legs!" Darian snapped, furious. "Everyone has the legs, Avery, it's fucking day four! But are you going to have the legs in the Alps? In the Pyrenees? On day sixteen, Caleb, are you going to have the legs then?" At Caleb's silence, Darian shook his head. "You think I don't see what you're doing?" he demanded. "You're only forcing me to push too hard too soon, Caleb,
and it's going to cost us yellow in the end. You're not trying to beat me—you're trying to bury us both!"

"Then pull rank, Mulciber." Caleb's teeth flashed white against the glint of sweat on his lips as the words fell with irreverence, tumbling into the space between them. "Go ahead. Tell me you're the team lead. Say it to my face, Darian: that it's my job to come second to you, and it always has been. Say it and I'll back down."

Say it, Darian thought. Do it. Salvage the race.

Say it and shut him up. *I'm the lead, Caleb. You answer to me.* Say it or you die on that bike, chasing after a reckless madman, trying desperately to play a game you cannot win.

Darian opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Not even the ghost of a defense.

"Didn't think so," Caleb said brusquely, turning away under the weight of Darian's silence.

**oOo**

_Eleven Months Ago_

"Darian."

Caleb's voice was a whisper, his touch soft in the dark as he slid into bed with Darian. He didn't force open the curtains; didn't pull back the sheets. He just crawled in, one hand sliding over Darian's hip, and gave him a pulse of pressure.

"Darian. Come here."

Darian turned unwillingly; only because this wasn't what he'd promised Caleb. When they'd started over, promising each other to try again, Darian had been a champion six-times over. Now he was just a man in bed until well past noon, staring into nothing and wondering when he'd become so easy to defeat.

Caleb, on the other hand, was fresh out of the shower. He'd probably done sixty miles already that morning, maybe more. It took as much effort for Darian to turn towards him as it used to take for him to climb a mountain, though the reward this time was greater. Caleb caught his mouth in a kiss he wasn't ready for, the effort of his swallow sticking in his throat.

"Get back on the bike," Caleb whispered to him. "Drown out the noise." He kissed Darian softly, then harder, one hand wrapped around Darian's jaw. "Get back on your bike and don't stop until you feel like you again."

"Caleb, I—"

Another kiss. Another. Again and then another, until Darian was on the verge of tears, feeling wanted and unworthy in the same unsteady stroke.

"Don't let them win," Caleb said. "You're a winner, Darian, so don't let them win."

The voicemails from Dippet were still living in his phone, unanswered.

"Okay," Darian said, letting Caleb's hand snake into his boxers. "Okay, Caleb. Okay."
Lee: "Now, given the tension between members of Team Slytherin, we obviously have to discuss the controversy surrounding team lead Darian Mulciber, whom none of us expected to see this year after his sudden decision to retire at the end of last year's Tour. What do you think about Mulciber's doping scandal, Luna?"

Luna: "Blood prejudice!"

Lee: "So true, and at this point, what do you suppose we can expect from his performance?"

Luna: "Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater!"

Lee: "The same can be said for yellow jersey winners! Albeit, of course, today, the Slytherin team member in yellow is Mulciber's one-time domestique, Caleb Avery. Now, for those unfamiliar with the sport, let me reassure you the yellow jersey is rarely determined by the first week. Mulciber is less than a minute behind in contention for the lead, but Avery is certainly looking very strong. Will Avery burn out in the early stages, leaving the jersey to Mulciber, or will Avery's aggressiveness on the bike win out in the end?"

Luna: "I'm starting to think I'm the only one who can see nargles!"

Lee: "Oh, Luna, you're so right. Always a mystery, but never a dull moment at the Tour de France!"

oOo

"Stay out of the red, Avery," came the voice of Dippet through the headpiece. "Today's for the sprinters and the climbers; don't waste your energy."

Caleb fought an eye roll, which the cameras would surely catch.

"I told you once and I'll tell you again, Avery," Dippet continued. "If you force Mulciber to push too hard, you'll both lose."

"Mulciber already won the Giro. He's tired."

"So?"

"So I'm not going to ride at Mulciber's pace. If he can't keep up—"

"Jesus, Avery," Dippet's sigh was muffled. "Just stay out of the fucking red, do you hear me? Do I need to explain the fucking science to you? If you blow past your threshold heart rate you won't recover for tomorrow. You'll get dropped in the Pyrenees, or even sooner. You'll fucking lose, Avery, and Mulciber will, too."

"I'm a goddamn professional cyclist, Dippet, I know how my fucking heart works," Avery snapped. A few feet away, Mulciber looked up, catching the sound of his voice, and then looked back down, concentrating on doing precisely what Dippet had asked.

Stay out of the red. Stay in your lane. Keep to your limits.

Avery inhaled once, counted to three, and exhaled.
"Slow down," Dippet said.

Avery set his jaw, forcing a swallow.

"Fine," he said, not looking up from his wheel.

oOo

Darian is better than I am. I know that. I've always known it. But he's also tired, he's overtrained and overworked, and he's suffering. I know that, too. I watched him do it. He's smart on the bike, calculated, but he doesn't take risks. He never gives more of himself than he's asked, and now that he needs to be aggressive, he may not have the energy to do it.

The truth is he's not scared of me. He knows my limits because he's trained with me; because he's on my team. If he wants to crush me, he can find my threshold power and hold me there until I crack.

He's not scared of me, but the truth is I am scared of him, because I know that when Darian Mulciber chooses to be brave he makes himself fucking unstoppable. He is blindingly, dazzlingly unstoppable, so for me it's a simple matter; a gamble. If I win, then I win yellow, and it's Darian's own fault for not chasing me when he had the chance. If I lose...

But of course I won't lose, will I? Because I know him.

In the end, I am just another risk Darian Mulciber wouldn't take.

STAGE SIX:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Caleb Avery's departure from Team TMR at the end of last year's Tour was one of many surprise decisions, leading to the selection of Rodolphus Lestrange as the team's new leader. Of course, much attention has been paid to the team's new sprinter, Draco Malfoy—both since his surprising appointment to the team, and since rumors first began circulating about his curious antagonism towards green jersey favorite, Harry Potter."

Luna: "Time to tail him with a house elf!"

Lee: "Or a stage win, perhaps! Malfoy is getting into position here, putting in work along with Nott of Team Slytherin and of course Harry Potter, already securely in green. Now, normally cyclocross riders get lost on world tour teams, given their skillset and the necessity of supporting the team lead, but—OH, LOOK! MALFOY TAKES OFF, MUSCLING PAST POTTER TO BREAK OFF FROM THE FRONT OF THE PELOTON! MY OH MY, MALFOY HAS CERTAINLY THROWN DOWN THE GAUNTLET!"

Luna: "The Hand of Glory, one might say!"

Lee: "Yes, glory indeed at the Tour, and will it come down to just the two, or—OH! NOTT HAS JOINED THEM! IT'S A THREE-MAN BREAKAWAY WITH NOTT LATCHING ONTO MALFOY'S WHEEL!"

oOo
"Glad you could join us," Draco said, glancing over his shoulder and chuckling as Theo caught onto his slipstream. "Is it too much to ask you to shoulder some of the work, or…?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry snapped, cutting Theo off before he could speak. "If I have to hear your voice all the way to the finish I'm going to crash this bike into the barriers myself."

"Always so touchy, Potter," Draco mused, tutting softly and passing Harry a wink. "You know, if we're going to spend the next twenty kilometers by ourselves, we may as well get comfortable. You know, talk about our hopes and dreams, our weaknesses, our mortal enemies, how you're going to handle your post-race concession interview once I've won the stage—"

"Jesus fuck," Theo muttered, pushing his wheel past Draco's and taking the lead, leaving the two of them to follow. They could switch if they wanted, but he'd rather do most of the work than listen to them bicker like children.

He caught the shadow of Harry's Bianchi pulling up beside his and glanced down, resolutely focused on his power meter.

"Are you going to talk to me or what?" Harry asked him.

"What's to talk about?" Theo said, shrugging.

"Look, you asked me to come to Milan-San Remo and that meant something to you, I get that now," Harry said under his breath, "but I'm a world tour racer, Nott, I don't do spring classics. I was training for the Tour of California and—"

"Potter," Draco scoffed, "what are those, DT 350 hubs? Seriously?"

"Bloody Christ, Malfoy," Harry shouted, twisting around on his bike. "Do you ever shut up?"

They were going to be in the breakaway for nearly a third of the stage, which meant plenty of camera time. Certainly plenty of time for the motorists nearby to capture Harry and Draco yelling at each other and write up a new version of the same articles they'd been printing since the Tour started: Is there something… especially charged about Malfoy and Potter's interactions?

Is it just us, commentary suggested, or does it seem like there's something more than just competition between the two best sprinters in the Tour?

"Nott," Harry growled, "are you listening to me?"

"No," Theo said brusquely, and then he put his head down, focusing on his wheel in silence until Harry sighed, falling back until it was time for Draco to take the lead.

---

I am exhausted.

I've never been this tired before. Sure, I'm getting older. Sure, I just won the Giro, I'm less fresh than the rest of these riders, but it's more than that. These grand tours, with all the stages and travel and shitty hotel rooms, they leech the energy from me, sap me to dullness, and I was an idiot to think it would be better with Caleb at my side. It was hard to imagine anything being worse than coming back alone for the Giro, which was the worst tour win of my career. People hate me now; they don't trust me. I'm not beloved like I was. I thought even Caleb's silence would be preferable to open suspicion, but I was wrong.
I can't sleep at night. I'm barely two feet away from him and his steady breathing; from the solemn beat of his heart. I lie awake and toss and turn and I wake up sore and miserable, tired and drained and alone. Caleb leaves without saying anything. How is he sleeping? How can he do it when I'm right there, bleeding out beside him? I deserve to lose this Tour.

It's such a pity so few people ever get what they deserve.

STAGE SEVEN:
Medium Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Well, after yesterday's sprint finish—just a hair's breadth between the front of Draco Malfoy's wheel and Harry Potter's handlebars, with the win narrowly going to the rider from Team Phoenix-Hogwarts—I think we can all agree that the first week of this Tour has been filled with surprises!"

Luna: "Usually Gryffindor wins!"

Lee: "Oh, without a doubt, and now we're starting to see some contention for the yellow jersey. Today Lestrange from Team TMR has the lead, but it looks like he's unlikely to keep it. Mulciber and Avery are nearly tied, only fifteen seconds apart for their overall times, but—OH LOOK, MULCIBER'S TAKING OFF! Mulciber is going for the points in this climb, and it looks like… yes, it looks like Mulciber will have it! Darian Mulciber takes the lead and the yellow jersey for the first time in this Tour!"

oOo

"Well," came a voice behind Caleb, "can't say I'm surprised. You turned down the lead on my team for… what, another excuse not to win?"

Caleb went rigid at the sound of Tom Riddle's voice, pivoting slowly to find him smiling.

"Such a pleasure to see you fall," Tom remarked, striding over to reach him. "I know I said no hard feelings but truly, I'm delighting in watching you suffer."

He had never said any such thing, but of course that wasn't the point.

"You know, when Dippet told me he was taking Mulciber back as the lead, I thought… my god, and to think that's what brought Avery running to me in the first place. He must hate Mulciber right now. But then I thought… actually, I don't think he does."

Caleb stiffened, saying nothing.

"You know what I think?" Silence. "I'm not stupid, you know. You were fine until I threatened Mulciber. And now that I watch the two of you more closely, I get it. I thought you lacked a killer instinct, but it was really just… one person you couldn't kill, wasn't it?" More silence. "But now, suddenly, you can. Now that you're on his team and it's the objectively stupid choice, of course. In fact it's so stupid it can't be logical, and if it isn't logical, then it's… emotional."

Silence.

"You don't hate Mulciber," Tom murmured thoughtfully. "But he doesn't feel anything in particular about you, does he?"
Caleb swallowed, and Tom smiled.

"Enjoy your Tour, Avery," he said, patting Caleb's shoulder and putting on his sunglasses, whistling as he made his way over to his team car.

-oOo-

Eleven Months Ago

"I think, in the end, we all want to know about the secrecy, Darian. Reportedly, there was no accounting for your whereabouts on multiple occasions, even by other team members or by the team doctors. Several times you were insistent you not be disturbed inside your rooms. Surely you understand, given the allegations against your peers—"

"So all of a sudden wanting my privacy means I was doping?" Darian's voice interjected on Caleb's screen. "Nothing about my performance reflects that. My results were consistent. I passed every test."

"And the salbutamol?"

"I have asthma. The levels were already deemed permissible by the UCI."

"There are rumors that Team Slytherin's reluctance to name their new team lead suggests you have plans to come back for one more season. Is that to compete again under a microscope, I imagine? Something you intend to do to clear your name?"

"They're just rumors," Darian's voice said flatly. "I can't speak to Dippet's intentions, or to his plans for the rest of his team."

Caleb jumped a little, hearing the sound of approaching footsteps.

"What are you watching?"

Caleb turned, tucking the iPad away. "Nothing," he said quickly. "I was just—"

Darien tilted his head, eyeing the obvious shape of the iPad sticking out behind the sofa cushion, and Caleb sighed.

"I could have vouched for you," he grumbled, holding up the video of Darian's interview, and Darian nudged him over on the sofa, sitting beside him.

"You would have implicated yourself," Darian commented, and Caleb scoffed.

"In what? You weren't doping and neither was I, and if they want to compare our results—"

"That's not what I mean."

Caleb fell silent.

Darian cleared his throat, and then said, "My career is over, Caleb. Yours isn't. We both know that if people found out, you could lose your spot on the team. You said yourself you could lose your sponsors."

"Yeah, well, Dippet hasn't finalized my new contract yet," Caleb said, opting for a joke, "so maybe I don't even have a spot on the team."
After a moment, he turned to find Darian staring at him.

"What?"

Darian opened his mouth, then closed it.

"You've been training hard lately," he said eventually. "You must have that shoulder knot again."

"Yeah," Caleb confirmed, grimacing. "It's a fucking disaster, I swear, it never fully goes away—"

"Let me take care of it." Darian gave Caleb's t-shirt a tug, slipping it over Caleb's shoulders, and then leaned forward, brushing his lips across the line of Caleb's neck. "Breathe in," he cautioned, his voice a low apology, and Caleb, oblivious to the pain that was to come, tranquilly closed his eyes.

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**STAGE EIGHT:**

Flat Stage

*Audio Broadcast*

**Lee:** "Well, today we have a very familiar sight: Darian Mulciber in yellow, with Team Slytherin rallied around their leader. Times remain close, with Caleb Avery down by thirty seconds and Rodolphus Lestrange about a minute and a half behind, so just about anything could happen!"

**Luna:** "Cars could fly!"

**Lee:** "Absolutely, possibilities are endless! There's been a bit of grumbling of course, as there are many who consider Team Slytherin and Darian Mulciber in particular to be too calculated, lacking any excitement or passion. What do you think, Luna?"

**Luna:** "I think passion is precisely the problem!"

---

About a year ago, for almost a month, I had the perfect life.

I had retired just before the Vuelta and Caleb hadn't yet been signed to a new team, so we spontaneously stayed a couple of extra weeks in Paris. I rented a flat, taught Caleb to make a proper omelet, ate too much cheese and nearly got fat, and every night I fell asleep beside him. I thought this is it, this is all I'll ever need, this is all I've ever wanted. We took shitty city bikes out to the countryside and collapsed beside a vineyard, drunk on wine and possibility. When I think of golden hour I think of his lips, the way they were stained with merlot and mocking laughter. The way they touched mine and bled into them, the taste of him meant to live forever on my tongue.

We tried living together. We were apart frequently; cycling has always been a matter of travel. Training, competition, it's all just constant motion, eternally grinding gears. I had the UCI allegations to deal with; the trial. Caleb, meanwhile, was back with our old team, traveling all over Europe except for the American races, the weeks training in Colombia. He came and went, and I stayed still.

To sleep, I used to close my eyes and reach for those golden hours in Paris, thinking of the wine on Caleb's lips. Sometimes it would work. Sometimes not.

It isn't working now.
"Are you really not going to talk to me?"

Darian didn't know what did it; the last straw didn't even seem to be a straw at all. One minute he was watching Caleb get ready for bed and the next he was flinging accusations at him, as if he were entitled to them. There wasn't a lot of logic to this thing.

Then again, there never had been.

"What exactly do you want me to say?" Caleb replied, his voice hollow and dispassionate and no different from the mechanized sound of the tour bus GPS. "You've got your jersey now. What the fuck do you want from me?"

"How about an explanation?" Darian demanded, realizing it was a mistake even before Caleb pivoted sharply, anger in his clear blue eyes.

"Did you give me an explanation, Darian?"

Darian swallowed, determined not to back down now.

"You know why I did it. It was just one more season, Caleb, one more, and then—"

"Bullshit."

"You know what?" Now something had snapped. Darian could feel it, the way it burst, shattered, seeped down from his mouth to his chest. "You're punishing me. I get it. You think I'm not punishing myself? I don't even want to be here, I don't want to do this—"

"But you are. And you did."

"I fucking know I did, but—"


Darian's breath quickened. "Caleb—"

"No, don't talk to me. Don't fucking talk to me." Caleb's voice was breaking when he took the steps across the room, cornering Darian by the door. Shitty hotel room after shitty hotel room; that was all the gloried Tour de France had ever been, and now Darian's shitty self was trapped between the shitty bathroom and the shitty bed frame. Caleb was swearing at him, and all Darian could hear was how madly Caleb wanted to tear his chest open, to leave him gasping for breath on the floor.

"Don't say a fucking word," Caleb warned, and it was quiet that time, like a whisper. He was standing there, close enough to love or to stab, and Darian, idiot that he was, stared blankly, unsure whether he wanted neither or either or both.

By the time Caleb kissed him, yanking him painfully close, Darian was sure it was punishment. There was no way Caleb wanted him, not now, not after he'd ruined everything—certainly not while Caleb was calling him a liar—so obviously it meant Caleb had wanted him to suffer, and now, vengefully, he had finally found a way. Darian kissed him back, brutal with desperation, savage with remorse, but it was over far too quickly, Caleb slamming him back and stalking away.

"You fucked this up," Caleb said hoarsely, "and I will never forgive you."

Then he turned off the light and fell into the bed, and it was over.
Darian stood alone in the dark and shivered, suddenly cold, the taste of merlot fading like the sunset from his tongue.

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**STAGE NINE:**
Flat Stage: Cobbles
*Audio Broadcast*

**Lee:** "Well, this was certainly a good day for Theo Nott to make up some sprint points! Pleased to see him get a win. Nott's one of the stronger cobbles riders, given his recent win in Roubaix, but Draco Malfoy was very close, wasn't he? Of course, now that the race has gone on for the team leaders to try to make up some time, he and the other sprinters will fall back with the peloton… though, at the moment Malfoy appears to have dropped back to the team car! Do we suspect a problem with his equipment?"

**Luna:** "I have a feeling his equipment is working fine!"

**Lee:** "Hm, well you can see here he's speaking to someone in the car… perhaps the team doctor, by the look of it. There's been plenty of rumors, of course, that Malfoy's been having trouble with his hamstring—"

**Luna:** "That's what the kids call a network-friendly euphemism!"

**Lee:** "—but his challenge to Harry Potter for the points classification seems, dare I say, personal. What do you make of the rumors Draco Malfoy was seen on the floor of Harry Potter's hotel room last night, Luna?"

**Luna:** "Midnight duel!"

**Lee:** "Oh Luna, you always liven things up. It's been a duel on the cobbles today, that's for certain!"

---

**oOo**

*I don't know why I kissed Darian last night. I only know I couldn't not, because the words I wanted to find were so impossible, so distant and inaccessible, that there was only one way I could find to communicate something to him; to confess everything to him, all the things inside of me he doesn't deserve to hear. To take the dagger from my mouth and shove it down his throat.*

*Because the truth is I want him, I always want him, no matter how much time passes or how senselessly he betrays me or how destructive I am to myself. I love him, I loved him, and part of me wants to continue being loved by him, even when he does it badly. Even when he loves me poorly, when he does it without talent; when it's the only thing he ever does with such a brutal lack of skill.*

*Why did I do it? Because I love him. Because I hate him. Because I see his exhaustion and I want it to burn him down, and then I want to lie down in his ashes and tell him the truth: that I'm sorry, that I'm angry, that I resent him, that I understand him.*

*That he hurt me, and therefore I need to cause him pain.*

*How can anyone begin to say any of that in words?*

**oOo**
"You know, if you just adjusted your stem, you might not have so many problems."

That was Darian. See a problem, diagnose it. Nevermind that adjusting the length of Caleb's stem meant adjusting everything, starting from scratch with his seat post and his pedals and hell, even the clip on his shoes.

"Just fix it, would you?"

Caleb knew precisely what Darian was going to do: drill that elbow of his into Caleb's shoulder knot until his eye watered from the pressure; until he had to remind himself to breathe through the pain, wondering how someone could inflict so much torment on another human being and finish by saying there, you're fixed, all better.

Instead, though, Darian leaned forward and slid his thumb over the place the knot usually was, where Caleb's muscle was coiled up with swelling. He brought his lips to the tangle of nerves and tension, soothing it with warmth.

"You know how I feel about you," Darian said, his voice muffled into Caleb's shoulder. "Right?"

Caleb leaned back, meeting Darian's forehead blindly with the back of his head.

"Yeah," he said.

Sometimes Darian did things like that. Made him get comfortable. Caleb had never really intended to be—he had come here expecting to suffer—but then Darian was being tender and gentle and Caleb hadn't asked for it, wasn't prepared. Sometimes he thought, I'll just stay here forever. I will never move again; I will never need to move again. This will be where I live, right here with him, because I cannot fathom a world where this is not enough.

But then Darian shifted, stabbing his elbow into Caleb's knot without a breath of warning, and Caleb let out a growl of anguish, surprised and half-angry and sharply, agonizingly sore.

"Just remember that," Darian advised, "the next time I hurt you."

And Caleb said nothing, because his eyes were watering; because breathing was difficult; because he was in pain.

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**STAGE TEN:**
High Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Today will be a difficult day for the climbers as we enter the high mountain stages! This is sure to be a punishing climb; you can see Darian Mulciber in the yellow jersey being protected by the members of his team, including Caleb Avery. Do you think we will see an attack from Team Slytherin, Luna?"

Luna: "It's not their fault snakes are cold all the time!"

Lee: "So true, and of course we can see the leaders on Team TMR pushing Lestrange to the front of the peloton, so there will surely be a showdown between the GC riders today. Obviously Darian Mulciber is a favorite to win the Tour, but what else might we expect?"
"Enemies to lovers!"

"Definitely, and it will be interesting to see if Caleb Avery does close that twenty second gap, or if Team Slytherin will focus their energy on beating Team TMR!"

"You're stalking," Theo said as Harry pulled up on his wheel. "This is what they call stalking."

"You're getting dropped," Harry pointed out, gesturing to the distance between them and the peloton. "This is what they call dropping."

Theo ignored him, focusing on his wheel. "Where's Malfoy?"

"Fuck if I know," Harry said, shrugging. "What's your deal with him?"

"Nothing, I told you. He's a cross champion."

"Yeah, and…?"

"And you're points champion," Theo said bitterly, "again."

Harry rode for a moment in silence, reaching behind him for his water bottle.

"Want me to pull?" he said, and Theo gave something like a scoff, only he worried it was more of an exhausted huff.

"I don't need your help," he muttered, though fuck, he certainly needed something, and help seemed like a prime contender. These high mountain days… he wasn't built for this shit.

"I know I didn't come when you asked me to," Harry said. "I know I let you down, okay? I didn't see how badly I fucked up then but I see it now, and if you could—"

"It's not that hard to see what people need, Potter," Theo snapped, because when you spend a perfect night with someone in Paris, you think: Surely it wasn't just me.

Surely they'll call.

And true, maybe you never treated it like anything but a joke while it was happening, but you didn't realize he was the kind of person who could have the perfect night and then not want to have it again. He seemed like the kind of person who overdosed on perfection, who craved it like a drug, so if he didn't call then it was never perfection at all, and that meant you imagined the whole fucking thing. You made the whole thing up in your head, and maybe that was just what he did every time he rode a world tour; maybe he picked out some hotshot sprinter to be his rival, and then when it was over he gave them one night in Madrid. In Pasadena. In Verona.

Carbon copies of a perfect night in Paris.

"Fine," Harry said.

Then he pulled in front of Theo's bike, lingering there until Theo finally latched onto his wheel with a grumble, biting back the gratitude from his tired, dehydrated tongue.

I know Caleb is torturing me on purpose. He didn't look at me again tonight, and now I'm driving
myself mad wanting to be close to him; wanting him to push me away so I won't have to do the work of pulling. I imagine calling for a new room a thousand times, halfway to dialing with my thumb on the pulse of my mobile phone, but in the end I know I can't be anywhere but here. I am tired, I'm empty and worn out and sore. I can't finish this tour without him.

I sleep facing him while he sleeps with his back to me, until finally, I give up. The effort keeping me here is enough to make me sick, and I have to ride the mountains tomorrow. I rise to my feet and shove his duvet aside to climb in bed with him, curling myself around his spine and tucking my knees behind his. I hold my breath, waiting to see if he'll wake, but he doesn't. I bury my face in the back of his neck and breathe him in.

In the morning, when I wake up in his bed, Caleb is already gone.

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**STAGE ELEVEN:**
High Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "It's been a struggle for Darian Mulciber. You can see it on his face, the way he's in a great deal of pain. If he's trying to prove to the world he hasn't been doping, I have to say, I think he's proved it! No man on drugs would look this exhausted, don't you think?"

Luna: "Only if the drugs were really bad!"

Lee: "So true, and meanwhile Caleb Avery looks determined, gritting his teeth through the pain and hanging onto his second place. Not normally a climber, Avery, but this has undoubtedly been his strongest Tour—perhaps even better than last year when he rode for Team TMR. Any speculation on his parting ways with team owner Tom Riddle last year?"

(Silence.)

Lee: "Well, Luna is reluctant to voice what I can only call a horrified grimace, but stay tuned! We're going to recap this morning's stage in about thirty seconds, at which point perhaps she will recover from—"

Luna: "Don't say his name!"

Lee: "Oh good, she's back! Wonderful, carry on."

oOo

Darian was already in the room, changing out of his kit when Caleb came barging in, somewhere between continuing the imaginary argument in his head—How dare you get in bed with me like that! How dare you hold me like you care! I slept like a fucking baby and how dare you, the audacity! Do you know what it's like to wake up in your arms and feel whole again and know it was all a fucking dream howdareyou!—and the silence of spending the whole day slaving over the incline of a fucking mountain (an experience that was mostly a lot of: fuckfuckfuck, shut up legs, fuck), but then he saw Darian there.

Specifically, he saw Darian's head bent, his chin dropped nearly to his chest, using his precious yellow jersey to mop sweat from his forehead as if it were just some dishrag he plucked from the floor. Caleb saw Darian looking like he wanted to vomit into his shoes, or possibly fall to his knees and not get up, worn down by defeat even while he was winning.
Caleb had no doubt winning the Giro had been difficult. Lestrange had pushed Darian hard, harder than he probably wanted to go; calculated Darian, who never did more than he needed to, because he knew how to conserve energy. Careful Darian, who understood how to preserve himself from pain.

Caleb dropped the bag from his shoulder and made his way across the room to have Darian's face in his hands in a matter of seconds, and the moment he kissed him, Caleb felt the energy drain from him and into Darian, jolting him to life.

"This doesn't mean anything," Caleb heard himself say, a faraway voice from a disembodied corpse. His voice was monotonous and strained. "Do you understand? This is nothing. It's just physical."

"Okay." Darian sounded broken. "Yeah, okay, fine."

Then they were kissing again and Caleb was pulling Darian into the bathroom, putting him in the shower, part lover and part mother, part impatient coach. "Get in," he said, and turned the water on, and he watched it pour over Darian's shoulders and thought fuck, he was already breaking eleven months ago and I didn't stop it, I didn't know how.

I watched him fall apart and then I left.

So Caleb stripped down to nothing and got in the shower. He shoved Darian against the wall and got down on his knees, throbbing with heat already.

How many times had he done this? Countless. He could draw the surface of Darian's abs from the tips of his fingers in his sleep. He knew precisely the sounds Darian would make and exactly the way he would return the favor. This, the person standing before him, was a stranger. He was a fraction of the man Caleb used to love. But if he made the sounds Darian made and kissed him the way Darian kissed him, then maybe Caleb could hate him again.

"This means nothing," Caleb said.

Wordlessly, Darian slid his fingers through Caleb's hair.

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STAGE TWELVE:
High Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Things are certainly heating up in the mountains! There seems to be a fire lit under Darian Mulciber today. Together he and Caleb Avery have taken off, dropping Rodolphus Lestrange of Team TMR and also Augustus Rookwood, who will both lose at least a minute in the race for the yellow jersey. A quiet day for the sprinters on the course, minus the ongoing gossip!"

Luna: "Only if you speak Parseltongue!"

Lee: "Indeed, and rumors continue to circulate about arguably the two lead sprinters in the race, though of course we won't hear much from them until tomorrow's flat stage!"

OoO

"Oi," came a voice behind him, and Theo grimaced, glancing over his shoulder to see Draco approaching from the back of the race. "Going a bit hard for a mountain stage, don't you think?"
Theo frowned, gauging Draco's trajectory. "Did you just come from your team car?"

"Glutes are troubling me," Draco said with a shrug, pulling up beside him. "These Alps stages are shitty, aren't they?"

"Glutes?" Theo asked, frowning. "Is that a new thing?"

"Been three years since we trained together, Nott," Draco reminded him. "Not that I'd tell you if I actually had a weakness."

He flashed a pale, silvery smile at Theo, who sighed.

"You're a real shitbag, Malfoy," he said, semi-ample praise, and Draco's smile broadened.

"Hey, what's Potter's deal?" he asked, gesturing to where Harry was bent over his wheel a few riders away. "Has he got some sort of bone to pick with you or something?"

"What?"

"He's always got one eye on you," Draco said. "Look, watch."

Theo glanced over and at precisely that moment, Harry looked up, catching his gaze and quickly turning askance, glaring at Draco.

"I think he's just busy trying to beat you," Theo said.

"True." To that, Draco looked aggressively delighted. "Fucker really hates me," he said, sounding like someone who'd already snatched a prize nobody else could even see.

I probably shouldn't have slept with Darian last night.

Correction: I know I shouldn't have slept with Darian last night. I know it fixes nothing. I should resent the fact that he seems more himself now, like I'm someone he can fuck for good luck when it's convenient. I'm the same as a favorite pair of socks, a favored climbing gear. He's an athlete and I'm his superstition. I know that. I know that's all I've done.

But it didn't come for nothing; it cost me greatly. I spend the day ravenous, starving. It eats away at my chest, burning in my muscles. I want him, I want him, I want him.

I ride hard and barely feel it, knowing I need to finish this stage; I need to be alone with him again. It will cost me everything—again—but I already know I will gladly, bitterly pay it.

The moment the door shuts behind us, he has me in his arms. Soon he'll have his mouth on my neck, traveling down my chest. I'll have my hands on his hips, digging angry crescents into his skin. He'll have me face down on his mattress and he'll come whispering my name in my ear, choking on the sound of the satisfaction I give him. I will bite my teeth into the muscle of his shoulders and he will touch me until I keen with pleasure, choking with pain. Soon he and I will be tangled on my bed, hatefully indistinguishable in parts. He will stroke my hair. I will fall asleep in his arms.

We don't speak a word, because we don't need to.

We know we've both burned all day for this. There is nothing else to say.
STAGE THIRTEEN:
Flat Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Well, it seemed at first that this would be a sprinters' day, but there's been a little bit of a shake-up in the general classification race! Looks like Team TMR rode out an interesting strategy, making their way to the front of the race and pushing the pace to force Darian Mulciber and Team Slytherin to work unusually hard for a flat stage."

Luna: "Potato, potato!"

Lee: "Admittedly, Caleb Avery opened the gates for this particular strategy by exposing Mulciber's weakness! Mulciber is a highly strategic rider, famously so, focusing on his own power threshold and never exceeding it unless it becomes necessary, but this is a faint margin. It seems Avery has the legs to push along with Team TMR even if Mulciber doesn't… so will Avery ride for his team leader, or will he try to take the stage win?"

Luna: "Lovers to enemies!"

Lee: "So true, and—OH, OH MY, and here's our answer! Avery is pushing to the front, ready to compete for the stage win!"

oOo

Caleb makes it hard to let him go. He exists, he lives and he breathes, and just for the enormity of who he is I know I can't release him. I know how unhealthy this is, how toxic and how twisted, that no one has ever hurt us worse than us. Not even the Alps; not even the Tour itself. Nothing has ever made us hurt like us, and still we can't let go. I run my fingers through his golden curls and cling to him, never saying a word outside of Caleb, Caleb, please.

I have to win this Tour, I have to. I have to, and I can't let him stop me. I can't let him push me or pull me. I have to win, even if that means he loses.

But all the same, I can't let him go.

oOo

"So." Darian leaned against the bathroom sink, watching Caleb reach for his toothbrush. "Nothing, huh? No excuse?"

Caleb deliberately applied the toothpaste without looking up. "Why would I need an excuse?"

"You attacked. Again."

"It's a race," Caleb said, pausing with his hand on the faucet. "People attack."

"People do. You don't." Caleb ran the water and Darian stared at him, waiting for something, anything. Some sign he was listening. "So we're done, then?"

"What?"

Caleb put the toothbrush in his mouth, the son of a bitch, and started brushing.

"We're done," Darian said. "Or so I have to assume."
Caleb said something through a mouthful of toothpaste and Darian glared at him. He rolled his eyes, spat it out, and repeated, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why assume we're done," Caleb said with painful condescension, "just because I attacked?"

He glanced up, Darian's pulse quickening when their eyes finally met.

"I told you this was nothing," Caleb said, and though Darian had had his heart broken by Caleb a thousand different ways by now, this one still managed to register. "You're still in yellow, Darian. It's still the Tour. We can fuck if you want to," Caleb said, shrugging, "or we can stop. Means nothing to me either way."

"Fine." Darian turned away, heading for his bed because for fuck's sake, he wasn't a total sadist, but Caleb caught his wrist, yanking him back.

"At least you know that if you win," Caleb said, "it won't be because I let you."

Then he pulled Darian close and, not for the first time, ruined Darian's life with a kiss.

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**STAGE FOURTEEN:**
Medium Mountain Stage  
*Audio Broadcast*

**Lee:** "Well, it's a very tight race for yellow, with the top five GC contenders separated by a matter of seconds! Remarkable, particularly with two riders on the same team. Any thoughts on this mountain stage, Luna?"

**Luna:** "It's the climb!"

**Lee:** "What is that, Miley Cyrus? Beautiful, so prophetic, and of course Darian Mulciber is looking focused in yellow, protected by his teammates. Team TMR will not be able to attempt an attack today, that's for sure! Not with Team Slytherin's command of the peloton. An early breakaway by Krum and Poliakoff has already been caught, so provided Avery does not attack, Mulciber may take the stage win!"

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**Eleven Months Ago**

"Have you eaten?" Caleb shouted from the bathroom, waiting for an answer, but after a few seconds of silence he sighed and made his way downstairs. Darian's London townhouse, the result of his six Tour de France wins, had a gym on the bottom floor, which was the only place Darian could be found if he wasn't still in bed.

"Babe," Caleb said, turning the corner, but paused as he noticed Darian had hooked himself up to the ergometer once again; another FTP test. The third, at least, in three days. Caleb tucked himself out of sight and frowned, watching the sweat drip from Darian's brow onto his handlebars.

Threshold testing was twenty minutes of effort. Full stop, uninterrupted power, balls to the wall for twenty minutes, and it was indescribably worse on a trainer. Caleb had always preferred to do his threshold testing outdoors on some stretch of road; any amount of time was less like hell when you had fresh air and something to look at. Only for metabolic testing had Caleb ever allowed
himself to be indoors and hooked up to a machine, working his heart to its max just to push up against his limits.

But now Darian, a retired cyclist, was doing his third FTP test in three days. There was no way the numbers were getting better. Overtraining was pointless even for an athlete who actually had something to train for. There was no reason for this.

Darian was just slowly going insane.

Caleb closed his eyes, waiting for the buzz of Darian's pedals to stop. It took about five more minutes, and then all he heard was panting. No doubt Darian's heart felt like it was tearing itself from his chest right now; Caleb peered around the corner, eyeing Darian's silhouette, and watched him stare blankly down at his power meter.

By the way Darian's neck had bent with disappointment, Caleb was sure he would be doing another one tomorrow.

"Babe," Caleb called, softer this time, and Darian jumped, startled, whipping around to face him as if he knew he'd been caught. "Hungry?"

Darian stared at him for a second, dazed, and managed a nod.

"Yeah," he said.

Darian was always the better athlete. He did what he was told, and that meant never doing too much or too little. Caleb hated training, finding it to be mostly a nuisance, but Darian took his training plans and his coach's notes and did it all without complaint. He already knew this was excessive. He already knew what he was doing was punishing himself.

So Caleb didn't say any of that.

"Okay," was all Caleb said, beckoning him. "Let's get something to eat."

\[O O O\]

Darian's thinner now. I can feel the way he shrank a little. He feels smaller in my hands.

Darian always felt larger than life to me. How could a man like that—with that much power, with that much capacity for greatness—ever feel small? He wasn't the team leader because he was the fastest in a sprint or the strongest up a climb. It was because he did the imaginable steadily, making his way there over time. He is the kind of man who wins grand tours because he can go harder when another person in his position would, and inevitably does, fail. He can outlast everyone. There is always something left in Darian, some reserve tank of immensity, and even at his most exhausted there is a piece of him that refuses to break.

I still feel it from time to time. This is the same man I loved, just a smaller version. A tired version. That reserve tank is emptying; it's doing it slowly, still rendering him better than most of the riders out there, but it's emptying all the same. I'm grateful for the chance to have something of Darian to resent. I let myself believe the man he was a year ago was frail, incapable of damage, but he was not that, and never has been. He felt himself breaking and he hurt me for it, just to make sure it never happened to him.

For a moment, when he makes me choke down on the rupture of his touch, I almost tell him I love him. For a moment I forget, and I don't see the man who lied to me. I see only the man I have missed, that I've worshipped as much as I've loathed, and I almost say I love you like I used to. My
preferred way of coming was always with adoration on my tongue.

Then I stop myself. I didn't destroy him today when I could have, so I've already given him more of myself than I wanted.

For now, that's enough to help me bite my tongue.

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**STAGE FIFTEEN:**
Medium Mountain Stage
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Well, today is off to an exciting start in the rain! The sprinters once again had an opportunity for points—which of course Harry Potter ran away with, securing his lead for the green jersey. Barring any misfortune, he'll be impossible to beat!"

Luna: "Youngest seeker in a century!"

Lee: "Without a doubt, and now the rest of the day will be devoted to the general classification race. There was a slight push from Lestrange, but Mulciber was able to retain control. He will have the yellow jersey once again, and tomorrow we are back in the Alps!"

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I'm not afraid of Lestrange. I never have been. Someone pushes me every Tour, trying to get the better of me. I've never been afraid of whoever that faceless rider is.

It's Caleb who terrifies me. Will he suddenly take off, leave me behind? Will this be the night he says that's it, no more, I'm done with you forever?

I push and push and push, my hands going numb around my handlebars.

I will lose something. Please don't let it be this race.

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Caleb kissed the back of Darian's neck, making his way lower, lips trailing Darian's spine until he shuddered. Caleb was like that, an expert in touch. His skill on the bike had always been the way he never dropped a chain; he always knew which gear to ride in, precisely when to change. He could feel it the way Darian could not. It was like the universe had a pulse and Caleb was always tapped into it, riding with it, effortlessly in the slipstream of life itself. Darian just pushed back.

He let his head fall forward as Caleb's hands curled around his ribs.

"Fuck," Caleb said softly, lips pressed to Darian's back. "Fuck, I want to hurt you."

Darian closed his eyes. It wasn't as masochistic as it sounded, because Darian could hear the end of the sentence; could feel the things Caleb hadn't said.

Fuck, I want to hurt you.

*But I can't, I can't, I can't.*

He twisted around, taking Caleb's face in his hands, and kissed him with as much anger as he could conjure. Take it then, he thought, tasting the rage on Caleb's tongue. Lash out.
They fell together onto Darian's bed, Caleb fumbling with his pants and scrambling lower until Darian let out a hiss of something; pleasure itself.

And fuck, did it hurt like hell.

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**STAGE SIXTEEN:**
High Mountain Stage
*Audio Broadcast*

**Lee:** "Well, today is a punishing day for all the riders, who are dealing with slightly slick conditions from the rain in addition to the vigorous climbs. Caleb Avery is always fascinating to watch, and he certainly looks to be enjoying himself today, doesn't he?"

**Luna:** "Smiling is one way to show your teeth!"

**Lee:** "And he's certainly got teeth! Both Avery and Mulciber took off in a breakaway joined by Krum and Poliakoff, dropping Lestrange and Rookwood from Team TMR. Looks as if the Durmstrang boys are falling off, and… YES, THERE THEY GO! Avery and Mulciber increase their lead in the GC competition, gaining two minutes on the third place rider, Lestrange!"

"You good?" Caleb asked, panting as he turned to Darian, who gave him a grisly little smile.

"I'm good," he said. "Short pulls?"

Constant slipstream, rapid switching back and forth. That was good. Caleb liked motion, and now that the other two had fallen off it would just be the two of them. They could do things on impulse alone. They would know without asking when the other was tired, just like they knew Krum and Poliakoff wouldn't catch back on. They were fast and unstoppable. They were the greats; two of the best cyclists to ever live, each lucky enough to have always had the other to push.

"You go first," Caleb said, and Darian gave him a look like, *You know I hate the rain.*

"You wear me out," Darian said, but he pulled in front. At the memory of all the versions they had been Caleb caught himself smiling, and rapidly, ruefully, he stopped.

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**Eleven Months Ago**

"Hey. You up?"

Caleb rolled over, squinting at Darian in the dark. "What?"

"I love you," Darian said.

Caleb groaned, raising one hand to his face. "You woke me up to tell me that?"

"Yes."

"Alright." He sighed, letting his eyes fall shut again. "Fine. I love you, too."

"Good."
Darian was quiet for a moment, which led Caleb to believe that he might actually be done. Darian had been acting strangely for weeks, only ever found in his bed or in the gym, so his inability to sleep wasn't really that alarming.

But then Darian spoke again.

"What do you think about us getting married?"

Caleb, frozen, cracked one eye, taken by surprise. "I… what?"

Darian said nothing.

Caleb frowned. "Are you… Darian, are you being serious? Because nobody, you know. Nobody knows about us, and…" And I have a career. I have sponsors. My ability to race depends on me saying, doing, feeling the right things. Loving the right people.

He trailed off, suddenly chilled.

"No," Darian said. "Wasn't serious. Just thought I'd bring it up."

He leaned over, brushing his lips against Caleb's chest.

"Get some sleep," Darian said, tossing onto his other side with a yawn. "Your watts are shit."

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**STAGE SEVENTEEN:**

High Mountain Stage

*Audio Broadcast*

Lee: "With Mulciber's stage win yesterday signaling that perhaps the infighting on Team Slytherin has come to a close, it seems like he'll be difficult to beat!"

Luna: "Like a bludger!"

Lee: "Absolutely, though of course there's always the chance that—OH, LOOK AT THAT! LESTRANGE IS ATTACKING AND MULCIBER IS BOXED IN! It looks like Avery will have the choice to stay back or—NO, AND AVERY FOLLOWS! He will not be letting Mulciber get his win so easily, will he? Mulciber is struggling to follow, but does he have the legs?"

Luna: "Not compared to an acromantula!"

Lee: "OH, LOOK AT HIS FACE, THE EFFORT IS KILLING HIM! Mulciber is in pain but he is following the breakaway! The yellow jersey pulls ahead!"

**oOo**

"Alright," Harry said, pulling up alongside Theo, "I hate this."

"It's a climb," Theo said gruffly. "We all hate this."

"Not that. *This.*" He gave Theo an irritated glance. "I miss the dumb shit that comes out of your stupid mouth."

"Don't you get enough dumb shit from Malfoy?"
"His shit is actually shitty. Yours is fake."

"So sweet of you," Theo huffed, and Harry gave an elaborate sigh of annoyance.

"So what, you hate me now?"

"I've always hated you," Theo reminded him.

Harry's eyes had never been greener.

"Nah," he said.

_Nah._

And then, having apparently said everything he needed to say, the golden boy of professional road cycling pulled away, rejoining his team and leaving Theo to suffer alone.

_oOo_

_Eleven Months Ago_

"Listen," Caleb said, wandering into the bedroom looking troubled. "About last night—"

"I have to tell you something." Darian looked up, the pads of his fingers white around his phone, and Caleb shook his head.

"Wait, just let me finish, okay? I know you said you were joking, and—"

It was now or never. Darian couldn't let Caleb finish that sentence. "I just told Dippet I would race another grand tour season."

"—honestly it took me by surprise, but if you meant it, then—"

Caleb broke off, a little stunned by the information, and stopped.

"What?" he asked, looking dazed, and Darian sighed.

"Listen, I know what this means for you, and I know you'll probably hold it against me. But Dippet's right; if I come back, that might be enough to put the rumors to rest, and—"

"You asked me to marry you," Caleb said in disbelief, "and now you're… asking me to be your domestique again?"

"I didn't ask you to marry me. And I'm not asking you about this, either."

Darian rose to his feet, letting the phone with all of its voicemails—all his messages of refusal except for the one call, the one time he'd said yes—fall onto his duvet.

"I'm racing the Tour," he said. "And the Giro. And the Vuelta."

Caleb stared at him.

"It's the only thing I can do to restore my reputation," Darian said, because he wasn't outing Caleb. He wasn't going to reveal what he'd really been doing all those times he was accused of doping. If he was going to destroy something, it wouldn't be Caleb's career. Last night had been enough to make up his mind for him.
And now he would have to win this Tour, or this, the worst thing he'd ever done, would have only been for nothing.

"You can ride for me, Caleb," Darian said, "or you can leave."

And that was it.

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**STAGE EIGHTEEN:**

**Flat Stage**

*Audio Broadcast*

Lee: "Well, if there's anything to be said for this year's Tour, it's certainly that anyone can see Darian Mulciber did not cheat. He voluntarily took multiple drug tests before the start of this Tour, and, more importantly, the man is undoubtedly **suffering.**"

Luna: "Someone yeet him to Paris!"

Lee: "If only we could! Mulciber maintains his lead by thirty seconds, which is certainly close, but when the second place rider is a teammate, perhaps there's not much to be concerned about. Meanwhile, it's a sprinter's day! Do we think it'll be Malfoy or Potter, Luna?"

Luna: "Sectumsempra is not a toy!"

Lee: "So true, and by the way the teams are maneuvering their riders into place, it'll be a photo finish for sure!"

  
  oOo

The sound of Darian Mulciber's voice startled him.

"Do you need a leadout?"

Theo blinked, glancing to the side as the rest of the sprinters took their places at the front of the race. "What?"

"Don't sacrifice yourself this time, Nott," Darian said, and nearby, Caleb Avery looked up, brow furrowed behind his sunglasses. "If you need a leadout," Darian said again, "I owe you one."

"This stage? No," Theo told him gruffly. It was a power stage, a technical sprint, perfect for a cyclocross champion. Even Harry Potter, who was the greatest sprinter Theo had ever seen, would be hard-pressed to manage it. "Malfoy'll take it."

The moment he said it, he felt himself realize something he'd been denying the entire Tour.

The thing dragging him down wasn't that Draco was the better sprinter.

It was that even before they got on the bike, Theo kept **letting him win.**

"Take what's yours, Nott," Darian said, like he could read Theo's mind. "Nobody in this life is going to hand it to you."

Theo didn't have time to say anything; certainly not to argue. Not if he was going to make it. Theo glanced ahead, trying to be smart. He had won Paris-Roubaix; he'd won a technically difficult race that most people said he should have lost, and this was a similarly technical sprint, almost a climb.
Draco would take the lead; Harry would bide his time and put out more watts at the last second.

So Theo would have to take them out one at a time.

First was Draco, who only ever looked over his right shoulder. Theo slid a wheel on his left, glancing up to find Harry, but couldn't see him. Fine, so it was Draco he had beat. He muscled ahead and Draco kept up. This, Theo knew, was going to be a matter of forcing the wheel forward, not his body; something Draco wouldn't know to do.

Call it a technicality. It was, after all, a *technical* sprint.

In the end Theo took the win, with Draco right behind him. They called it on the photo finish, pointing to the narrow inches where Theo's wheel had beaten Draco's across the line.

"Hey," came Draco's voice when Theo dismounted his bike, looking around for Harry. "Nott," he panted, tossing his bike aside to someone on his team and jogging over to him. "That was excellent, man. Congratulations, I'm glad it was you."

Theo, stunned, gaped at him. "What?"

"That was epic," Draco said again. "I obviously underestimated you. Maybe I should have started the rumor it was you I was fucking," he added with a bark of laughter, glancing around with a scoff. "Seeing as Potter couldn't be bothered to make an appearance."

"I," Theo began, and stopped. "What?"

"Oh, you know how it is… cross riders get lost in the fray, blah blah," Draco said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "I wanted to make a name for myself, start a rivalry, get the cameras on me. Plus I'm sort of sleeping with our team doctor," he added, winking from afar to a girl with bushy brown hair who instantly turned away, "so, kinda have to prove I'm valuable and all that before Riddle tries to sack me for breach of contract."

"Wait." Theo frowned. "So, the hotel room pictures—"

"Yeah, weird coincidence, right? Potter's room was very conveniently located. Hey, seriously though, where is he?" Draco asked, glancing around with a frown as a handful of medics hurried through the crowd. "God, hope he didn't make good on his threats and crash out. That would be a waste of a fake relationship," he added, tossing Theo a wink and disappearing.

Medics. Theo went numb counting them. Four, five…

*A lot* of medics.

And no Harry Potter across the finish line.

The helmet fell from Theo's hand and crashed to the ground, just before he was hurried dizzily away for the podium presentation.

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**STAGE NINETEEN:**
High Mountain Stage
*Audio Broadcast*

Lee: "Well, this was quite the emotional stage, wasn't it? Harry Potter tore his quad on a barrier yesterday after some aggressive riding by fellow sprinter Viktor Krum, and while Potter hoped to
Luna: "Unless he speaks parseltongue!"

Lee: "Absolutely, and of course this will be an interesting stage… for one thing, we're about to come into some severe weather! An unexpected snowstorm—yes, you heard that correctly, snow in July… always a fascinating Tour!—has rendered the second of today's climbs unrideable. The UCI is debating right now whether the stage will be neutralized, meaning the riders will be held until conditions are safe—"

Luna: "Mother nature comes for us all, that vengeful bitch!"

Lee: "—or whether the stage will be canceled. Now, this would be quite the surprising upset! Both Mulciber and Avery joined the breakaway, but Mulciber was dropped at the top of the first climb, giving Avery a twenty second lead. If the officials call the race at the end of the climb, then not only will the green jersey change hands, but the yellow jersey, too!"

oOo

"They're stopping the race," came Dippet's voice over the radio. "Avery, Mulciber, stop riding. They're stopping the peloton now."

"Is that some kind of joke?" Caleb glanced around at the small breakaway, noting that both the Team TMR riders were on their radios as well, along with the Durmstrang rider. "Why are they canceling it? Did someone fucking die?"

"Snow," Dippet said. "On the descent."

"What—?"

"Stop riding," Dippet said again, and Caleb twisted around, looking over his shoulder.

"But Mulciber's about to catch up, we need that second climb—"

"Caleb." Darian's voice came through the radio. "It's done, we're done. They're pulling me from the course."

"But—" Shit. Fuck. Fuck. "But that means—"

"That means you're in yellow, Avery," confirmed Dippet's voice. "You won the climb, you're taking yellow. You had twenty seconds on Mulciber."

Caleb's head swam. The TMR riders had slowed; if they were pulling off, then it wasn't some dirty trick of Tom's. It was actually, definitely true. The stage was fucking canceled with two goddamn days left—only one of which actually mattered for the general classification race.

Global warming had genuinely tampered with the fucking Tour de France.

"You'll have to win the time trial tomorrow if you want to beat me," Darian said over the intercom. "So Caleb, for the love of god, get off your damn bike and rest."

But his hands felt numb. His legs, too.
Time trials are Caleb's weakness. There's no fun in it for him, and discipline has never been his strong suit. I can still win this Tour. I can beat him in the time trial.

Or.

Or.

I can let him win.

The truth is I may not deserve to win. I'm not the strongest rider here. Maybe I was once, or I would be if I hadn't exhausted myself to win the Giro, but there's a reason I got dropped on the climb today. I had a wheel—for fuck's sake, I had Caleb's wheel, and I never lose in Caleb's slipstream—but I couldn't hold it. My legs gave out.

I was tired and I got dropped.

Maybe I would have caught him for the finish if the stage had been allowed to continue. The piece of me that believes Caleb still feels something for me believes that, too; that Caleb expected me to catch back on, to win today, then win tomorrow. To win my last Tour and finish this, everything between us, for good.

But I got dropped and the stage got canceled, and maybe I could have fucked Caleb tonight in yellow, but now I will be back in my own jersey, nothing remarkable at all, wholly and apologetically myself. The same version of myself who turned to him in the middle of the night and couldn't quite beg him to marry me. The version who tried but couldn't say you're enough for me, Caleb. If I have you I won't need the validation of the UCI; I won't even need my medals. I won't need anything at all if you say yes.

It's not my best version.

But it is, despite my best intentions, the only one I have the energy to be.

STAGE TWENTY:
Individual Time Trials
Audio Broadcast

Lee: "Quiet an unexpected sweep by Team Slytherin! Theo Nott rides in green, Caleb Avery in yellow, but all eyes are on the GC race. There are less than thirty seconds between Avery and Mulciber, but barring any disasters, Mulciber has proven time and time again he is the better rider when it comes to time trials."

Luna: "Time is a construct!"

Lee: "Very true, though Avery has looked much stronger this year. He has always had the makings of a general classification champion, but will this be the year he actually wins?"

Luna: "Infinity is a myth!"

Lee: "Luna, I wholeheartedly agree. And as always, we'll just have to watch and find out!"
Darian had his eyes closed when the final times were announced. He stayed there until he heard Caleb's time, and then he didn't move, hardly breathed, until he heard the familiar footsteps that meant Caleb was standing right in front of him.

"Tell me the truth," were the first words out of Caleb's mouth, arrogant as ever, and Darian smiled. "Did you let me win?"

Darian cracked one eye, looking at the man who had just won his first yellow jersey at the Tour de France.

The man Darian loved, despite everything.

"I was tired," Darian said, and to Caleb's look of impending argument, he firmly shook his head. "I gave it everything I had," Darian assured him. "I earned my second place and I'm proud of it. I nearly killed myself to get it."

"I didn't help," Caleb said gruffly. As close to an apology as anything.

"No," Darian agreed, "but you shared six wins with me. Do you even know how much that means to me? How much that matters to me?" In response to Caleb's silence, Darian clenched a fist, voice straining. "They weren't just threatening to take those yellow jerseys away from me, Caleb, they were going to take them away from us. But fuck," he said with a humorless laugh, "at least because of this stupid fucking thing I did, we'll always have this one."

He swallowed and looked up, forcing a smile that he hoped Caleb would understand.

"This one," Darian said, "is ours."

For a moment, he was sure Caleb was going to kiss him.

He didn't. He took a step back.

"I have to go," Caleb said, a little dizzied. "I just… I just won the Tour."

It was the thing every cyclist dreamed of. It was the thing Caleb had surely dreamt of, and now, finally, it was his.

"Go," Darian said. "I'll see you later."

He expected that to be as much as they had time for. At the last moment before he turned, Caleb's mouth had stretched into a brilliant smile, the sheen of it as warm as golden hour in the sun.

"Yeah," Caleb said. "Yeah, Darian, you will."

oOo

I wish I'd realized while it was happening that this would be the last Tour I rode with Darian.

I knew it, in some distant, abstract way, but I'd forgotten. Last year I was alone, watching him from afar, denying everything and suffering in silence. This year, for the last time, I spent three weeks in his orbit, doing the thing I love most with him at my side. In my anger, I took it for granted. If I had been the lead—if Darian had never said yes to Dippet and come back—I would have ridden this Tour alone. Nobody would have been here to push me, to make me better. Would I have even won if not for him?

No. I think I know it in my soul, that if I am a winner—not just a cyclist, but a champion—then it's
because of something I share with Darian. Because he shared himself with me.

And for the first time in weeks I cannot resent him. Not for that, or for anything at all.

——

**STAGE TWENTY-ONE:**

Flat Stage

*Audio Broadcast*

Lee: "Well, a first win for Caleb Avery! We have Armando Dippet on the line, owner of Team Slytherin—how are you, Armando?"

Armando: "Hi, Lee! Luna, how are you?"

Luna: "You really should have noticed Tom Riddle's latent psychopathy."

Lee: "Okay, everyone's doing great! Anyway, I hear there's some updates from Team Slytherin about the Vuelta de España—is that right, Armando?"

Armando: "Yes, I spoke to Caleb Avery last night. As you both know, Avery would not normally ride the Vuelta after winning the Tour, given the importance of recovery. However, Avery has made it clear he intends to ride another grand tour this year."

Lee: "Will he be taking over Mulciber's lead?"

Armando: "No. Mulciber will remain team lead."

Lee: "Oh, what a surprise! Does that mean Mulciber plans to continue his quest for the triple crown?"

Armando: "Lee, this has always been about Darian's legacy as a cyclist. He's a champion, and he's proven it six times already. He doesn't need another yellow jersey to prove he earned the jerseys before, and while I hope his reputation going forward will be secure, he remains one of the greats of the sport, through and through. This journey was never going to end with a single race."

Lee: "No doubt of that! So we will see Mulciber and Avery at the Vuelta, then, for Mulciber's last grand tour?"

Armando: "Oh, absolutely! They're my dream team, Lee. They make magic happen!"

Luna: "Not always the good kind, but that's okay!"

oOo

Without Harry, the sprint to Paris was laughably easy. Theo beat Draco Malfoy and Viktor Krum and crossed the finish line first. He won the green jersey and it meant absolutely nothing, obviously. It was only a technicality.

"You did it," Harry said, waiting for Theo at the finish. He should have been in a hospital or on his way home but instead he was waiting for Theo at the finish. The cameras were everywhere, and Harry Potter of Team Phoenix-Hogwarts was here, waiting for Theo Nott of Team Slytherin, standing on crutches at the finish line in Paris.

"About time," Harry added.
"Shut up," Theo sighed, rolling his eyes. "You know this means nothing."

"A win's a win, Nott."

"No." Theo shook his head. "No, it's not."

Harry was quiet for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said eventually. "About everything."

Theo arched a brow. "Everything?"

"Everything."

"You not calling me, you mean?"

"Yes, that. But in my defense I often lose my phone, and I really thought you would call again."

Typical. "So you just waited for me to do something, then?"

"I mean, yeah. I never said I was a genius."

"I know you aren't," Theo sighed. "And your affair with Malfoy?"

Harry's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Well," Theo said, "not so much the affair, but—"

Harry stared at him, disbelieving. "Wait. You really thought I wanted him?"

Immediately, Theo wished he'd said nothing.

"I mean," he began, feeling stupid. "In my defense, you were just so—"

He broke off, though, when Harry pulled him in and kissed him.

In full view of the cameras.

In front of the entire world.

"You stupid idiot," Harry whispered, one hand locked around the back of Theo's neck while photographers crowded frantically around them. "You really think there's anything I've ever wanted more than you?"

Theo managed a smirk. Or, if things had not gone as suavely as he intended, then a smile.

"Dinner on you?" he asked.

"If you want to fuck me, Nott, just say so," Harry replied.

"Nah," Theo said, though he did not, as Harry had, stop there. "I want to date you, Potter. Flowers and candles. Romance and shit." He reached out, touching his thumb to Harry's chin, and gave him a merciless look of arrogance. "I want to love you, Potter. But I'll fuck you if you ask nicely."

Harry tilted his chin up in apparent acquiescence.

"Alright then, Nott," he said. "Then consider this my formal request."
When the ceremony is over, Caleb finds me. I've never been on this side of it, in the shadow of someone else's glory, but for the first time I understand how Caleb must have felt for all those years.

His win has taken nothing from me. For the first time in years, I don't feel empty. I have come in second at the biggest cycling event in the world, and I am satisfied and whole.

"I was going to make a big public scene," Caleb tells me, "but Potter beat me to it."

I had been looking at my derailleur before he found me, determining how to finish what I started. I'll have to win the Vuelta and the World Championships now, if I still want that triple crown. I don't know if I have the energy for it, or the strength. The World Championships is one stage; that I can manage, if I rest well enough. The Vuelta I cannot possibly do alone.

I say what, confused by whatever Caleb is saying, and he bends down beside me, crouching to glance a moment at his hands.

"I love you," he says. "I want to spend my life with you."

I wait, of course. We've both made versions of these promises before.

But then he says something else; something new.

"I don't want to fucking hide," Caleb tells me, and then it's enough for me to pull him closer, because I have misunderstood everything in my life but this.

I wasn't satisfied before; that's why my sense of self was so easily taken from me. I thought taking those jerseys away meant I wouldn't exist, but the truth is I was never truly complete even with them. I have never been satisfied alone, because what I am is half of whatever I make with Caleb. I am not myself without him.

I don't know what the next stage will be for me. I have no way of knowing whether Caleb chances destroying his career, or if mine has yet to suffer. I step forward knowing that whatever comes from this, it will be enough for me. When I am the man Caleb Avery can love, openly and without reservation, then I am the man I want to be.

Whatever happens next will be whatever it is. I no longer concern myself with the finish line. I have been made and unmade by the places I took when I finished, and even the rosy glow of nostalgia won't make me long for the uncertainty of the start. I don't need to fall in love again; I don't need to start over. For the first time, what I hold in my hands is enough.

Take it from someone who knows; it's not a race. Coming from me that's ironic, but for what it's worth, the finish doesn't determine who you are. The gold medal, the yellow jersey… whatever it is, it can't make you whole if you weren't enough at the start.

If I've learned one thing, it's this: It's not where you place when you finish.

It's who's by your side at the end of the ride.
I know, I know, sequels are never as good as the original, but I tried. Thank you to Aurora, mostly just for loving the first one so much, though also for editing. Happy first day of the Vuelta, and vive le Tour!
Dearly Departed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dearly Departed

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: muggle AU

Rating: T

Summary: Hello and welcome to Olivie Advent 4.0! I have been collecting prompts over the past month and will be posting brief one shots every day from now until Christmas. Thank you to everyone for your submissions! As we move forward, the specific request(s) will be listed below. Some caveats: Many prompts have been combined in order for me to address as many requests as possible. Additionally, these will all be fairly brief, as I do have to write 24 of them, and they will vary experimentally by mood, characterization, etc., so if you don't care for one day's prompt or pairing, there will be something very different the next. (You are welcome to tell me if you'd read more of any tropes or concepts in particular, as I'm always up for pondering future stories.) Thanks again for joining me!

Prompts: 1) Barista x obnoxious customer w/creatively misspelled names; 2) Draco as a funeral director.

Fine. So she was 'just' a barista. So what?

"Uni's quite expensive," she would offhandedly remark, quick as a trigger pull. It was a reflexive tick, that little compulsive add-on of explanation, which came at the end of what do you do and no really, you? and just before the hasty little so great to see you, we should definitely catch up!

"Sure," Hermione would say, forcing a smile and sliding a latte across the bar to the girl who'd cheated off her exams from ages 8-13 without fail. "Skim milk, right?" she would add, former prodigy turned perpetual failure, and in return, the girl would smile and give her a half-hearted compliment, eager to ring up her mates from lower sixth announcing just what had become of brainy Granger.

In Hermione's defense, uni was quite expensive.

But also, the real world just fucking sucked.

He was wearing a black suit the Monday he arrived in her cafe: single breasted. Fitted in the shoulders. Two buttons, with only the top button done. She would later wonder if he owned any other clothing, only to gradually conclude that he probably did not. He had a preternaturally formal look to him, almost vampirically. Pale skinned, pale blond, utterly lacking in both melanin and patience. The stitching on his lapel read Dearly Departed: Malfoy Funeral Services.

He was exactly the sort of character one expected to find at a cafe, of which there were many identifiable types: The Sing-Song Customer chirping about the weather. The Indecisive One, who was compelled to ask several questions about Hermione's selection of milk as if she had been the
one to do the milking. The Mother With Too Many Children, who couldn't be faulted but certainly wasn't a thrill.

Then there was The Asshole, who was always somehow in a hurry; twitching in line, tapping his foot, sighing loudly when he reached the counter as if to say finally—only of course he wouldn't, because microaggressions were more suited to his aesthetic.

Entitlement. He was rife with it.

"Is that a joke?" Hermione asked, pointing to his nametag as she wrote down his afternoon order: half-caf Americano, room for cream.

He slammed the bills down on the counter, half-startling her. "Yes," he said. "We in the industry are positively notorious for our vivacious grasp of humor. How can we make you laugh today?" he snapped, sliding his wallet back into the inner pocket of his jacket.

Hermione paused, irritated. Sometimes when her manager was out and the lines were short, she liked to play a little game of who could be more difficult.

"Is that a joke?" she asked innocently, glancing up from the cup.

He opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Your job," he said, "is to make my coffee. Not to ask stupid questions."

"Do you get any calls about supernatural stuff, like Ghostbusters," she asked, pondering it aloud, "or is it only the regular kind of death?"

He glared at her. "Just make the coffee. Hermione," he added derisively, glancing at her nametag as if it had personally threatened to raise his taxes.

She glanced at his nametag again: Draco, it read, followed by: Have a happily ever afterlife!

"Drah-co?" she said.

"Dray-co," he corrected, pursing his lips. "Are we done here?"

She smiled broadly, hospitably. "Almost."

Five minutes later, after humming the full overture to the Nutcracker suite and watching Draco slowly melt with fury, Hermione set the coffee down on the bar.

"Americano for Dracula," she called mellifluously.

He snatched the cup from the counter and stormed out.

"Oh look, it's the harbinger of death," she said, flipping a page in her book from where she sat alone behind the counter.

"Can you just honestly fuck off?" he muttered, slapping his credit card into the counter. This time, his nametag cheerily read In your end is your beginning!

"Seriously," he added, "I'm begging you."

"No need to beg," she said. "Although tips are appreciated."
He slid a glance over her doubtfully, eyeing the stains on her apron where it sat above a shirt she hadn't particularly cared to un-wrinkle before arriving. "I'm sure they are."

She ran his card in silence, waiting for the beep that meant the transaction had gone through.

"Hope you don't mind, though," she remarked offhandedly. "Steamer's a bit dodgy this morning, so it might take a bit."

His mouth tightened. "What?"

"Two minutes, I'm sure," she assured him.

Ten minutes later, after quite a lovely performance of Schubert's *Ave Maria*, his coffee was ready.

"Cappuccino for the Grim Reaper," Hermione called.

"Jesus fucking Christ, you're a menace," he muttered, letting the door slam as he went.

"Has it ever occurred to you that I might find this deeply insulting?" he asked, after she announced that a latte was ready for Maweth, Angel of Death. "Do you have a manager I could speak with?"

"If you're collecting souls, can't say I recommend Frank's," advised Hermione. "Just a professional courtesy between us."

He scowled. Today, his nametag read *See what awaits beyond the grave!*

"You think this is funny?" he said. "It isn't."

"You're coffee's getting cold, Maweth," Hermione said.

"Well, you don't have much experience aside from this… little cafe," noted the interviewer, frowning to himself. "No internships, anything like that?"

Internships didn't pay and landlords didn't typically accept 'a promising future' as a form of compensation, so no.

"I do have excellent references from my professors," Hermione began, but the interviewer cut her off with a glance.

"Mm," he said, "yes, of course. And what's one thing you've learned from working at the cafe?"

She blinked. "What?"

"As a company we value work experience," he reminded her. "What's one thing you've learned?"

She paused, clearing her throat.

"Um," she said.

He picked up the cup, staring at it. "Who the bloody fuck is Thanatos?"

"God of death," replied Hermione, "obviously."

"You mean Hades?" said Draco, unconvinced.
"No, Hades is the god of the Underworld, not death. Not the same."

She turned away, wiping down the machine and glancing at his nametag.

*Make us your first stop on the train to Glory!*

"Why do you know so much about death?" demanded Draco. "It's unsettling."

"I know about a lot of things you evidently don't," replied Hermione. "Coffee, death, human decency…"

He rolled his eyes and spun, the heels of his dress shoes tapping across the floors.

"Have a heavenly day," she called after him, waiting until the door fell shut to let her smile fade.

---

His cup read *San La Muerte*, Saint of Death.

His nametag: *We'll be there when your number is up!*

"How does one become a mortician, exactly?" she asked him.

"I'm not a mortician," he told her, irritated once again. "I don't touch the bodies. You need a license for that. I just—"

"Do you drive the hearse?" she asked thoughtfully, stretching her imagination as to what he might do when he wasn't caffeinating at odd hours.

His eyes narrowed, glowering a bit. "On occasion, yes."

She wiped down the counter, pondering it further. "Are you like, a pallbearer?"

"If others cannot be found."

She paused, replacing the filter basket.

"Do people often die alone?" she asked. "Or, you know. With no one to bear the pall, I guess."

He paused, regarding her warily.

"Sometimes," he said.

She waited for him to demand that she move faster, but what came out of his mouth was, "It's quite difficult, actually, to die with loved ones around you. It necessitates the prerequisite of being loved to begin with," he explained with a sullen glance at his hands, "which seems impossible enough as it is."

She glanced at him, waiting for a glimpse of mockery, but he seemed entirely serious.

"Do you think about that often?" she asked him.

"Incessantly," he said.

But that seemed to be all the civil interaction he could handle, so when his coffee was finished, he turned without a word and left.
"Americano for Draco," she called.

He blinked, then frowned.

"Americano for Draco," she repeated, as if perhaps he had simply misheard.

He plucked the cup from the counter gingerly, giving it a thorough inspection, and then looked up.

"For what it's worth, you make very good coffee," he said, looking positively strained by the concession. "You're meticulous about it. Annoyingly so," he added in apparent defense, preemptively daring her to challenge him.

"Well," she remarked, "things ought to be done well if they're going to be done at all."

There was no need to continue, though she glanced up at him again, perhaps on impulse. That day, his nametag read *Find tranquility beyond the veil!*

"Anyway, it all seems rather pointless sometimes," she continued, for reasons utterly unknowable. "Go to university, get good marks, find a proper job, take out all sorts of massive loans, drudge through life to pay your debts, get married at some point neither alarmingly late nor irresponsibly early, have a few ungrateful children, work until all work grows meaningless and then tend to your feeble vegetables until you die. It's all a bit sickening, if you ask me," she said, shifting to clean out the coffee grinder. "There's not a spot of joy in the whole thing unless you make one. Or," she added on second thought, "unless you find it in a proper cup of coffee."

"Right," he said. "My thoughts exactly."

He slid on a pair of sunglasses and turned on his heel, exiting through the doors.

Two minutes later, her phone buzzed in her pocket; three times from an unknown number.

*hello hermione it's me*

*death*

*don't suppose you're free thursday*

That day, his cup had read *Why do it alone?*, followed by her phone number.

She gave it a moment, polishing the espresso machine until it gleamed, then typed her response.

*assuming your colleagues don't come for me first? I can be available.*

*good,* he said. *I'll be the one on the pale horse.*

Chapter End Notes

Happy belated birthday Little Chmura!
They are at war from the moment they meet.

"Let him go," says Draco when Theo stops, catching signs of life in the high Scottish grass. The boy barely visible between the reeds is thin, almost skeletal, and his eyes are closed, but his lungs are filling, emptying slowly. On his forehead is a thin, lightning-shaped scar.

"Nott, there's no time, we have to leave—"

"He's alive," Theo pants, trying to catch his breath. "He won't be for long."

Draco, equally breathless, hesitates a moment, glancing over his shoulder. "My father's waiting for us, Theo. If we stay out here long—"

"Just help me get him somewhere safe," Theo pleads. "I'll come back for him."

He isn't sure exactly why he stopped; whether it was this particular boy or the sight of yet another body. They had seen so much death by then; their friends, their families. War was death by sword or by famine, by unforgiving wildlands or blood, by man or by nature. One way or another, the soul began to fade.

"Just help me," begs Theo.

Draco grimaces, but agrees.

He opens his eyes to the vastness of night, half-illuminated by a set of narrow black eyes.

No, not black.

Green.

"What's your name?" asks the stranger. The symbol fastening his cloak bears a skull and a snake, but his hands are gentle, and it is too painful to move.
It takes a while to find his voice. His head swims.

"Harry," he manages to say.

Then he tumbles backwards into darkness once again.

When Harry wakes, Theo is sleeping beside him. They have already won, the Order surrendering at last to Lord Voldemort's forces, but no one will miss Theo if he waits in the forest another few days. Draco has gone home already, collecting their rewards, making their excuses.

When Harry wakes, Theo's eyes snap open with alarm, hand thrusting out behind him for the dagger he knows by now not to sleep without. But Harry already has it, and quick as a flash he has it raised to Theo's neck.

"What do you want from me?" Harry asks hoarsely. His ribs are healing well, apparently, as he's summoned the strength to slit Theo's throat.

"Nothing," says Theo.

He almost stops there, but in the end he adds, "I just wanted to keep something alive for once."

Harry blinks, swallows hard.

From where he straddles Theo's hips, the situation shifts somehow. Something between them changes. They were men at war before, and they are still at war now, but in the span of a breath, the tension is somehow different.

Theo reaches up, curling his hand around Harry's, which remains wrapped tightly around the knife.

"Will you kill me?" Theo whispers.

Harry leans forward, catching Theo's mouth with a gasp.

The blade falls to the ground, forgotten.

He has to go, he tells Theo. He can't stay here. If Voldemort has won, then he will surely be captured and killed. The life that Theo saved for him depends on his escape. From here on, he has to save what remains of his people. He has to save himself.

"I understand," Theo says, but doesn't look at him.

That night they lie naked together, his hands tracing Theo's scars. They are boys with men's bodies, a pair of soldiers with a widow's sense of loss. Theo kisses Harry's ribs penitently, blessing them.

"If there were a place we could be together," Harry murmurs, but Theo doesn't let him finish.

"I know," he says. "I know."

In the morning, Theo pretends to sleep while Harry slips away.

Theo and Draco are both granted positions of privilege. Over the next few months they cultivate new lands, new wealth. Draco becomes accustomed to comfort, but Theo, a restless soldier still, makes war on Voldemort's behalf whenever it is asked of him. He becomes known for his prowess,
his talent at war, his unassailable luck. He scours the land for Harry's body, thanking the gods each night he doesn't find it.

Five years later he is summoned to Voldemort's court. At last, Voldemort is satisfied with his empire.

"Let us have my old champion fight my new one!" Voldemort says with a laugh, lifting his glass in Theo's direction, and Theo obediently straps on his armor. Numbly, with motions long lost to reflex, he picks up his sword.

His opponent, wearing a mask and the markings of a prisoner of war, only stares at him.

"Will you kill me?" the masked man asks.

Voldemort is watching, so Theo is quick, ruthless, and Harry, who has clearly been beaten and starved for months, goes down without a whimper, without a sound.

"Stay down," whispers Theo.

Sorrow and sweat are both matters of salt. Theo licks it from his lips while Harry is dragged away.

Harry wakes to find blackness above him.

No, green.

"You'll be killed if he finds out," he warns through cracked lips.

"Let him try," says Theo, as Harry's eyes fall shut again.

Theo reminds Voldemort he has asked for nothing; not jewels, not gold, not land, not even a wealthy wife. He serves his Dark Lord faithfully; has served since he was a boy.

Does he not deserve a reward?

"Fine, take him," Voldemort says, who is not above slavery.

Theo takes Harry to his rooms in chains; then, carefully, worshipfully, he removes them. He kisses the wounds on Harry's wrists and bathes them with his own hands. He wipes away the blood, the dirt, the carnage. He finds the old scars buried under new ones and sits dutifully beside him while he sleeps.

"Why this prisoner?" asks Draco, who doesn't recognize Harry. To him, the faces have only blurred throughout the years.

Theo doesn't answer. When Draco leaves, he helps Harry sit up, gives him water. Feeds him by hand. He holds a cool cloth to Harry's forehead until his fever of malnourishment breaks.

When Harry has sweat through his linens, waking to find Theo asleep beside him, he turns and strokes Theo's hair, startling him awake. On instinct, Theo's hand closes around Harry's wrist.

"Easy," says Harry, but Theo's grip doesn't relax.

Instead he forces Harry onto his back, straddling him, and stays there, bending his head slowly
until their noses brush, their foreheads meet.

"Don't make me let you go this time," Theo says quietly.

Pleads, really.

Harry says nothing.

That night, Theo kisses Harry like he hates him. It burns and burns and burns.

"It's only you for me," Theo says, furious. "Only you."

"Only you," Harry promises him, swearing it like an oath. "Always you."

In the morning, Theo pretends to sleep while Harry slips away.

The Order becomes a threat again, rising from the dead. It resurrects like the phoenix for which it was named. Voldemort is furious, sending Theo into a battle he knows he cannot win. Some things can't be forgiven, and now Theo is one of them.

When Theo goes down he thinks of Harry, the way he tastes, the way he feels. He remembers Harry's lips, the shape of his mouth, the arch of his back. They are at war eternally, unceasingly, forever. When Theo falls, cut down by an Order sword, he chooses to die with Harry's name on his lips.

He falls into darkness and wakes, two stars blinking above him.

No, not stars.

Green.

Theo is weak and delirious, thinking he's dead. He thinks this is heaven.

Theo's heaven, Harry realizes, is Harry's eyes.

"Did you kill me?" Theo pleads with him, shivering with fever. He was left alone without resources, with insufficient men. After so many years, after countless victories, Voldemort has turned on his most decorated lieutenant.

Harry holds a cool cloth to Theo's head.

"Not yet," he says.

That night is tenderness and promises. For a night, they are at peace.

In the morning Harry keeps his eyes closed. The moment they open, he will be at war again, as he and Theo have been from the moment they met.

Fingertips brush his ribs, blessing old scars and new.

"Only you," Theo says.

"Always you," Harry murmurs, and for another few minutes, this will be enough.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so much for your encouragement, and for following along. Something very different tomorrow!
A Little Twisted

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Year 6 AU

Rating: M for sex

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: 1) Dramione based on *Jeux d'Enfants* (Love Me If You Dare); 2) Dramione coming together to get revenge on someone (super manipulative and particularly vengeful); 3) Could you maybe do a one shot in your advent of Hermione and Draco as a power couple? Ambitious, manipulative, power hungry, kinda bad?

I think I'm in love with you, read the note.

Hermione glanced at it, arched a brow, and scribbled her response below his.

Prove it, she said, charming it into a bird and sending the note on its way.

She had a craving for small spaces that he was starting to suspect was incurable. Broom cupboards, alcoves, once below a desk in a classroom that was fully empty. He could have easily sat her down on top of it, proceeding to fuck her more comfortably there, but no, it had to be on the floor, as if sex for her was unsatisfying unless it tore apart his knees.

"What do you want from me?" he panted.

She slid her tongue over the tip of his cock again, releasing it with a little pop from her lips.

"I'm sure you'll think of something," she said.

An unfamiliar owl had dropped a particular heavy package atop the table that morning: a catalogue of vanishing cabinets.

"So this is how much you love me?" Hermione prompted, straddling Draco's hips. She let him slide his hands beneath her skirt, pushing aside her knickers, but stopped him just shy of anything more sinful—or, as it were, more satisfying. "Just a clue, Malfoy? And not even a very good one."

"What are you offering me in return, hm?" His slid his knuckles against her clit, finding a way to circumvent her deliberate resistance. He was constantly deteriorating her sensibilities, delivering her to wanton shudders. "I don't see you proving anything."

"Why should I have to prove anything to you?" she scoffed.

He looked at her for a moment, grey gaze thoroughly unreadable.
Then, startling her to a gasp, Draco lifted her up by the ribs, setting her on her feet and waltzing out of the room, unfazed. The air in his absence was suddenly cool, the fabric of her knickers thoroughly saturated with wanting.

"Damn," she muttered to herself, positively aching.

Clearly she would have to take care of things herself.

"Who's someone you hate?" she had asked him once.

"Why?" Draco said, eternally suspicious.

"I like to know these things," she replied. "Says a lot about a person who their enemies are."

"Who do you hate, then?"


An odd thing to say with his cock still inside her, but that was the fun of her. No one else would be so blatantly undeferential.

"Fine. Besides you and Potter and Weasley," Draco conceded, to which she placed her foot on his chest, ready to shove him away, "I suppose I hate Snape."

He hadn't expected to say that until it came out, and perhaps it wasn't even true. It was only that he was so very annoyed with all the fussing. Yes, fine, Draco had to kill Dumbledore and it was difficult, logistically and psychologically speaking. Still, it didn't mean he needed a nanny.

"Hm," said Hermione. "Interesting."

That day, Crabbe flew into the Great Hall with Goyle flapping madly beside him.

"Did you hear?" they squawked, practically in unison.

"One at a time," Draco replied, impassively as ever. The two of them shared a single brain cell, and not even a reliable one at that.

"Snape's been sent to St Mungo's," Crabbe said, sounding distressed. "Said he's gone mad!"

Draco glanced up, catching sight of Hermione across the room. She had her right leg crossed over left, but upon feeling his gaze on her, she shifted subtly in her seat. Below the table, he watched her knees part slowly, widely, before crossing left over right, settling back in place.

"Hm," said Draco. "Interesting."

He tried to fuck her during the ten minutes between potions and transfiguration, but of course she wasn't having it. "I've just done something massive for you, haven't I?" she reminded him, bristling. "It's your turn."

Not that it was difficult, really. Snape's life was a nightmare already. It had taken scarcely any magic at all to make the nightmare stick permanently, and she could hardly be blamed for him deciding to go mad as a result.
Resilience was a valuable trait.

"Fine," Draco seethed, though before he went, he shoved her against the wall, leaning in as if he would kiss her. "You're really very twisted," he said to her lips, skating cruelly above them. "Does anyone else know?"

Certainly not Harry. Not Ron, either.

Rita Skeeter probably did.

"Give me something good, Malfoy," she told him, stroking the outline of his cock. Poor thing leapt perilously in her hand. Draco's haughty expression contorting with desperation yet again. "Satisfy me," she whispered. "Please?"

Boys. They only wanted one thing: their egos stroked.

He shoved a hand under her skirt, cupping his palm between her thighs.

"Fine," he sighed, grimacing, and left.

Two days later, a list of names. Within a couple of hours she had worked out that they were the names of current Death Eaters, planted by Voldemort to take over positions of monotony within various branches of wizarding government. Within days, their homes had been raided, their fortunes turned over to the Ministry for their efforts at war relief.

Then, a week later, a note: You owe me.

Hermione smiled to herself. Yes, she really rather did.

Harry Potter and Ron Weasley failed their exams.

"It's funny," said Draco crossly, "but hardly the same thing."

"Oh, I know," Hermione assured him. "I'm not finished."

Then, a week later, the unbelievable happened.

"There's no way you did this yourself," commented Draco in disbelief, murmuring it out of the side of his mouth.

Hermione, dressed somberly in black robes, didn't look up. They hadn't intended to be seen together publicly, but some things couldn't be avoided.

"He was dying anyway," she replied under her breath, shrugging, "and this way, no one's starting an idiotic war over it. He just… passed away in his sleep, that's all."

Inadvisably, Draco suppressed a shiver.

"You've got ice in those veins," he remarked to no one in particular.

She shifted in the crowd, brushing the (unfortunately) tented material of his trousers with the fabric of her skirt.

"And here you thought it was mud," she replied.
Then she looked up, eyes wide and wet, before brushing away a single, artfully manufactured tear.

Just after Easter, a surprising announcement came via Ron's idiotic owl Pigwidgeon.

"What the—" Ron stared at it. "Harry, bloody Christ—"

But shortly afterwards, everyone's owls had streamed in with their own copies of the *Daily Prophet*, rendering the rest of Ron's sentence mostly pointless.

"He's dead," came a shout from Seamus Finnegan. "You-Know-Who is dead!"

There was a shout from the crowd, an uproar, and shortly after, Draco waltzed in late for breakfast and pointedly alone; one hand in his pocket, tie loosely slung around his neck. He paused in front of the Gryffindor table, glancing sideways at Hermione, and slid his tongue between his lips, mouth stretching into an arrogant smirk.

"Sorry to hear about your Dark Lord and savior, Malfoy," remarked Hermione, reaching dispassionately for her cup of coffee.

"Strangest thing, isn't it," drawled Draco. "Hate to think it was the poor hospitality wherever it was You-Know-Who was staying." He slid his glance to Ron, considering him for a moment. "What's your hovel called, Weasley? The Pigpen?"

"Sod off, Malfoy," snapped Ron.

Draco winked at him, striding lazily away, and Hermione tightened her legs, suddenly rather throbbing.

She would owe him quite a lot of somethings after this.

"What if I said I loved you back?" she asked.

By then the announcement had already been made that they had been named Head Boy and Head Girl respectively. Not that it was a competition, really, after the only other male student with Draco's grades coincidentally wound up with some sort of obscure 18th century swamp flu.

"You'd have to actually say it," he said. "Which I'm not sure you can."

She was radiant with perspiration, gloriously naked in his bed. One of the conditions of their recent detente was that she would give him proper space for once, and he had returned the favor tenfold, in his opinion. True, at least three mermaids had watched him fuck her with her tits pressed to his lake-facing window, but that was rather a fun addition to the tryst.

"Well, I don't see why this should have to end," she said. "Whose turn is it, anyway?"

"Yours," he told her. "It'll be yours for quite some time."

She sighed, stretching out against his sheets.

"Could always take over the Ministry ourselves," she offered, rolling the prospect around on her tongue. "I'm sure I could manage it."

She twisted to face him, giving his cock a stroke.
"He's tired," warned Draco, exhaustedly shoving her hand away.

"Too bad," she said, and to his dismay, she was right. "So, will that do, then?" she asked, giving him another languid stroke.

"Will what do?"

"Political omnipotence," she said. "Shared," she added, "seeing as I think I might be in love with you."

Christ, she was fucked up. Then again, he'd rather enjoyed offing Voldemort, so maybe it was a meeting of the minds.

"Prove it," he said, and she gave him another spectacular smile.

Chapter End Notes

Trying to keep your daily fare diverse. Thank you for following along!
Things generally came in threes: deaths, catastrophes, other issues of portent. By the third time she wound up in his bed, it had become fairly clear they'd have to stop, or else chance a compounding cataclysm.

"We have nothing in common," Pansy said, still panting a bit. She really ought to get in a bit more cardio, as this was becoming shameful. True, he was an unnaturally inventive partner, but there was a difference between winded and utterly catatonic. "At this point, we're just being irresponsible."

Percy turned his head, considering her. "You want to stop?"

"That's not what I said. But yes."

"So it is what you said."

"Shut up." She closed her eyes, limbs starting to buzz with that familiar post-carnal euphoria. He was good, no question about that, but she was a Parkinson. He was a Weasley. Nothing had ever been less suited for the future.

"You," she reminded him, "are my accountant."

"I am an accountant," he said. "Not yours."

"Well, whatever you are, we're done here," she said.

"Mm," he replied. Ostensible agreement. "Are you staying the night, then?"

The idea of getting to her feet—putting on clothes, how dreary—was absolutely unacceptable. Walking all the way to the floo? Impossible. She'd already used the toilet. Any further movement was out of the question.

"Yes," she said. "But tomorrow morning, we're done."

She woke to the motion of the mattress as he sat heavily beside her, lacing a pair of trainers. He
was wearing some sort of ratty crewneck and a pair of… shorts. How odd.

"I'm off," he said. "Will you be able to let yourself out?"

"What are you doing?" came out of her mouth before she could prevent it.

"Running," he said. "Training, technically. My family's recently decided we're all going to do something called a 'fun run' together," he clarified drily, "though I haven't the slightest idea when the fun's going to come into play."

His family. His family of Weasleys, aka half the reason she needed to leave.

"You could come," he said. "Get a bit of a workout in."

"I thought I'd already had one," she said.

He gave her half a smile, which never looked like something she had earned. Always something she stole unwillingly.

"Well, anyway," he said, rising to his feet. "I'm off, then."

The shorts were ridiculous, but she could see the outline of his quadricep flexing as he stood. She watched the lines of his calves, lingering over the toned muscle of them. It never failed to surprise her what the former Head Boy had kept dutifully hidden beneath his robes.

"Wait," she said, sitting upright. "I'll come, I suppose. Just for the exercise. Something competitive usually helps a workout."

(Up against a tree, her palms pressed flat to the bark. His tongue under the fabric of her athletic shorts, his mouth sucking her through them. A moan, twisting around to look at him, clapping a hand belatedly over the sound. "Lovely day, isn't it?" from a passing jogger. Hidden by the bushes, thank god. Building and building, legs shaking, heart pounding. "Yes, yesyesyes—quite," forced from her lips, followed by a strangled cry.)

"Wonderful," said Percy. "After that we can be done."

"I need a doubles partner for tennis," she said. "My dreadful relatives are coming into town and my uncle always has something to say about my swing, or my nose. I'd like to beat him."

"Don't you know anyone better suited?" asked Percy. "Possibly someone with which you have something in common?"

"Draco's rubbish on the ground," she said. "Daphne's only leggy in the optical sense."

"Meaning?"

"No one but you," she concluded tartly, resenting having to spell it out. "Though of course, if you're busy—"

"I'm not busy," he assured her.

(In the locker rooms, her back pressed to the wooden bench. The door locked, handle jiggling, voices swearing impatiently just outside. One leg over his shoulder, the other thrown to the floor for leverage. Pressure mounting, abdomen aching, a cramp in the arch of her foot. A moan: "Harder, Weasley!" A whisper in her ear: "You'll come when I say you can come, Miss Parkinson."
"We'd better win," she warned him. "I'm very competitive."

"We will," he assured her. "I'm very good at tennis."

"Since we're getting all this running in," he said. "I don't suppose you'd like to come for a family game of rugby."

"Rugby?"

"My father's enamored. Mostly I have the sense that everyone on the pitch is a beater in one form or another."

"Are they?" she echoed, dismayed and intrigued. "How utterly barbaric."

"True, but you'd get to antagonize the members of my family," he pointed out. "My sister in particular has a tendency for physical violence."

Pansy bristled. "And you think she's better than I am?"

"Not at all," Percy assured her. "Hence your invitation."

(In his childhood bedroom, a fraction the size of her own and still somehow shared with his brothers. Standing up, her back to the wall, his hands curved around her backside. Watching him slide into her, in and out. Deeper, deeper, hands above her head. His lips on her breasts, his tongue, his teeth. "Did you take girls here?" "One or two. "Were they as good as me?" "Careful, Miss Parkinson. I might take that as an indication you'd like to stay.")

"Well," she said stiffly. "So long as your family doesn't mistake this for anything serious."

"I'm sure they think it unlikely anyone would take me seriously," said Percy.

"Oh, don't be so tragic," Pansy sighed. "And anyway, this doesn't mean anything. It's just a favor, so don't get your hopes up."

"I wouldn't," he assured her. "As a rule, I don't."

"Are you… dating?" asked Daphne, bewildered.

"Not even remotely," said Pansy. "By the way, you don't have any exercise-related events you need to attend, do you?"

"Me? No," Daphne said, making a face. "Though my mother's been trying incessantly to convince me to go on some sort of yoga retreat."

"Ridiculous," scoffed Pansy.

"I know," Daphne agreed.

(Outside, on the grass, everyone else in bed. Last minute thing, forced into it, needed someone to come along, he understood. Yoga side by side, their clothes soaked through with sweat. Licking salt from his skin, mouth watering. "Yes, god, Percy, yes—" One hand over her mouth, catching a gasp. "This is a silent retreat, Miss Parkinson." Grass stains on her sports bra, blooming bright
"Are you sure you don't like him?" Daphne asked.

"What on earth would there be to like?" Pansy said crossly. "We've nothing in common."

"I don't know. Does there have to be something? Sometimes it's enough to just…" A shrug, dainty as ever. "Want someone around."

"Polo?" he asked.

(In the stables, on the hay.)

"Swimming," she said.

(In the showers, on her knees.)

"Golf," he suggested.

(Skirts shoved up above the sink.)

"Badminton," she supplied.

(Trousers unzipped by the pool.)

"What should we do now?" she asked, turning to look at him.

He slid a hand down, fingers brushing hers.

"I have a book I'd like to read," he said. "Perhaps you might have one as well."

"But there's nothing competitive about reading," she said.

"No," he agreed. "There's not."

He sat up on the bed, reaching for a pair of glasses and his book. He opened it, finding his page, and began reading.

Pansy rolled onto her side, looking up at him.

"What are you reading?" she asked.


"Muggles?"

"Rival bloodlines," he explained. "Brother against brother. That sort of thing."

"Oh." She paused. "I like history," she remarked.

Percy patted the empty space next to him on the bed, beckoning her. She hesitated, but ultimately conceded to sit, settling herself beside him.

"Shall I read aloud?" he asked her.
She never liked things being left unfinished. If she let him start reading now, she'd be there all night.

(In his bed, wrapped in his arms until morning, growing drowsy from the sound of his breathing. In, out. In, out. His lips beside her cheek. Thinking he's asleep, "I like you." His arms tightening around her, secure. "I like you, too.")

"Yes, please," she said.

He gave her half a smile. They came more freely now, so long as it was her.

"Alright," he said, slipping an arm around her. "This could take a while."

"Fine," she said; a little bit sore, moderately exhausted.

Privately, she rather hoped it would.

Chapter End Notes

Quite similar to Survival Techniques (ch. 97), but I am what I am, which is trash.
Robotics wasn't exactly a popular thing to do at any high school except theirs. Here, though, the robotics team were practically gods. Every year the Slytherin Academy of Science and Technology took first place in the national high school robotics competition, and the only reason that year was any different was because there was a girl on the team.

(Pansy. Pansy was the girl.)

Things got off to a rocky start when Pansy was picked initially, owing to the small technicality that she had never actually done this before. Her dad was rich, obviously, but that was due to some biochemical, pharmaceutical mumbo-jumbo Pansy only half understood and had zero time for. But robotics was Draco's thing, and because he was naturally a dick and also the son of Lucius Malfoy —aka the biggest for-profit weapons manufacturer in the developed world—he was properly outraged that a girl with no experience was randomly assigned to his team at the last second.

"What has she even done?" he demanded of Slughorn. "She writes code! She can't build a bot!"

In response, Pansy took out her own bot, which was really more of a pod. It wasn't great, but she had programmed it with a laser, which quite helpfully burned the shit out of his bot's retractable claw.

For a moment, Draco said nothing, staring at the place his parts should have been.

"Okay fine," Draco said, shoving the remote into Crabbe's hands. "But if she's going to be on the team, then she's working with me."

It turned out there was a lot of time to discuss things that weren't bots while Pansy ran tests or Draco fiddled with things she didn't understand. (She really wasn't into hardware and had only wound up doing this because Slughorn had bullied her into it, plus she desperately needed some extracurriculars on her university applications that weren't another one of her mother's 'philanthropies.') Once Draco sorted out she wasn't completely useless, he wasn't that difficult to get along with. He also seemed to have forgotten entirely that she was a girl, but that was probably best. She suspected he might not have been so open with her otherwise.
"What's it like being Lucius Malfoy's son?" she asked him once.

"Oh, you know how it is," he said, though she didn't, technically. "High expectations. Impossible ones. And he and I have totally different ideas about what I should do with my life."

"Yeah, my mum's always trying to get me to do... I don't know. Ballet or something." Maybe she did know how it was.

"Anyone can dance," Draco said without looking up. "Not everyone can code like you."

"First of all, that's outrageously false," she said, making a face. "And secondly, I think most people would rather date a ballerina than a software engineer."

He paused, looking up at her, and brushed his hair out of his eyes. It was absurdly unfair for him to be so attractive. A person shouldn't be smart and hot, and anyway, she had gone to a school full of nerds for the express purpose of not being distracted.

"You're not just someone to date," he said. "You can really do something with your life. Something big."

It wasn't exactly the compliment she was looking for, but she figured it could have been worse.

"Whatever," she said.

"Not whatever," he corrected her. "My dad builds bombs and guns and shit. You think that's something? It's nothing. I hate it, but it's what everyone expects me to do."

"Well if I'm not someone to date, then you're not someone to do whatever your father does," Pansy advised him.

He shrugged, returning his attention to his bot. "Easy for you to say."

With her software running his bot, they won handily. Slytherin took their fifth straight gold at nationals along with the prize money, and Pansy got early admission and a scholarship to MIT.

Draco got into CalTech shortly after. They said goodbye on graduation night, the day before he flew out to meet his parents in Paris.

"Guess this is it," said Draco.

"Guess so," Pansy said.

They had gone to prom together as friends. Mostly they spent the night talking about video games and the likelihood of terraforming life on Mars. Draco was highly elitist, the worst kind of intellectual snob. Pansy was, too, whenever she cared to admit it.

It was why they got along so well: they hated all the same things.

"Well, stay in touch," said Draco impassively, though his mind seemed to be elsewhere. He had already said something about how the hottest girls were in France, which was where he would be for the whole summer. He'd probably lose his virginity to someone tall and tan and blonde.

"Sure," she replied, forcing a smile.

She was fairly certain they would never speak again.
Pansy focused mostly on school after arriving in Cambridge, competing in various hackathons and frustrating all the male CS majors until they cried about the injustice of affirmative action. She slept with her Algorithms and Computations T.A. freshman year and decided sex was less fun than coding. She didn't have time for robotics, though when NASA hosted their national competition for college students on MIT's campus, she showed up to support the handful of friends she had on the electrical engineering track.

She caught a glimpse of his blond hair and turned away, startled and unprepared. He, meanwhile, saw her and didn't hesitate.

"Parkinson!" he half-shouted, striding across the room to her. This was a big thing in their world, so the room was packed and noisy. He forced through the crowd to reach her, breathless by the time he got to her side. "Fuck," he swore as he tugged her into a distracted hug. "you don't have a bot in this thing, do you?"

Jesus, he had clearly been working out. How fucking unfair was that?

"What? No," she managed, trying not to stare at his biceps. Or his abs. Which she could see through his white t-shirt. "Um, no, I'm just… you know. Watching."

"Thank god," he exhaled, shaking his head with relief. "You're the one thing I can't beat."

_Same_, she thought silently.

"Want to get dinner later? My treat, since I'm totally winning this thing." He smirked at her, princely and deliberate.

"Oh, yeah, I think I c-"

"Hey, Ironman!" called someone from the CalTech engineering team, interrupting as they passed and nearly shoving her into him in the process. "You coming?"

"Ironman?" Pansy echoed, and Draco rolled his eyes, jogging away.

"It's nothing. See you tonight," he called, disappearing into the crowd.

It wasn't romantic or anything. Just conversation over burrito bowls. He was interviewing at NASA and SpaceX, he said. This latest robotics win—one in a string of college robotics wins—would hopefully clinch a job in one of their development departments.

"What about Malfoy Industries?" she asked.

He hesitated. "Well… you know." His fingers drummed against the table. "It's just not my thing."

"I know. But maybe you could turn it around? Do something different?"

"Maybe. Probably not. What about you?" he asked evasively, reaching for his glass. "Something genius, I hope."

"I don't know," she said. "Guess I'll work for a startup or something."

Draco paused with the glass halfway to his lips.

"You're a genius, you know that?" he told her. "You're fucking brilliant, so don't waste it. Do
something big."

She bristled a little. "Are you implying that I'm small if I don't?"

When his grey gaze fell on hers, she wished she had said nothing.

"Whatever, didn't mean to piss you off," he said, with his usual air of not particularly caring who he pissed off when he talked. "But hey listen, I'm glad we could do this."

"Yeah." She chewed her lip, feeling positively tiny. "Yeah, me too."

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They stayed in touch this time. She dated a few guys who looked like cheap imitations of him, but nothing stuck. For six months he drifted away, busy with a new girlfriend and work, but when he came back he was inexplicably weird.

"Can I come to California and see you?" he asked, sounding jittery. He was in London working for his father by then. Apparently the position with NASA had fallen through, or some truer reason he wasn't going to tell her.

"Sure," said Pansy.

When he showed up at her door, he had a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, effortless. He was wearing a cashmere hoodie, the bastard. It fit his chest so perfectly she wanted to crawl inside it and never leave.

"My Uber driver was a fucking idiot," Draco announced, letting the bag fall the moment he walked inside.

"Uh," said Pansy, watching him wander into her kitchen. "How long are you staying, exactly?"

He had already claimed her space, pulling a beer from her fridge.

"Until I've had a great idea," he said. "So I guess that depends on you."

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They were absolutely high on Red Bull and cheap beer when they thought of it: a self-driving electric car with an augmented reality feature built into the GPS so it would tell you in real time, right there on the road, where to turn.

"Can't tell my dad," Draco said once the buzz from caffeine started to wear off, leaving him slumped down in her sofa. "He'll turn it into a tank and sell it to North Korea."

"Can't tell my boss," Pansy agreed, legs curled under her on the floor. Her current project manager was a total brogrammer who absolutely refused to even so much as glance at her ideas. "I mean, we could," she amended, shrugging. "He'd just ignore me."


Draco sat up, shoving aside his sketches. He was a gifted artist, really talented. She had already known that, but she never got tired of watching him build things. He could dream them up inside his head and commit them to any medium he wanted. He could frame that drawing and put it in the goddamn Louvre and people would line up for it like the Mona Lisa.

"Fuck, I'm so in love with you," Draco said, a bizarre mirror of her exact thought, and Pansy blinked, wondering for a second if she'd imagined it. "I don't know why I've never told you
before."

She forced a swallow, setting down her beer.

This couldn't be happening.

Could it?

"You're drunk," she said slowly.

He scoffed. "Barely."

"Delirious, then."

"On what? This?" He shoved the graphic paper aside, settling himself next to her on his knees, and she stared at him. "I could do this, Pansy," he told her, so close she could see the motion of his swallow. "I could do it for a lifetime."

"Do what?"

"Build things with you." She could practically taste the IPA he'd drunk. "I'll quit my job tomorrow. You and me, let's do this."

"The… the car?" Pansy asked, her heart pounding. "Or—?"

"Both. The car, yeah, but this, too. Us, let's do it."

"Draco, you're being crazy. You're just saying that because you're here, and because—"

He leaned forward, taking her face with both hands, and kissed her so resoundingly she forgot how to breathe, how to speak, how to do anything except kiss him back, her hands running helplessly down his ribs and climbing up the shape of his shoulders.

"Only came here 'cause I couldn't do it," he murmured to her lips. "Couldn't be the guy who wasn't yours."

She really needed to have a talk with him about not being so entitled. Tomorrow, she told herself. Tomorrow they'd have that talk.

She kissed him again, sweeter this time.

"Know any VCs?" she asked him.

"Fuck yeah, plenty. Your code and my build? We'll have offers down the block." He bumped her shoulder with his forehead, half-nuzzle, half-nudge. "Come on, Parkinson. Let's do something big."

Yeah, she thought. Yeah, Ironman, let's do it.

"Alright, Malfoy," she said. "I'm in."

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I would have even attempted this pairing three years ago… probably not
It was unfortunate that one of the markers of polite society was order, as it meant there would always be some sort of police scuttling around the realms to upend a perfectly decent Thursday. Even with the expansion of the sentient universe—even with all of space to explore—the Ministry of Magic was quick to enforce a system of intergalactic Aurors whose job it was to make the joyous freedom of uninhibited space flight 64% less fun. Humans, according to the Ministry, couldn't be trusted to behave honorably under most (or any) circumstances.

Naturally, Theo couldn't imagine why that would be.

"It's happening again," said Hermione, who was, in order of her proficiencies, an excellent captain, a moderately gifted thief, and a stunningly irreverent nag. They were being flagged down by an Auror ship yet again, the communication light blinking on the dash for some new and unavoidable castigation. "Did you check the heat pipe before we left?"

"Of course not," Theo said. "I wasn't in the mood to ruin my day."

"The heat shield, then?"

"No."

"The droplet radiator?"

"You may list all the things you like, Madame," Theo assured her grandly. "As you know, we won't be able to fix anything on this abominable heap of junk until we finish this job."

"Well, balls," was Hermione's final ruling, leaning over to fiddle with the dials on the intergalactic radio. "Sorry, what seems to be the problem, sir? Over."

Sir? mouthed Theo. Hermione shrugged, impassive. He mostly hoped it wasn't anything requiring a fine. True, they never paid any, but the paperwork for new identities each time they accrued one was getting tiresome.

"Your location transmitter is off," came the voice over the radio. "We nearly crashed into you before realizing there was something unlabeled on the map."
"Fancy map," mouthed Theo, as staying off of one was precisely what they'd intended from the start. Again, though, Hermione shrugged.

"Do you realize how dangerous this is?" demanded the Auror. "Over."

"Is it?" asked Hermione. "Hm. Odd we were never informed, over."

There was a moment of silence wherein Theo and Hermione exchanged a glance, waiting.

"I'm coming aboard," said the Auror. "Lower your wards. Over."

That, Theo thought, was a far worse outcome than a fine.

"Best you didn't," he fumbled to say, leaning over to speak before Hermione could open her mouth. "It's a mess in here. Isn't there some sort of statute we can—"

"No," said the Auror. "Over."

"I wasn't finished," said Theo hotly.

Silence.

"Over," Theo added.

"Let the wards down, Captain. As for your lieutenant, I advise you to order him to stand down as well. Over."

"What happens if we don't comply?" demanded Theo. "Over."

Another pause.

"If you do not remove your wards, we will remove you from the sky," said the Auror. "Over."

Theo had no doubt that was a possibility, seeing as the ship was hardly in proper state for flight to begin with. It could withstand one, maybe two significant blasts before being blissfully knocked out of orbit and exploding to smithereens, but overall it was a gamble, and not even the fun kind.

"Well, alright then," Hermione murmured, turning to Theo. "How bad can it be? Maybe he won't notice anything amiss."

They both turned to look at the abnormally large package stowed away in plain sight and grimaced.

"Sure," said Theo. "I'm sure everything will be fine."

It was obviously a smuggler's ship, though they must not have been particularly good at said smuggling. The moment he got on board, Harry was unsurprised to find that the captain, a sort of half-pretty girl with wild hair, and the lieutenant, a weedy bit of mouthy intemperance, were both young, his age most likely. That being said, Harry was the youngest Auror in about a century and these two were criminals, so it wasn't as if they were on comparable paths; youth notwithstanding.

Harry suspected piracy. Or perhaps he hoped it? Unclear. There were only so many exciting things about being an Auror, truth be told, and right now he needed a big arrest to move up in ranks. For the moment his job was the equivalent of being a muggle policeman, merely stopping ships to inform them their tail lights were out.
Dull, to say the least.

"What's this?" Harry asked, kicking the toe of his boot into a box unceremoniously hidden in the corner of their orbital module. They had draped some sort of sheet over it, probably hoping he'd be too distracted by the skinny lieutenant's drawling anecdotes about the weather in space (there was none, hilarious, move on) to notice, but it was clearly unmistakable.

"Nothing," said the lieutenant. "Tea."

"Tea?" echoed Harry skeptically.

"Well, we're British, aren't we?" asked the captain, though she gave her lieutenant a look suggesting she wished he'd said anything else.

"I suppose we'll find out," said Harry, pulling out his wand.

"No, wait," the captain cut in hastily, rushing towards him. "I… I wouldn't."

Harry turned over his shoulder, frowning at her. "You realize that's not going to stop me, don't you?"

"Marvelous. So chivalry is dead, then," lamented the lieutenant, haughtily patting the captain's shoulder. "Let it go, Granger. Men, as we all suspected, are unrepentant trash."

"No, I just mean… for your safety," she began, and winced. "I just— Well, the thing is—"

"You don't know what's in it," Harry deduced with a sigh, and the captain lifted her chin, meeting his glance with defiance.

"Do you even understand who you work for?" she demanded. "The Ministry is corrupt all the way through. For one thing, their tests for establishing sentience are inherently biased by imperialism, making nearly all colonization of alien life forms a question of slavery—"

But before she could continue, Harry flicked his wand, prying open the lid of the box.

"Well, fine," said the captain, setting her jaw. "If that's how you want to play it, let's play."

Hermione had been perfectly willing to get along until the Auror had gone and interrupted her. Men were always interrupting her, thinking aha, a female captain, easy to trip over, delightful to step on. She had been concerned about his safety initially, but that was obviously nonsense now. Instead she cast her own spell, locking all three of them (and the box) into the orbiting module.

"You realize this is an abduction now, don't you?" Theo whispered to her, but that was Theo. All mouth, no action. "You're effectively kidnapping an Auror! And the one thing we don't do is—"

"Yes, yes, I'm familiar with our excuse for a moral code," Hermione snapped, though she'd already gone ahead and defied what remained of it anyway. The thing about people is there were only two kinds: those who postulated and those who acted. Well, four kinds, actually. Those who postulated, those who acted, those who did neither (who were probably dead now), and then Hermione, a reformed postulator who had become a person of action by necessity.

Space was unsafe, unexplored. It required a certain proficiency at blind leaps.

Besides, it wasn't that she loved this particular way of life. It was simply that she couldn't foresee another.
"Put your wand down," said the Auror, but it was much too late for that. She'd already disarmed him, sending his wand flying across the room to Theo, who for all his uselessness was at least adequate enough to catch the things she threw at him.

"Back away from the box," warned Hermione. 'If you ever plan to get off this ship—"

But just then, there was a low sound from inside the container, and she paused, all three of them intently listening.

"What was that?" demanded Theo, at the same moment the Auror demanded, "Who hired you to smuggle this for them?"

Not that Hermione was paying any attention.

"My father will have your heads for this," muttered a groaning voice from within the box, revealing that perhaps it had never not been an abduction after all.

He'd been trained, of course, for what would happen if he were ever kidnapped. As the son of a high ranking Ministry official, he was a prime candidate for kidnapping: worth his weight in gold—or, even better, in the sort of materials used to traverse galaxies. Unfortunately, the grim reality of kidnapping was that being knocked unconscious and stuffed into a box barely big enough for him to breathe was not a good time to begin revisiting his lessons in hostage negotiation.

"You realize who that is?" came one voice, and Draco blearily glanced up, registering the familiar uniform of a Ministry Auror within his swimming line of sight. "This is a capital offense—the Malfoys could have you both thrown in Azkaban without so much as a trial!"

"Well, this just gets better and better," came another dry voice as Draco tried and failed to orient himself to his new surroundings, squinting into bright white to sudder occasional shocks of motion. "I suppose it's no wonder they offered so much money for this transport—"

"Unhand me," mumbled Draco, swatting away something that turned out to be a frizzy curl.

"Who are you?" demanded something. Someone.

A face, as it were, of a girl belonging to the frizzy curl.

"You don't know who he is?" The Auror's voice again. "For fuck's sake. Who on earth gave you this package?"

"We ask not 'who' so much as 'how much,' Your Eminence," replied the dry voice. "This was enough for an entirely new ship, which tells me exactly as much as I need to know about its contents."

"That's the last time we deal with Snatchers," came the rumble of the girl's voice again, though she had turned over her shoulder to address one of the others.

"Snatchers? No," came the Auror's voice. "This isn't the work of a Snatcher."

"Well, he was dressed like one, wasn't he? In one of those low hoods, and he was—"

At the mention of a hood, Draco's vision swam.

I wish I could say I was sorry about this, said a low voice, but unfortunately, I can't say that I am.
Uncle Tom, wait—!

"I've got to get to the Diagon space station immediately," Draco announced, clambering to his feet before a light flashed, and everything went dark.

For a moment after the entitled blond had been stunned, they all stared at his vacant expression.

"Where were you supposed to deliver the package?" asked the Auror.

"We weren't," said Theo, as coolly as possible.

"We were supposed to destroy it," came a thin version of Hermione's voice.

"Well." The Auror straightened, glaring at them both. "A good thing I came along, then. We'll have to take him back to the station on Knockturn, it's closest, and then—"

"Don't be an idiot," snapped Theo, losing all semblance of rationality and rounding on the Auror. "Don't you realize what this is?"

"It's an assassination," Hermione realized aloud, her face nearly as pale as the Malfoy's hair. "We were hired to kill him, and we had no idea."

"We're going to Knockturn," said the Auror firmly. "I need this reported, and then—"

But it was one thing for Theo to come second to Hermione, a fellow ruffian who knew what it was to starve until her next job. It was one thing to be her lieutenant, following the orders she gave because she was usually inhumanly clever and remarkably well connected—perhaps too well connected, in this case—and quite another to respond to some pampered prince of the Ministry church.

So instead, Theo turned and ran, sprinting for the command center.

The Auror's reflexes must have been remarkable, because he pivoted with hardly a breath's hesitation to catch onto Theo's heels in a moment. Not that it mattered; Theo knew this shithole of a ship better than anyone but Hermione, and he had his hand on the apparition lever before the Auror could block his path. Unfortunately, he didn't have enough time to set a destination.

With a jolt, they were sent into hyperspeed, heading straight into empty space.

"You idiot motherfucker," swore the Auror. "We'll die out here. We'll all fucking die, you stupid, mad little—"

"Theo," said Theo. "Call me Theo before we die in space."

The Auror's eyes slid to his, warily at first, and then with palpable loathing.

"Harry," he said.

Then Harry hit him so hard Theo saw stars.

It was supposed to happen one way. She had thought about it carefully, deciding they clearly needed a bit more control than they currently had. He had money, and clout, and thanks to Theo, they desperately needed a safe place to stop for fuel, and also a significant need for fuel itself. She sat by his side and waited, holding a cool cloth to his forehead.
Gradually his eyes opened, revealing a crisp, wintry grey.

"Who are you?" were the first words out of his mouth.

"Don't talk," she advised him. "You've had a rough couple of days in here."

She brushed the tips of her fingers over his cheek, and then his lips. She traced them down to his jaw, then slid them over his bare chest, drawing a thin line down his abdomen until he shivered.

"You're Draco Malfoy, I take it," she said. "Son of Lucius Malfoy. Currently on track for a seat in the Intergalactic Wizengamot, if I'm not mistaken. Being groomed for Minister, even."

"Someone—" He broke off. "Someone wanted me out of the way. My uncle. Well, he's not my biological uncle… it doesn't matter. His name is—"

But he stopped when her fingers brushed his hip, boldly stroking lower.

"Poor thing," she murmured, but he caught her hand stiffly, sitting upright and glaring at her.

"You can't seduce your way out of this," he snapped, shoving her away and rising to his feet. It seemed he was unconcerned with his own nudity, beginning to prowl around for his clothes and glaring at her again when he discovered they were hidden from sight. "You really expect me to forget that it was your job to kill me?"

Abruptly, Hermione did away with her facade, launching upright in annoyance.

"We'll all die unless you help us," she said. "We're in space, and—"

"Yes, I'm aware," snapped Draco.

"No, not—we're in space," she growled more emphatically, suddenly furious with his very existence. After all, none of this would be happening if he had not been so disastrously foolish as to get himself kidnapped and shoved onto her ship. "Open space, Malfoy! Meaning we're going to be splinched," she spat in frustration, "unless you can get us safe passage somewhere soon."

"Splinched?" Rightfully, his expression contorted with distress. With all hyperspeed launches, it was crucial to set an intended landing coordinate. Even someone like him would understand that being 'splinched'—that is, leaping to apparition without a clear destination—was as good as a death sentence unless they found a safe place to stop. "But—"

He stopped, considering something, and rounded on her.

"If I help you," he said slowly, calculatedly, "you'll have to help me."

Unfortunately, naked was not a bad look for him. It was a bit too persuasive.

"Help you do what?"

"Do you have blasters?" he asked. "Dueling proficiency?"

She gave a shrug intended to indicate that she was here, wasn't she? Out in the middle of empty space on a smuggler's ship with an Auror kidnapped on board. It wasn't like she'd gotten this far with any sort of practical ineptitude.

"I need to take down my uncle," he supplied in grim explanation. "In exchange for my help getting us safe passage to Diagon, you'll need to raid the Ministry with me."
"So my options are I die, or I die," Hermione countered, irritated. "Is that it?"

"No," he corrected. "You die for certain, or you chance getting out alive."

"Not good enough," she determined with a scoff, and turned away, though he caught her arm, tugging her backwards.

"I'll buy you safe passage out, if you want," he said. "Clear up the little misunderstanding you obviously have with the Ministry Auror you've unlawfully dragged aboard. Or," he began, and stopped.

She waited impatiently, tapping her foot. "Or what?"

Right about then she thought for the second time that things were going to a certain way. He was going to shove her against the wall of the ship, tug at her trousers and fuck her too-roughly until she faked a moan and he had what he wanted. That was how things went, after all.

He stepped towards her, backing her into the wall (prophecy part one) and slid one hand up her thigh, letting it settle.

"I need a wife," he said, startling her into silence. "Ministry politics are brutal, dangerous. Even if I kill my uncle, someone else will come for me, and someone after that. The galaxy is changing, and I need someone who can handle herself. Someone to rule beside me."

He glanced down, stroking his thumb over her hip through the fabric.

"You'll do," he murmured.

It was possible she'd stopped breathing.

"Fuck you," she said, or possibly whispered.

He smiled at her, thinly.

"Think about it," he told her, and tossed himself backwards onto the cot, eyes falling languidly shut.

"How's that?" asked Theo, checking the restraints on Harry's wrists. "Comfortable?"

Harry, who was currently strapped into one of the emergency landing seats, glared at him.

"Well, I just need to make sure you sit quietly while Granger and her new fancy boy go aboard and sweet talk their way into some fuel," Theo said, folding one leg over the other as he picked up a months-old copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

Harry stared at him, immediately listless. He hated restraints of any form, and particularly hated having been put there by someone so stupid as to nearly get them all splinched.

"How does it feel," asked Theo without looking up, "being a useless puppet of the Ministry?"

"How does it feel being a useless criminal belonging to nobody and nothing?" Harry retorted bitterly, and Theo glanced up.

He stared for a moment, then rose to his feet, pausing just in front of Harry.
"It feels," he said in a low voice, "incredible."

Harry blinked, startled, and Theo's lips curled into a derisive smile.

"Feels like oblivion," he said, and leaned closer, his mouth brushing Harry's ear. "Tastes like freedom."

Harry stiffened, suddenly aware of Theo's proximity and worse, his absence when he pulled away. He struggled a moment, bracing; though against what, he wasn't entirely sure.

"I used to have a place, you know," Theo drawled. "My father's Sacred Twenty-Eight. I bailed because I hated it, because it was so stifling, all of it. Felt like I was choking all the time, dying of boredom, sick of my cage." He stretched upwards, feline, and rolled out his neck, giving Harry another look of haughty certainty. "You think I'd ever go back?"

"I'm nothing," came out of Harry's mouth before he could prevent it. "No parents. No bloodline to speak of."

Theo's eyes traced him slowly. They were expressive and deep, searching and cold. He spoke volumes without making a sound.

"Shame," he remarked, patently mocking, and turned away.


Theo considered it, pausing, and then turned, obeying out of curiosity, or possibly something else. Something in Harry's veins had already thrilled a little by the time he registered Theo's presence in front of him.

"Loosen the bindings," said Harry.

"No," Theo said lazily.

"Fine," Harry conceded. "Then touch me."

"Where?"

"You know where."

It was the first time Theo had been truly thrown off guard, and it showed on his face. He looked younger, more vulnerable for having encountered it, though it was only for a moment before he had placed one hand on Harry's mouth, stroking the shape of it with the pads of his fingers. Harry let his lips part, Theo's fingers drawn along the chapped edge of one before he eventually moistened them, swallowing.

"The one thing I do have," said Harry, "is a map. A rather useful one, if you wanted."

Theo's free hand slid up his thighs, pausing precisely where he shouldn't.

"I'm listening," he said.

She slid silently into the cot, turning to face him.

"We'll land in Diagon shortly," she said.
"And have you made your decision?" he asked her.

He'd been watching her since their little jaunt for more fuel. She hadn't liked the Death Eaters on the Wiltshire station, but then again, despite having known most of them for the majority of his life, suddenly, neither had he. He didn't like the way they looked at her, like a sweet to be unwrapped. It made him anxious, set his teeth on edge. She, meanwhile, treated them like they were nothing. She had shot one in the shoulder with her blaster just for looking too long at her legs.

At the moment she was naked, which Draco supposed was a decision of sorts. He rolled over her in the cot, sliding the palms of his hands along her upper arms until both were secured locked above her head.

"What I need," he reminded her, "is a wife. Not a mistress. Certainly not a smuggler."

She arched her back placatingly and sat up, nipping his ear.

"No," he said, pushing her back down and watching her eyes widen in the dark. "No."

She glared at him. "But I thought—"

"You will ask to see Tom Riddle alone and he will agree, because he is far too arrogant to think you a threat on your own. You and I will kill him together." Her breathing was unsteady, rising and falling beneath his chest. "Then we will get married, properly. After a decently long engagement. Then I will run for Minister. One day, you and I will rule this galaxy together."

They fit together so perfectly, after all. He had known right away that she had the sort of ruthlessness he needed. Besides, he knew craving when he saw it, and whatever he felt was currently mirrored by her face.

"And until then?" she asked, half-holding her breath.

He glanced down at her body, considering it.

He needed a virginal wife, that was true. Someone acceptable by pureblood standards, which she certainly was not. But 'acceptable' left ample room for interpretation and he'd already seen her handle herself with a blaster, so he slid down her torso, positioning himself between her legs, and adjusted them to drape over his shoulders.

"How long until we land?" he asked, glancing up. She was staring down at him, transfixed.

"Ten minutes. Perhaps less."

"Excellent," he said. "You'll have time to come twice."

Then he put his tongue to better use.

Chapter End Notes

If all I did here was relentlessly tease you, some similar stories: Better If You Run for nottpott (ch. 64), Rook, a nottgrass featuring the Hermione/Theo bromance plus Draco getting kidnapped (ch. 69), or A Hive of Scum and Villainy, which is more dramione space shenanigans (ch. 107).
The New Royal's Guide to Bearing Princes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The New Royal's Guide to Bearing Princes

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Hansy (Harry x Pansy), Nottgrass (Theo x Daphne)

Universe: The Commoner's Guide to Bedding a Royal storyverse

Rating: T

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: 1) more from the Commoner's Guide universe; 2) more Harry x Pansy from Commoner's Guide. A very brief glimpse, comparatively. If you're here and you've never read the full length version of The Commoner's Guide to Bedding a Royal, better get started! See you back here in 500,000 words.

23 December 2019
Kensington Palace, London

Is the Princess of Wales Expecting?
Daily Prophet Exclusive Coverage
Rita Skeeter, Royal Correspondent

Earlier this week, the Princess of Wales was seen to publicly decline a celebratory glass of champagne, holding her hand delicately to her stomach in apparent refusal. Given how positively joyful Their Royal Highnesses have looked upon their return from their goodwill trip to Pakistan, is it fair to say there is something in the air besides diplomacy? At Hermione's age, there mustn't be any dawdling!

We likely won't see the Prince and Princess again in public until they arrive at Sandringham tomorrow for Christmas, but until then, the Daily Prophet remains your number one source for all things Royal News. Subscribe for more details!

Bonus Daily Prophet Exclusive: Click the link below for our retrospective celebrating two years since the engagement between Hermione Granger and Prince Draco! Includes never before seen footage from the American's lavish thirtieth birthday celebration.

Ah yes, so lavish, definitely not paparazzi photos of me in the car. Well anyway, I suppose this makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Nevermind that Prime Minister Scrimgeour's a warmongering xenophobe—that's certainly not news compared to me declining a glass of champagne. A country in chaos needs only one thing: a reminder that its princess very well spat in the face of tradition by daring to close her own car door (last month's news, though I suspect I'll be paying for that one for weeks yet) and also, speculation about her uterus. For fork's sake, you'd think refusing champagne might be seen as an economical choice after being slammed last month for wearing too much couture. Sometimes I'm too princessy, sometimes not princessy enough… an impossible balance, particularly 'at my age,' which you'd think was positively ancient.

In any case, I am not with child, of course. If I were, that would mean that I would be carrying the
next heir to the throne of England, which of course I am not and couldn't possibly be. Yes, I've been a bit ill, and yes, my unmentionables are impossibly tender and perhaps certain things are a bit off, but that would be the jet lag. Or the stress! It's difficult enough battling outrageous feud rumors or misbehaving royal cousins without having to worry about whether I may have put on a few pounds—which is quite a sexist consideration to begin with, though don't get me started on that bowlshirt. When Daphne convinces Draco to wear a velvet dinner jacket he's hailed as a fashion icon representing the dazzling future of the crown, but when I wear velvet it's nothing but 'visible boob darts?!' and "PRINCESS OF WALES CARRYING TRIPLETS" for weeks.

In any case, I can't possibly be pregnant. Obviously.

I'm... pretty sure I'm not.

"Well? Is she or isn't she?"

"I hardly think I should be the one to comment on that," replied Daphne warily, chewing her lip and glancing askance at Theo, who arched a brow over the top of his book. Pansy, Daphne mouthed in explanation, and Theo shrugged, unsurprised. "But really, Pans," she said firmly, "you mustn't bully her, you know how she is—"

"For heaven's sake, Daphne, women have managed to bear children before," came Pansy's usual intolerance for nonsense. "What I can't fathom is why she wouldn't tell us, at least. She's been back for days now, hasn't she? Surely you've seen her."

"Well—" Daphne paused, glancing again at Theo, who held out his hand, expectant. She sighed, placing the phone in his palm, and he lifted it to his ear without looking up from his page.

"Lady Seven-Names," he said coolly, to which Daphne could hear the instant tones of betrayal coming from the receiver. "Yes, yes, I'll scold her later, vigorously I'm sure—but the point is you've got to let Cali come around to these things on her own time. You know she's foreign and exotically delicate." There was another feverish burst of commentary. "Yes, I'm aware." More babbling. "Well, that's a bit uncalled for." Pause. "Of course he hasn't said anything to Abraxas. After all, we can't be cert-" A sharp, biting tone of disagreement. "Well, that's all well and good, Pansy, but as things stand, I think some patience is in order. Yes, I agree. Thank you for being so level-headed about the whole thing. The usual Saturday brunch, you said? Wonderful, we look forward to it. Yes yes, love to you both, goodbye."

He held the phone out to Daphne, who sighed.

"She already hung up, didn't she?"

"Yes, very much so," confirmed Theo, "though truthfully, I can't say I blame her. I don't think any of us can even begin to understand what's going through Cali's mystical head at the moment."

"It's not so unreasonable," Daphne grumbled, nudging Prince Lucius' tartan dog bed aside with her foot before falling ungracefully into Theo's lap. "She just didn't expect anything to happen so soon, that's all. And she does have a way of... Well—"

"Subsisting on denial?" Theo prompted.

"Hesitating," Daphne corrected. "And thinking. Perhaps overthinking." Definitely overthinking, seeing how there were few other conclusions to come to when the signs were showing so undeniably in her recent bust measurements.
"She needs to be ready," Theo summarized succinctly. "Which, unfortunately, she can't be, or at least not as ready as she'd like."

"No," Daphne agreed, leaning her cheek against his shoulder.

They sat in silence for a moment, Theo setting aside his book to make more room for her, and she readily expanded into the vacancy.

"And how are you, darling?" she murmured to him fondly, toying with his collar. "I feel as if we haven't been alone together for ages."

There were so very many international fashion weeks, after all, and while Theo's burgeoning reputation as a high profile philanthropist mostly kept him in London, he had just returned from a week's trip to Barcelona co-chairing a conference on public art in architecture. It was rare they had a moment to themselves.

"Do you know," Theo replied quietly, speaking the words into her hair, "there's not a place on earth I love more than right here, with you?"

"I'm familiar with the feeling." She burrowed down into his side, letting him lazily stroke the inch of bare skin where her jumper had risen above her hip. "Shall we take a sabbatical?" she suggested. "Run away to Greece or something?"

He kissed the top of her head. "Well, I do love when you tease me with absconsion."

Truthfully, they loved their work too much. They had both fought too long for it: her for recognition, him for passion.

But they both knew where home was.

"You know I've arranged to stay in London until after New Year's? Once we're back from Sandringham we'll have a week, at least."

"Of course. And I'll meet you in Paris as soon as the Transfiguration budget is finalized."

"Perfect." And it was.

Eventually they grew drowsy by the fire, his breathing steady and soothing, and it occurred to Daphne once again—a renewed revelation each time, blissfully—that this was comfort like she'd never imagined. A love so bespoke and unfailing that she could trust it to wrap around her with ease, each time a more perfect fit. Perhaps a matter of years ago a moment like this would lead to sex, but by now their love was more than lustful incandescence.

Or, she thought, feeling Theo's fingers begin to trace their way temptingly up her spine, perhaps there was still some of that to burn, too.

The small child barreling into Pansy's legs the moment she hung up with Theo had to be Jamie, not exclusively because Teddy was so remarkably like his mother in terms of maintaining some reasonable amount of decorum (and also only recently able to walk) but also because only Jamie could move so quickly. She was like a bolt of lightning, that girl. As fearless as her father and twice as reckless, if not more.

"Jamie, sweetheart," Pansy sighed, "where's—"
But there was no need to ask, of course. Within moments, Harry had rounded the corner with their one-year-old son thrown over his shoulder, colliding with an arm to Pansy's stomach that sent the whole of her little family crashing into the priceless upholstery of the sitting room's Hanoverian sofa.

"Careful," she half-heartedly scolded, though Jamie had already crawled up somehow, holding Pansy's face tightly between her hands for her undivided attention.

"Mummy," announced Jamie gravely, green eyes wide and preternaturally persuasive, "can we visit Aunt Luna today?"

"Your father will have to take you," Pansy told her, "because Mummy needs to see to something immediately."

"This isn't still about Hermione, is it? Pans," growled Harry, freeing one arm to slide it around Pansy's waist and tug her closer. "She'll come around."

"Since when?" Pansy scoffed. "She's going to go mad, Henry, and perhaps Draco's willing to let it happen, but I'm certainly not."

"Mama," said Teddy, who was not particularly chatty yet, and therefore used frequent mention of Pansy to refer to almost anything unrelated. In this case, it seemed to be 

Mother, this is undignified and frankly, unacceptable,
or alternately,

Mummy I'm squished.

"Henry, sit up, you're crushing our son," said Pansy, and Harry grinned, peeling upright only to launch a wriggling Teddy onto his shoulders. She had intended to name their second child after Draco, naturally, until Blaise had insisted the better name would be his favorite fictional character: Edward, the Black Prince from A Knight's Tale. (Draco cheerfully settled for the middle name, applauding Blaise's sensibilities and earning himself a respectable heaping of points.)

Jamie, meanwhile, had settled herself on Pansy's lap. "Is Aunt Hermione being appalling again?" she asked serenely.

"Immensely," Pansy agreed, ignoring Harry's eye roll, "but it's only because she's frightened of something."

"Mama," said Teddy, which seemed to mean, But Mother, what could the Princess of Wales possibly be frightened of? or, alternately, Daddy's hair is an atrocity.

"Ouch," said Harry, reaching up to relax Teddy's grip on his roots.

"But you said Aunt Hermione's brave," insisted Jamie. "Isn't she?"

Pansy sighed. As far as she could tell, parenting was mostly a series of being called out by her children for things she had mistakenly said when she thought they weren't listening. "Even brave people encounter frightening things sometimes," she explained, or tried to. "It's not bad to be scared so long as you face your fears. Or at least accept help if you need it," she added with a grumble, "which Hermione certainly needs—"

"And which Mummy does all the time," Harry interjected. "Doesn't she?"

Pansy opened her mouth to tell him to be quiet—she was busy teaching her daughter a lesson or something—but of course he reached out, taking hold of her chin and kissing her silent.

"Yeeuuuuuck," whined Jamie, sliding bonelessly from Pansy's lap to the floor.
But Harry only pulled away with a smile, leaving Pansy to bask in the gleam of it.

"Mummy's the bravest person I know," Harry declared, launching to his feet this time as Teddy let out a shriek of hysterical exuberance. "And she always remembers to be… what again, Willow James?"

"KIND," bellowed Jamie, at precisely the moment Teddy announced, "Mama!"

Pansy gave Harry a look of *don't sell unnecessary propaganda to our children*, and he returned with a look of *make sure you've removed that dress before I come back or I'll have to strip it from you myself.*

"You're hopeless," sighed Pansy, which was one of many ways she typically said *I love you.*

Harry smiled. "I know," he said, which meant, like most things he said, exactly what he said.

"Well," said Blaise, removing his helmet, "that was invigorating."

"It was, rather. I'm pleased we ran into each other." Beside him, his companion pulled off his own helmet, running a hand through his silvery-grey hair.

"I suppose I understand now why my son has such a fondness for these," remarked the former Prince of Wales and current Duke of Malfoy, glancing over the handlebars of his borrowed motorbike. "You said this is his spare? Outrageous to think he's got a better one hidden away somewhere," Lucius scoffed, half-impressed.

"Yes, well, he's prince or something," Blaise confirmed with a shrug, and Lucius made a sound suspiciously like a laugh.

"Well, I'm sorry you missed him," he said. "He and Hermione were in something of a hurry to get to Sandringham."

"They're hiding, as I understand it," Blaise replied. "Pansy's already rung me several times this morning about it."

"Yes, Narcissa seems to feel similarly." Lucius leaned back for a moment, tilting his face toward the sky. "Bit brisk for a ride, isn't it?"

"Sometimes that's best," said Blaise. "Clears the head."

"Are you doing much head-clearing these days?"

"A… bit."

"I see. And would this have anything to do with your friendship with the erstwhile Lord Longbottom?"

Outrageous. No longer the heir to the throne and still, there was no detail too small for the Prince of Darkness to inexplicably know.

"He's no longer erstwhile," Blaise said, avoiding the question. "As it turns out, his grandmother didn't properly disinherit him before she passed last month. Neville is now functionally in control of his entire estate, or will be soon." He glanced askance at Lucius, adding, "Terrible oversight on her part."
"Not an oversight, I suspect," Lucius remarked.

There was a moment of pause.

"No," Blaise admitted. "I suppose not."

They sat in silence for a few more minutes before Lucius finally rose to his feet, stretching upright. "A bit of fresh air does these old bones some good," he admitted, and Blaise managed half a laugh.

"I never would have predicted you to join me." That, Blaise thought silently, was worth at least fifty points, if not a hundred. Though of course it would be outrageous to levy points to Prince Lucifer himself.

"I suppose everything I once was is different now. No longer being the future of the crown has a way of changing my perspective," Lucius offered in explanation, adding offhandedly, "I was never very cut out for it to begin with. Always a bit too afraid to break something."

"Ah." Blaise glanced down. "Yes, I know the feeling."

There was another lengthy pause.

"You know, I'm sure, that your friendship with the young Earl is not something my father approves much of when it comes to Draco's inner circle," remarked Lucius, prompting Blaise to inwardly flinch. "Lord Longbottom has been subject to quite a lot of controversy over the last year or so."

One would not imagine sexuality to still be such a despicable thing in 2019, but then again, the English aristocracy was its own beast. "And to think," Blaise commented drily, "I'm the one who's supposed to be the last of the Bad Lads."

Lucius removed his gloves carefully, one fingertip at a time. "It's an old world we come from," he remarked off-handedly. "Old traditions. Old values. And yet," an afterthought, "much of what we consider normal has only been normal for perhaps a century or two, hardly more."

"Is there some other normal we ought to concern ourselves with besides that one?" Blaise prompted coolly, though he knew the answer well enough. The truth of his isolation would be as it had always been.

Lucius looked up, fixing Blaise with the grey gaze so like his oldest friend's.

"Is it only friendship between you?" he asked.

"Yes," Blaise said.

A pause.

"Is it only friendship between you," Lucius clarified slowly, "because you are afraid to break something?"

They'd been dating other people casually for a year, trying to be friends. It was going so well, so smoothly, like the mechanizations of muscle memory: brunch from time to time, coffee in the late afternoons, occasional dinners that bled into drinks. The stakes belonging to this iteration of them were as Blaise preferred them: low to none.

Naturally, Neville had ruined it.

*It's only you I want*, said Neville, revisiting some weighty truth they'd both been trying for months
to ignore. Let's have Christmas in my bed, Blaise. Let me kiss you on New Year's Eve. Give us a chance to be holiday-bright, shiny and new, like normal people.

And if what we are is old and misshapen?

Then let's find out once and for all.

"Ten points to the Prince of Darkness," murmured Blaise, unthinking, and narrowly, Lucius permitted a smile.

"Invite him to Sandringham," he suggested. "From what I understand, my son will happily welcome whatever guest you choose to bring, and I doubt Hermione would disagree."

"I'd need the King's permission," Blaise pointed out, but Lucius, recently the sort of man who was no longer ruled by considerations of such things, gave a light, dispassionate shrug.

"Don't worry about my father," Lucius said. "I'll handle it."

He straightened, setting the helmet atop the motorbike's handlebars.

"It's good to clear one's head, isn't it?" he said, and at a nod from Blaise, he turned on his heel, heading back into the house.

Hermione, it's Daphne. Listen, we don't have to talk about the tabloids, but if you'd like to just have a chat—

Hermione, this is absurd. Do you plan to ignore us forever? I know you've been in London for days. Winky's already called me twice to confirm I won't be serving raw fish at the Christmas brunch Harry and I are hosting. Why on earth do you suppose she would ask me that, hm? The job isn't just Draco, the job was always partially bearing Draco's child—

Cali, I know you've never liked champagne. It's that cigar habit you've got to watch out for. Straight to voicemail, is it? MINUS TEN! Though, plus five for royal panache. Listen, about Sandringham—

I have two children, Hermione. Two. As we speak Harry is willfully trying for a third—Henry, please. I'm on the phone—and all things considered, if you're going to make such a fuss about something so abysmally normal, I'm going to have t—

Hello, sunshine! Dad and I are having a wonderful time in Australia, we may never leave. Thank Dobby again for the wonderful suggestions, will you? By the way, you would tell me if you were pregnant, wouldn't you? The tabloids down here seem to think you're going to have twins any day now—

Hermione. It's Narcissa. I suppose you ought to know that when I discovered I was pregnant with Draco I tried to throw myself down a flight of stairs in Kensington Palace. I felt woefully inadequate, for what I assume are obvious reasons. Countless eyes, always judging. In the end I—

"Narcissa," Hermione said breathlessly.


"Did you, um—" Where to begin. "Did you say—?"
"Stairs," Narcissa confirmed. "Ironic, considering what happened years later with Lucius and the pills, but… bygones, as they say," she concluded evasively.

"Oh." Hermione's fingers tightened around the phone.

"It's rather not my finest moment, but in any case I understand what you must be going through. I was you once, not so long ago, if you recall. Though, I was only twenty-two at the time," Narcissa reminded her with a sniff of disapproval. "You, meanwhile, are at a perfectly acceptable age to bear children. Aren't you in your thirties now?"

"I just turned thirty," Hermione insisted, immediately defensive, and Narcissa gave another tired sigh.

"My dear, youth is positively overrated," she said, half-scolding. "No one knows anything at all until they're at least twenty-five, and even then it's highly questionable."

"Well, I'm…" Hermione faltered. "This isn't about my age, it's—"

"Of course it is, and of course it isn't. It's about everything, in the end, isn't it? This kingdom will only put your value on your face or your womb, no exceptions. And now you have concerns about both, I take it?"

Hermione hesitated.

"I do know you, Hermione," Narcissa reminded her crisply. "I was in your place once. I can assure you now that whatever it is you are facing, you cannot do so alone. It is, perhaps, the best possible way to crumble, and that is the one thing I have repeatedly mentioned you must never do."

"But—" Hermione swallowed. "But do you think it's possible that I'm… still quite unsuited for all this? It hasn't been the easiest year."

(Too thin. Too old. Too familiar. Too elitist. Too outspoken. Too American. Not British enough, not royal enough, not good enough. Sometimes she glanced down at her unpainted nails, long and unblemished, and failed to recognize her own hands.)

On the other end of the line, there was a long, steady pause.

"In every conceivable way there is to fail as a mother, I have done it," said Narcissa matter-of-factly. "And still, somehow, I have the perfect son. So I think perhaps there is no such thing as suitability, is there?"

It wasn't a question requiring an answer. Instead, Hermione glanced up at Draco, who was sleeping with his head against the car window. One hand was resting comfortably on her knee, and she reached down to brush his fingers with hers. At least one thing remained reliably constant.

"I suppose I should go," murmured Hermione into the phone. "We'll be in Norfolk soon."

"Good," said Narcissa, and hung up.

By then Draco had stirred, eyes blearily opening to find her watching him.

"Who was that?" he asked, gesturing to the phone.

"Just Winky with some last minute details," said Hermione.

He had been terribly patient with her. She had spoken to the family doctor in private that morning,
revealing nothing. Prior to their departure she had spoken alone with the staff, suggesting certain changes to their usual grocery purchases in the interest of improving their nutrition. Over the past couple of weeks she had excused herself more often than usual, and not once had he questioned or pushed her.

He had said only one thing of relevance, which was, "I had a dream I met our daughter."

Hermione said nothing, and Draco continued, "She had your hair and my eyes. Very bookish. In fact, she was telling me about a book she'd just finished, and I thought my god, you're just like your mother. So thoughtful, so bright. So terribly uninterested in tennis." He paused. "She had a laugh like your mum's and a smile like my grandfather's." Then he kissed the top of Hermione's head, adding softly, "It was a lovely dream."

That was over a week ago.

Today, though, was a different day. A week ago, Hermione was just a woman with a long-missed period and swollen breasts who wanted nothing more than to ignore the signs of something bigger, clinging to the safety of a version of herself that had already slipped away.

Today, she was a different person; her truer self. The more that person came into focus, the less she felt afraid.

"Draco," she said. "I have to tell you something."

Slowly—delicately, like snow falling—he smiled.

They had all flocked to her side without needing to be asked; birds of a feather.

"Well, there was going to be a storm," sniffed Pansy, stiffly allowing herself to be pulled into Harry's lap. "What were we supposed to do, risk our lives by arriving a day later?"

"Lady Seven-Names has it," Theo agreed, settling himself at Daphne's feet while dog-Lucius remained stoically beside the hearth where Jamie had left him. "This was all a simple matter of logistics."

From Daphne, with a sigh: "And because we care about you, of course."

From Pansy, with a grumble: "Now you've done it. That'll go straight to her head."

From Draco, indignantly: "What about me? I haven't seen any of you in at least a month."

From Theo, grandly: "Yes, and now, at long last, the light of the throne shines upon us!"

From Harry, grinning: "We were blind, but now we see."

From Blaise, who folded one long leg over the other from the corner of the sofa: "Ten each to Lord Potter and Associates for sass, though it'll be twenty total to Lord Nott if he can manage to start another feud rumor before day breaks upon the Yule."

Pansy, with a disapproving scoff: "Please. Make it a real feud or get out of the sandbox."

Harry, with a sidelong glance: "Whose side are you on?"

Pansy, matter-of-factly: "The crown's, of course. Though as the father of my children, I would prefer you not embarrass yourself or your progeny."
Harry: "Thank you, sweetheart. I love you too."

Hermione, with a roll of her eyes: "For what's worth, you were all quite unnecessarily worried about my sanity."

Daphne, loyally aghast: "I wasn't!"

Theo: "Yes, she was charmingly apprehensive, which is its own delightful category."

Blaise: "True."

Daphne, expectantly: "…No points?"

Blaise, with a sage nudge of invisible spectacles up his nose: "If I gave you points for that now, I'd be forced to eventually award the whole game to Princess New Tracey."

Pansy, with a shudder of dismay: "You shut your mouth."

Hermione, loudly: "None taken, and anyway, the point is, everything's fine. Though we're glad you're all here for this, of course. You too, Neville."

From Neville, who was also there, and who was in fact frequently there these days, although previously in the slightly different context of amicably platonic pretense: "Yes, thank you, this is all very new and exciting."

Blaise: "We wouldn't have missed it. Well, correction, we would have—"

Neville, assuringly: "But we didn't, and that's what's important."

Blaise: "More like what's factual, which is so close the Venn diagram is all but a circle as far as I'm concerned."

Theo, cheerily as ever: "Personally, I'm only here because I heard there was some theoretical news to be shared. Something about… what was it, Greengrass? A tapeworm? Some sort of parasitic growth?"

Daphne: "Don't be ridiculous, Nott. It's that Draco's got another saucy jacket."

Draco, royally pleased: "It's silk jacquard and believe me, it's pure cheek."

Blaise, pinky aloft: "It's about time someone else join me in silks. I've been saying this for years."

Pansy, frowning with either displeasure or intense concentration: "I don't think I've ever seen Draco in something other than tails or a navy suit."

Theo: "Yes, as I recall it was nappies, kilts, then straight into navy suits."

Harry: "There was a brief period of kicky short-pants, don't forget those."

Blaise: "Not to mention the Etonian era, which to my recollection involved a sparse amount of tribal jewelry and a great deal of unnecessary stripes."

Draco, bewildered: "Are you referring to my rugby uniform? Harry wore it too, as you might recall."

Blaise: "Is that what that was? Strange."
Draco, with a sigh: "This group desperately needs new members."

Theo: "Well, there's only a few good years left to get to work, isn't there? One of us will have to do it soon or risk extinction."

Blaise: "Yes, the little science girl with plaits says we've only got twelve left. Personally I've sworn to buy all my ceremonial hats vintage, specifically for the cause."

Daphne: "I had no idea you were such an environmentalist, Blaise."

Neville: "He was taken in by the 'how dare you' bits, I suspect."

Blaise: "You know perfectly well I prefer my outrage in excess."

The group, in unison: "Excess or death!"

Blaise: "—and here we have the source of our global pandemic, but yes. Ten points to everyone for avarice, gluttony, et cetera, well done."

Theo: "It was fun while it lasted, but I think we all know a meteor's been justly earned."

Daphne, with a sigh: "Personally I find the whole thing mildly paralyzing."

Theo: "What, the apocalypse? I certainly hope so. I could use the reassurance that some things still come as advertised."

Daphne: "Well, that, but certainly other things. I can't imagine bringing something into this world and then having to explain its carbon footprint. Or immigration policy. Or why anyone ever got a perm, for that matter."

Harry, surprising them: "But that's the thing, though, isn't it? There's so much to show them, good and bad. They're just blank pages waiting to be filled. And you can teach them to see fear or hatred or you can teach them to find beauty, to be curious. Ideally, to be smarter than you ever were."

Theo: "Ah, and thus leave the survival of the species to them? Excellent. As plans go, I find it resoundingly flawless."

Pansy, with a perfunctory purse of her lips: "Really, the best thing about it is giving them everything you never had and watching them fail to notice."

Daphne, surprised and a touch skeptical: "The best thing, really?"

Pansy, fixing Daphne with a glance: "My daughter will never know what it is to have a mother who demands her to be something she isn't. My son will never be made to question his worth or what he should be."

Harry, arms wound loosely around Pansy: "My children will know what it is to have invasive family dinners, to be thoroughly embarrassed by their parents at any given moment. Which is, in a way, to never have to wonder how it feels to be supported and adored."

Pansy, with a delicate shrug: "So if they take it for granted, good. That is the privilege I want for them, far more than titles or wealth: To not even wonder whether the world ought to look any differently, because the one they know is only love."

From everyone: momentary silence.
Theo: "Well, you've gone and ruined the joke, you bawdy vagrants. Now how are we supposed to lament the failures of humanity?"

Daphne, arching a brow: "Assuming there's anything relevant to announce, that is."

Slowly, everyone's heads swiveled to Hermione, expectant. She glanced at Draco, who shrugged (pretending, as it were, that he was not presently vibrating silently with suppressed excitement), and she sighed, finding that to be as good a moment as any.

Funny how something shared between eight people could still be intensely private, perfectly intimate. Something precious and delicate and yet belonging to others beyond herself, as every piece of her life would be from this day on. Hermione supposed she had forgotten that wasn't the same as performing for an audience of millions.

This was life, and it was meant to be shared.

"I want this for them," Hermione confessed, looking around the room. "I want them to know what it feels like to be surrounded by everyone they love most."

It was a confession even if it technically wasn't; and beside her, Draco reached for her hand, raising it to his lips in a familiar gesture, comforting and sure. Marriage was the same, really, even if it was inexplicably different. Initially she'd believed nothing post-nuptials had changed—they loved each other, so naturally they'd gotten married to keep it that way—but in reality, theirs was a constantly changing enterprise, every day a slightly different turn. Each one was a new piece of shared history, the building of a future still to come.

"Not so scary anymore?" Draco asked, and Hermione exhaled with a smile.

"No," she agreed. "Not anymore."

You'd think with everything I've gone through I'd have lost a bit of my old apprehension by now, but Pansy's right, I grudgingly suspect, that fear isn't about the absence of some hardier fibers, but a process of repeatedly learning to overcome. Facing life head-on and saying yes, I'll be ready for this, but even if I'm not, I'm not alone. I suppose I forgot that for a moment, but that's something to teach my child, isn't it? That no matter how old you get, there are always new challenges. New roads that become new adventures, and being brave enough to love can make you strong.

I'll tell Rita eventually. Or I'll leak it to Gilderoy just to spite her, whatever happens first. For now, though, it's enough to tell the man I love, and to let him hold me in his arms, because when he holds me, he holds you, too. And I guess all this time I've really been talking to you, haven't I? Even if I didn't know it yet.

Welcome to the world, Baby Wales. I can't wait for you to see it.

Chapter End Notes

This story was just… So Much, you know? Hard to shove all the pieces of everything it was into something short, but I hope this was something close! (Also, I have a ton of comments I need to respond to, esp. my lady engineers. I see you!)
"Listen girly, I don't need to explain the details of what you've done wrong and I'm guessing you don't need to hear it. Obviously you stepped on my turf, and I ain't buying that's an accident—out here, the drugs are mine, the profit's mine... everything the sun touches? Mine. Simple rules, and you're too pretty to let this get ugly. Got big dreams, little rich girl? Bet you do. This town's a small pond with a lot of big fucking fish, and you—what are you, Pali? Nah, Malibu, I'll bet—you're a goddamn minnow."

"Did you rehearse that in the car?" asked Daphne.

Scabior smiled broadly, all teeth.

"Just get me the money in forty-eight hours, sweetheart," he said.

"Better," she noted, approving. "Neater without the excess threats. I mean, I admire the showmanship, you know? But it's just kind of a lot."

Scabior rolled his eyes, beckoning to his comrades. "These L.A. bitches," he said to no one. "They're fucking fearless. Too much money. Think they're untouchable and they're almost right." He slid a glance at her. "Which is why I don't miss when I take a shot at one."

Deep down, she was a little scared.

Just a little.

"I'll get you your money, shitbag," she said.

Scabior called her bluff with a wink. "See you back here in two days, princess," he replied, stepping into his Camaro and heading back down Saddle Peak.

"Okay, here's what we're gonna do," she said in a low voice, pulling a pre-grumbling Draco aside. "We're gonna throw a party."

Naturally, he was in, even if he pretended not to be. "You're planning to make fifty thousand off a high school party? Must be some fucking party."
"I made that much off them once. I'll do it again." Prescription drugs, mostly, but also molly, coke, whatever else she could get her hands on. Basically, whatever anybody wanted, Daphne Greengrass could get. Never touched it herself, obviously, as she liked looking like this and certainly didn't have any interest in corrupting her bloodstream or her brain. Mostly she just liked the thrill of fucking with everyone else. Including the Snatchers, who were basically low level drug dealers. She was in hot water, sure, but she could still get out.

"Why not just get the money from your parents?" Draco asked.

"Are you kidding me? No way," she scoffed. "Viridian'll shit himself. We'll do this grassroots."

"What, like campaign donations?"

"No. Shut up. We'll do... gambling." She smiled broadly, pleased. "Like Vegas. The house gets a cut."

"A cut of what?"

"Doesn't matter. Poker, I guess. Whatever else people bet on." Not that she really knew or cared, but her classmates would. Slytherin Prep was full of celebrity children, tech billionaire offspring, the untalented progeny of entertainment lawyers and plastic surgeons. Even old money like hers had a spot if it could summon the exorbitant funds to pay, and the only commonality more important than their wealth was that they were all bored out of their fucking minds.

"Fucking... ponies or some shit?" Draco asked her, bewildered.

"No. A fight. A tournament or something." The idea came to her with delight. "Can we get Flint? Pucey?" They were older, still doing nothing, but now with an upgrade to hard drugs and threesomes. They ran with a crew that never lasted more than a night in jail before bail was posted and the whole thing forgotten, plus a handwritten apology from the D.A. himself.

Boredom and money, baby. Corruption made the world go round.

"I mean sure, maybe," Draco said, shrugging. "But you have to have a purse, Daph. Reward money and all that, or at least a cut of the house's earnings."

"Yeah, duh. Got it."

"... Do you, Daph?"

"I don't know. Shut up, I'm thinking." One of her secrets? She was fucking good at math, which made her fucking good at business. Also, she knew her customers, and the more illicit activity at the party, the more it would be the thrill of the year. "Yeah, okay. This could work. But if we really want to make bank, we need to fix it."

"Find someone guaranteed to win, you mean?"

She shook her head. "Too risky. No one'll beat Pucey, anyway. We need someone guaranteed to lose."

"Then pay someone to lose. Someone good, though," he cautioned. "If they can't win to begin with, nobody'll place the bet."

Slowly, Daphne's gaze slid across the quad. Crabbe and Goyle, Draco's usual flunkies, had wandered up to one of the weedier kids, needling him with idiocy. His mouth twitched, irritated,
but he didn't move.

"Bet Nott's got something lethal stored in the tank," she commented. "Don't you think?"

"No," said Draco. "Don't even think about it."

But it was too late.

"Hey, Nott," Daphne called, rising to her feet and swinging her hips as she walked. "I've got a proposition for you."

Everyone knew who Daphne Greengrass was. Everyone also knew what she kept in her backpack.

"I don't want drugs," muttered Theo the moment she approached.

She rolled her eyes. "Scatter," she suggested to Crabbe and Goyle with a wave of her hand, sending them fumbling to leave before sliding into the seat beside Theo, gracing his empty table with her miniskirt and baby doll tee. "Want to make some money?" she asked him.

"What makes you think I need money?"

"Nobody here needs it," she said. "But burning it sure is fun."

She flashed him a smile, bright as the sun.

He returned his attention to his notes. "What do you want, Greengrass?"

"I'm throwing a party. Thought we'd host a fight." He glanced up again, arching a brow. "Gambling," she said with a shrug.

"You want me to fight?"

Her hand slid over his thigh, her knee nudging his.

"Maybe I do," she murmured.

"You're fixing it, I take it." He wasn't an idiot. "You want me to go down? That'll only work if people bet on me to begin with."

"We'll do one after school for publicity," she said, adding, "I'll let you fight Crabbe and Goyle, if you want."

Crabbe and Goyle, his thick-headed tormentors. Theo didn't fight them because he had a plan. Harvard. Then Harvard Law. A clerkship. Federal judge. Supreme Court Justice. Whatever it took to eventually sit on high and finally fucking look down.

He didn't fight them because he didn't need to.

That didn't mean he couldn't fight them.

"Fine," he said. "After school, then."

"Jesus fuck," said Draco after Crabbe went down with one shot.

Nott straightened, blandly shaking out his hand, and looked up at Daphne.
"See you at the party," he said, and walked out.

Daphne turned to Draco, who was still watching Crabbe.

"What the fuck," Draco said again, transfixed. "He can't just do that."

"Sorry," she said insincerely, "but I told him he could have Crabbe or Goyle in exchange for playing tomorrow night."

Technically she had offered Crabbe and Goyle, but it was probably best Draco didn't hear that.

"Fuck, I don't even care," said Draco, still staring. "Holy shit."

Daphne looked up, watching Theo disappear around the corner behind the band room.

Then she took off after him. First a walk, then a run.

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He was waiting when she turned the corner, grabbing her arm and tugging her into him so firmly she gasped.

"You like it, don't you?" he asked her. "Violence."

She kissed him so hard he thought his lips had started bleeding. Turned out no, that was just how she tasted. Coppery and sour-sweet, like blood. He slid a hand under her shirt, just to do it. Just to see. He dug his fingers into her vertebrae and counted the notches to her bra.

"Fuck," she whispered, shuddering when his palm closed around her ribs, and he was suddenly pretty sure she was in more trouble than she pretended to be. A girl like this had real problems, and real problems meant real trouble. He would know.

"What's the money for?" he asked her.

She shoved him and walked away.

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She recruited Pansy and Tracey to do helpful things, like wear tight dresses and trick their male classmates into revealing the names of their childhood pets and their mother's birth dates, plus using the face scanner on their phones for what they insisted was 'just a selfie.' They emptied Urquhart's checking and savings before he passed out, then Venmo-ed whatever else they could find into Daphne's account in increments of $4,999 until Daphne's account got flagged for suspicious activity.

It wasn't a bad start, but it wasn't enough. By eleven, Daphne slid her phone away and checked on the booze, which was flowing. These kids were definitely not alright.

"Daph, I need some candy," whined Millicent Bulstrode, daughter of a producer currently being investigated for sex crimes. She was useless; her funds were all tied up in legal bullshit.

"Bathroom," suggested Daphne, spotting someone more interesting down the hall and slipping deftly towards him.

"Hey," she said to Theo, who glanced down at her. He had this way of looking down, slant-eyed, at whoever was speaking to him. It was totally fucking creepy and it thrilled her. "Ready for your fight?"
He said nothing.

Then he took her arm and led her to the coat closet, shoving Draco's mom's furs aside and tugging Daphne in after him.

"What the fuck is this?" he asked her, shutting the door behind them.

She leaned on her toes, kissing him. He hesitated a moment, but let her do it. She pushed and pulled, tugging him closer, but he took hold of her hips and shoved her back.

"What do you need the money for?"

"I owe someone." She licked her lips. "Need fifty thousand by tomorrow."

"I can give you that."

She bristled, annoyed. "I don't want it."

"Why not?"

"Because I," she informed him flatly, "don't need to be saved."

It was dark in there, too dark to see him, but she caught the motion of his hand resting on the wall behind her head. He was leaning into her, first close and then too-close, and she could hear his pulse, feel his breath, taste his excruciating nearness.

"Sure about that?" he murmured.

She tugged him down and kissed him again desperately, furiously, and this time he kissed her back angrily, with spite. One arm was long enough to wrap around her waist, the other used to hold them both upright. She fumbled with his zipper and he laughed, maliciously.

"I'm not doing that in a coat closet," he said. "Fuck off."

She bit his lip. He slid a hand under her bra.

"What do you need me to do?" he muttered.

"Lose," she told him, breathless. "Go down in the last round."

"Fuck you," he said.

She took hold of his face and turned it, drawing his ear closer to her lips. "Do it and I'll fuck you."

He released her, letting her stumble clumsily backwards, and then yanked open the door, leaving without another word.

He was supposed to go down in the last round to Adrian Pucey, who had tormented him for the year he'd played freshman football. Nott Senior considered sports deeply important, so when Theo came home and told him the varsity captain had nearly drowned him in the school's artificial lake, Nott told him to toughen up.

He did.

There weren't that many rounds. Goyle was probably on coke, Flint did steroids, but it didn't
matter. Theo was good at this, better than he looked.

When it came to Pucey, though, he played around a little. Slid to the side, too-quick. Did it a few times, just to watch Pucey lose his temper.

"Nott!" shouted Daphne, and he glanced her way.

In a sea of wasted, stumbling teenagers, she alone was clear-eyed and calculated. She wanted him to lose; would make money off him if he did. It wasn't personal, that much was clear. He was a piece of a much larger plan. Probably her life was riding on this, her safety. Was she really that sort of person, the kind born with everything who spent their whole lives trying to throw it away? What a waste, a fucking waste. Jesus. He wanted to put his tongue on her neck and lick her clean.

He gave her a look that said Too bad, and she blinked.

"Nott wait, don't—!

He turned, faking a cross, then threw a hard overhand right, slamming it into Pucey's temple.

Pucey went down and his posse, all coked out and armed beside the makeshift ring, went deaffeningly silent.

By the time Theo leapt over the side and strode to the exit, all the color had drained from Daphne's face. "You fucking idiot," she whispered, her lips as blue and numb as if she'd spent the whole night in the cold.

"Come on," Theo said, taking her by the shoulders and turning her. "Let's go."

Pucey's crew were furious. Theo and Daphne ran.

"Don't worry about it," he told her in the car.

She said nothing.

"I'll figure something out. But I wasn't going to lose to him."

The road up to Saddle Peak was dark and twisting. He had to keep his eyes on the road, his hand on the gearshift. She wanted to look at her phone, which was buzzing with panicked texts from Draco, but knew she'd probably get sick. She didn't have the stomach for this.

"I don't know what your deal is," Theo said after a few minutes of silence, "but if you're just trying to get someone to see you, Greengrass, then fine, I fucking see you. I don't know what you want, I don't know what you think you're missing, but Jesus, don't waste it, don't waste your life. You don't have to be good," he told her, sparing her a fleeting glance. "You just have to be smart."

She closed her eyes, then opened them.

"Pull over," she said.

There were three spots at the top of Saddle Peak and he pulled into the furthest one, shutting off the car. The lights of the city blinked down below on the right, the ocean black and limitless on the left. The sky was hazy, the desert air frigid and cold.

"I bet on you," she said, and he turned to face her.
"What?"

"You don't lose," she mumbled. "I'm not stupid. I never should have asked you to lose."

For a moment, he didn't move. Didn't speak.

"Fuck," he said, and she was sure he would kiss her hard, hatefully, but he didn't.
Instead he slid a hand over her cheek, tender and sorry and awed.

"Now what?" he asked her.

"Don't know." She leaned into his hand. "I don't actually have the money. He's meeting me here in a few hours and I'm not ready, I don't have enough."

"Pucey's thugs would've killed me if we stayed."

"And me. I'm the one who told them he was going to win."

Theo let out a darkened laugh. "So it's Snatchers or thugs, huh?"

"How did you know it was Snatchers?"

"Just a guess."

There was a pause, and then Daphne leaned over with a sigh, flipping the handle on Theo's seat until he shot backwards, lying flat in the driver's seat. She clambered over him, straddling his lap, fingerling his collar. They still had a few hours to make something happen. Maybe Draco would manage to deposit the money from the fight in her account before then.

Maybe not.

"Where're you headed, Nott?" she whispered, running her fingers over the shape of his lips.

As far as she cared, there was one dumb answer and a hell of a lot of smart ones. She had a guess they were both total fucking idiots, and conveniently, he proved her right.

"Wherever you're going, Greengrass," he said, "I'm going too."

Chapter End Notes

I just really enjoy writing these two as anarchist teens. Something a bit more magical tomorrow!
Once upon a time, a handsome prince lived in a shining castle. Although he had everything his heart desired, he was spoiled, selfish, and unkind.

But then, one winter's night, an old beggar woman came to the castle seeking shelter from the bitter cold. Repulsed, the prince turned her away.

"Whatever this is, consider it declined," he said, about to close the door, when the old woman revealed herself to be a young enchantress. The prince glanced over her wild curls, her diminutive form, and added with a derisive sneer, "Not much better, if we're being honest."

"Not everything is about looks, you absolute cockstain," said the witch, raising her wand in her hand.

The prince moved to shut the castle door again but it was too late, for the witch had already seen there was no love in his heart. As punishment, she transformed the prince into a creature—half-man, half-fish—and placed a powerful spell on the castle, concealing it from any who aimed to seek it.

"Where are you going?" demanded the prince, who was now confined to his enchanted cove. He glanced over his silvery-grey scales, frowning at the pearlescent blue, and glanced up again to face her, scowling. "You can't just leave me here."

"I can and I will," replied the witch. "I'll be back to check on you at some point."

"When?"

"None of your business," she told him, though truth be told, she couldn't have told him even if she wanted to. Life as a vengeful enchantress left her without a proper home, and unfortunately, humans were mostly rubbish. Already she had a collection of spoiled princes and warmongering kings to keep track of, and this was only one stop on her rounds.

"Well, in that case, you may as well run along," said the prince, sparing her a fleeting look of annoyance as he splashed his tail below the water's tranquil surface. "Unless you plan to curse me further."

She opened her mouth, about to do precisely as he suggested, when she paused instead, frowning at
"You really mean that, don't you?" she asked him, and he glanced up.

"Mean what?"

She bristled, considering that perhaps this was a tactic of some sort. After all, men had been known to trick enchantresses before. Look at Odysseus and Circe.

"You do realize I won't turn you back," she warned him. "Nothing you say can convince me to forgive you. You will simply have to stay here until you learn to love another and earn their love in return," she informed him, watching his handsome face contort with displeasure. "Only then will the spell be broken."

"I didn't ask for forgiveness," he said, and she blinked.

It was true, he hadn't. Typically, they begged. They pleaded. They fell over themselves clutching at her ankles, clinging to her robes. Anything to be a man again—to be *a prince* again. She'd seen many of them weep rather than let her go, though she invariably did.

"So you'd rather be a merman forever?" she asked, bewildered.

"Yes," he said flatly. "If that's what it takes."

She considered that maybe she ought to try a different tactic—perhaps she'd left too much human in him, and could always swap the top and bottom halves—but in the end she decided to trust her instincts, leaving him as she'd initially intended. After all, this was the perfect trap. He might be intoxicated by his own beauty for now, or enamored with the power of his new exotic form, but coaxing others to shore with his song would become an exquisite trap eventually. For each person he lured, he would only become lonelier, more desolate with boredom. As the years passed, the prince would fall into despair and lose all hope.

After all, who could ever learn to love a fish?

"Fine," she said, certain he would come to regret this soon enough.

Then she disappeared, leaving him to the solitude of his cove.

"Well," said Hermione. "Can't say I like what you've done with the place."

It had been at least a decade, though of course neither of them were much in the business of aging. He was trapped in a curse, and she was a powerful witch. Unfortunately, she may have underestimated his sense of entitlement, as he appeared to have spent the last ten years doing nothing more than collecting trinkets, presumably from ships.

At the moment, he was polishing what appeared to be a lovely bronze bust.

"I intend to put it there," he remarked, gesturing over his shoulder to an empty spot in the corner.

That seemed to be all he planned to say, though Hermione remained at the edge of the banks, considering the rest of his interior design.

"I see you've discovered the luring bit," she said, and he glanced up.

"I never really had a voice before," he commented, fins glinting opalescent in the midday sun.
"Never intended to make music my vocation, either, but candidly, there are worse things."

"What about the people?"

"What people?"

"The people on the ships," she said. "The ones you lure. What do you do with them?"

He shrugged. "I don't," he said, which wasn't an answer, though she opted not to get into it at the moment. Other curiosities were more pressing.

"You're really not sorry?" she asked him.

"I don't think being sorry would help," he remarked, returning his attention to the polishing of his bronze. "Would it?"

She considered it. "No," she admitted. "What's done is done. But you understand, don't you, what happens if you don't find someone to fall in love with you?"

"Well, as far as my calculations have taken me," said Draco, pursing his lips, "I'll either be a merman forever or I'll die alone."

She waited for him to express malcontent with either option, but he didn't.

"Are you really this stubborn?" she asked him, irritated. "Or are you truly psychopathic?"

That time, he glanced up at her, fixing her with a princely look of impassivity.

"Does it matter?" he asked.

She was starting to get the feeling she ought to leave.

"Well, goodbye," she concluded, rising to her feet. "I'll be back at some point, maybe."

He placed the bust in his intended corner, fiddling with its placement.

"Yes, goodbye," he said disinterestedly, not even looking over his shoulder as she went.

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The next time she arrived he had managed to build his own castle out of the gold stolen from ships. Half of his eccentric construction was underwater, or appeared to be. He was the one with the fish lungs, not her, so she didn't bother trying to find out.

"Exactly how many ships have you robbed at this point?" she asked him.

"Does it matter?" he asked her again.

She was starting to think maybe it should.

"You're supposed to be falling in love," she told him. "You know. Breaking the curse?"

"Love is a fallacy," he replied. "There's not a force on earth more destructive than love."

"That's ridiculous," she told him. "Haven't you seen greed? Hate?"

"Yes," he said.
"Avarice? Envy? Wrath?"

He glanced up fleetingly. "Have you ever watched a heart break?" he asked her. "Really break, I mean. Shatter. Have you seen love's desolation? Its loneliness, its emptiness. That can be far more persuasive than envy or wrath. In fact it can be envy and wrath even while it is love."

"Yes, but love is also beautiful," she told him, and this time, his lips curled up thinly.

"Aren't you the one who told me beauty isn't everything?" he said.

Irritated, Hermione rose to her feet and left.

When she returned, he was in the process of painting a mural. His original castle—the one she'd cursed—was starting to crumble, so he appeared to have taken on the task of refreshing it with a bit of art. He was about halfway through, as far as she could tell, though the scene was unrecognizable to her.

"What's this?" she asked.

"You obviously haven't gone far enough if you don't recognize it," he said without turning around, though he paused his brush to swim slightly backwards, looking over his progress. "Where is it you go, anyway?" he asked, sweeping one hand through his hair and leaving behind a bit of pink; coral, she presumed, which had been ground down to pigment.

"I told you," she said, settling herself on a rock. "You're not allowed to ask me questions."

"Fine." He swam forward again, fixing a spot on the sunrise he was painting.

She watched him mix darker and darker pigments, the sunrise gradually becoming a night sky. He painted the stars in precise patterns, using a constellation map for reference that he must have drawn by hand.

"There's a fine line between observation and voyeurism, you know," he told her.

She had half-forgotten they'd been sitting in silence for hours.

"Aren't you lonely?" she asked him.

He twisted around, glancing at her, before turning back to his painting. He had aged a little over the years, just slightly. Just enough that he was unquestionably a man now. Perhaps in a century or so he might start to have a few silvery strands woven into his pale hair.

"Are you lonely?" he asked her.

"You're not allowed to ask me questions," she reminded him.

"Why not?"

"Because you're not. I'm the one who cursed you."

"You know, for someone who puts so much stock in love, you don't seem to understand it," Draco remarked. "You have to give, too. You can't just curse one-sidedly."

She couldn't tell if he was joking. He seemed like maybe he was, but if he was, then he was making her the joke, which she didn't appreciate.
"You're selfish," she told him. "Vain."

"Yes, I know."

"You're cruel and unkind."

"Yes."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"From time to time," he said.

"Then why not try to break the curse?"

He paused, then set down his brush, turning to face her.

"Do you want me to be a better person," he asked, "or do you want me to not be alone? Because they're not the same thing."

She frowned at him. "You can't ask me questions."

"You keep saying that," he said. "But you're the one who could easily make me stop."

She sighed, rising to her feet. "You're tiresome," she said.

"So I've heard," he told her, plucking his brush from the ground.

Agitated, Hermione turned and left.

When she came back, he was singing. It was a little sailor shanty, something about storms on the horizon. All sailors sang about storms, and obviously Prince Draco, who was no longer prince of anything, had come across plenty of them over the course of his curse. By now, his castle gleamed with paint and gold, his cove half-buried under riches.

"Sounds lovely," she said when he finished.

"Thanks," he said. "I like that one."

He was lying on the roof of his underwater castle, sunning his grey-blue tail and turning his skin slickly bronze. How he had gotten up there, she wasn't totally sure. Upper arm strength, she supposed. Ropes or seaweed or something.

"Don't you ever wonder what happened to your kingdom?" she asked, treading carefully over the beams toward him and then, giving up, choosing to magically levitate herself over them instead.

"Not really," he said.

"Don't you want to know what happened?"

He cracked one eye, turning to face her. "Sure," he said, impassive. "Tell me."

"It's a democracy now, sort of. Little city states."

"Ah. And does that work?"

She considered it. "Have you heard of Florence?" she asked him. "Or Naples?"
"Yes."

"Well, so basically no," she concluded, "it doesn't work."

A moment passed in silence.

"People can be tricky," remarked Draco, closing his eyes again.

Hermione settled herself back on the roof of his castle, soaking in the warmth of the sun. It was an unusually calm day, or so she assumed, though it was difficult to tell. He had cleverly built his castle to block most of the tempestuous winds from the sea.

"Do you still curse people?" Draco asked, half-startling her.

"Hm?"

"It just seems like a lot of work," he said. "And most people are looking for love anyway. They don't need to become strange creatures just to be incapable of finding it."

She remembered that she had forgotten to tell him he wasn't allowed to ask her questions. Oh well. Too late.

"I think you might be right about love," Hermione admitted softly. Cursing was increasingly difficult work as humanity progressed, and hardly even worth it. Beasts got things they didn't deserve every day, and the business of reprisal was a rather demanding vocation. It turned out that even love could be toxic and unwell, parasitic and fleeting.

Worse, it could be beautiful and harshly unforgiving.

After a moment's silence, Draco reached over, brushing the knuckles of her hand with the soft, worn wetness of his fingers.

"Don't take it personally," he said.

He was never going to break the curse. Or maybe he already had. Maybe she didn't actually understand the first thing about curses.

In the end she simply nodded and closed her eyes, content to lie beside him in the sun.

Chapter End Notes

Onto week two! Oh my word. I am tired.
Forgive Me, Father

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Forgive Me, Father

Pairing: Parkweasel (Pansy Parkinson x Percy Weasley)

Universe: post-war, EWE

Rating: M for themes, language

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: 1) Fleabag with a twist; 2) a Pansy/Percy rom-com. To be clear: Fleabag is perfect and I would change nothing about it. I made drastic changes to the personalities of these characters/plots in order to make this pairing work. The show did the right thing, and I have intentionally gone a different direction to arrive at a different ending. You do not need to have seen the show to read this.

This is not a love story.

I suppose if I have to start somewhere, I'll start with me. My mother will say that's nothing outside the usual, but she's a bit of a cunt. I say that lovingly, of course (I don't, I'm lying) but it's a foundational aspect of her personality. Some people are just a tad cuntier than others by nature, and she is one of those.

I, on the other hand, am not a cunt. Not to say I'm any better than my mother (I'm not), but being a cunt takes real panache; a splash of something zester than whatever I've got. When used effectively entitlement is fifty-percent confidence, but when I do it, I'm just a bit of a spoiled little bitch. I'd love to improve, but it seems unlikely. I am currently an only child, though I'm sure my mother would be more than happy to pop out someone's progeny if it meant they'd foot the bill for her lavish, cuntly lifestyle.

We used to have money—we don't anymore. My father passed a few years after the war, and much to my mother's distress, he died without a sickle to his name. Turns out he never had any to begin with, and now, of course, we're swimming in debt.

I have thus far failed to marry rich, having been cursed with my nose and also my personality, but luckily my mother clung devotedly to her figure over the years. When Ava Greengrass ran off with the gardener, poor Viridian was left with his enormous manor house and two beautiful, accomplished daughters, which was just about the best thing to happen to my mother. Mum, a longtime friend of the Greengrasses, was more than happy to tend to Viridian's emotional wounds. (By which I do mean his penis.)

Daphne's my best friend and she's fundamentally perfect. I wish I could think of something unflattering to say about her, but even at my foulest she lacks any conceivable flaw. (She's outrageously inoffensive; there, that counts as one.) Her younger sister, Astoria, is beautiful and talented and sweet, but she at least has moments of selfishness. Like now, for instance. Daphne and I are accompanying my mother and her father to dinner, but Astoria's off in Bulgaria, probably
sucking off some quidditch player in heat. (Not that I blame her. I'd like to be doing the same thing.)

Mum, of course, surprises us the moment we sit down to a table set for five, not four.

"What's this?" I ask in reference to the empty chair beside me. (She ignores me.)

"Daphne, dear," says my mother, turning to the daughter she frequently tells me she wishes was hers, "where's Theodore?"

"Oh, Theo had a meeting," says Daphne, who even lies beautifully. (Theo's her doting husband. Skinny, but rich. Independently wealthy, and therefore unbeholden to meetings.) "He's ever so sorry he couldn't join us." (False. Theo is the only person who hates my mother more than me.) "He sends his love!" (He doesn't.)

"How is Draco?" asks my mother, which prompts Viridian to cough quietly into his hand. For what it's worth, I've always loved Viridian, who was as much a father to me as he was to his own daughters. (It's not his fault he went weak for a cunt like my mother. There's a secret they'll never tell you in school: Men often adore cunts, so if that's your style, embrace it. Wear it well.)

"Oh, he's… fine," says Daphne evasively, glancing at me.

(I am also fine.)

(We broke up ages ago.)

(It would be weird if I weren't fine.)

(Which, obviously, I am.)

"Well, good," says my mother, who is admittedly very beautiful for a woman of her age. "Pansy, sit up straight," she adds, which of course I thought I was doing. (Years of Russian ballet typically ensure that I am, but mother knows best, as they say.) "Anyway," she continues, as if I've interrupted her somehow, "Viridian and I have an announcement to make."

Before she can tell us what her announcement is (please god, not a baby) someone suddenly pulls out the empty chair beside mine, sliding into it.

"Apologies," says a slim redheaded man I have to blink to recognize. (A Weasley, that's obvious, but it takes a moment to align this man with the stuffy Head Boy from fourth year.) "Food drive took a bit longer than I anticipated."

"Food drive? How quaint," purrs my mother. "Father Percy, I'm sure you remember Daphne."

(Father?)

"Yes, of course. Hello, Miss Parkinson," he says (Miss Parkinson?), turning to me despite my mother's obvious wish to collectively pretend I'm not here. "It's nice to see you again."

"Oh yes, of course." (His eyes are disturbingly blue.) "How are you?" (Were they always this blue?) "Doing well, I hope." (I don't mean that, but it doesn't matter. It's called decorum, which I have and the Weasleys famously do not.)

"Father Percy's a priest," inserts my mother, as I blink. (A what now?)

"I didn't care for the Ministry lifestyle," explains Percy, catching the confusion on my face. (I can't
say I bothered to hide it.) "I was going down a bit of a bad path. Pushing away the people I loved, forgetting my values, that sort of thing. Ambition," he remarks, in something of a joking tone, "is a hell of a drug."

"You probably shouldn't try cocaine," I say. (Why is he looking at me?)

Daphne laughs, but my mother doesn't.

"I have," says Percy.

A weighty silence falls over the table as he looks at me, raising his glass of water to his lips as if challenging me to test him. I don't, though I want to. (It would only delight my mother if I embarrassed her now. Then she could hate me outright, like a proper mother, instead of forcefully feigning approval.)

"So, anyway," my mother says brightly, "Viridian and I are getting married. Surprise!"

I choke on my glass of water as Daphne reaches out, clutching my arm beneath the table. (His eyes are so fucking blue.)

"Your mum's a cunt," says Percy, and that's the moment I realize I want to fuck him.

I'm getting ahead of myself. First my mother and Viridian announce their engagement, and then they reveal they'd like to get married in a church. "Doesn't that sound so charming?" exclaims my mother.

"I wasn't aware you were particularly religious," I say.

"Don't be ridiculous, Pansy, of course I am," says dear old Mum. "Viridian and I just went yesterday and we positively adored Father Percy's little speech."

"Homily," says Percy.

"Yes, of course," smiles my mother, looking happy as a clam. "In any case, we're doing a small wedding, just us and you girls and Astoria, plus a few close friends—" (Translation: Everyone she knows will be sorry they ever doubted her resurrection to the heights of social graces.) "—and Father Percy's been gracious enough to agree."

"It's really not a problem," says Percy. "Gives me the day off from healing the sick."

"Do you encounter many lepers?" I ask him. (My mother glares at me.)

"None so far, but I was only recently ordained," he tells me. "Wine?"

"I didn't realize priests were allowed to drink," I remark. (My mother's hand is so tight around her glass I think it might shatter in her hand.)

"So long as you do more good than harm," Percy says, leaning over to refill my glass, "the rules are somewhat circumstantial."

"I don't think that's how it works," I say.

(He's so close to me I can smell him. Linen and bit of aftershave.)
"Stop pestering him, Pansy," says my mother. "Daphne, more wine?"

Dinner went on as normal, with a few more apologetic glances from Viridian. He always looks a bit embarrassed by my mother, but in a powerless sort of way. She has a tendency to dominate a room.

The bit where it gets complicated is mostly when my mother says right at the end of dinner, "Don't spoil this for us, Pansy."

"Me?" I ask. (I had been staring at Percy's hands, trying not to.) "What does that mean?"

"It means don't show up in Viridian's house drunk and crying with your dress on inside out," says my mother smartly. "Please, don't find a way to make this about you."

(The episode in question was the anniversary of my father's death. Also, a week after Draco dumped me.)

"Right," I say.

Percy was silent at the time, though he caught me on the way out. "Your mum's a cunt," he says, though you know that already, and you know my thoughts on the matter as well.

(Largely: I want to fuck him into the goddamn floor.)

"I know," I say.

"Don't listen to her."

"I don't." (I absorb her and spend the rest of the evening wringing myself out like a dishtowel.) "What do you care?"

"I've had... some difficulties," he tells me curtly. "My little political fall from grace, my brother's death, it all led to some very poor choices. But now I'm here," he reminds me, tapping his little priest's collar. "You'll find peace eventually."

"Did you?" I ask him.

We stand there in silence for so long that I wonder briefly whether I actually spoke aloud.

"No," he says.

Then he tosses some powder in the flames and disappears into the Floo.

It's not like I'm desperate for marriage. Yes, Daphne and Theo had a lovely wedding and combined they have more money than God, but it's not about the institution of the thing, or the possession of it. It isn't something shallow, like how Daphne looked so much better in her gown than I could ever dream of looking. It's her certainty; her knowledge that they belong together. It's the way Theo looks at her as if she's the most precious thing in the entire world.

I used to think that Draco and I belonged together until I realized it was just my mother's voice telling me that. Now I know I don't belong to anyone, but it makes me feel untethered, awash. Like I'm floating aimlessly without direction, and nobody cares where I land.

I've never gone to church before, but now obviously I can't resist. After mass, I pause to shake his
"I liked it," I say. "The little speech."

"Homily," he corrects me.

(So, so blue.)

"Come here," he suddenly says, taking my elbow and leading me into the rectory or something; whatever this old room full of choir robes and moldy Bibles is called.

He plucks one from the table, handing it to me. "Thirsty?" he asks.

"For… scripture?" I ask uncertainly.

"I was thinking more like wine," he says. "Though I keep Ogden's in my good robes."

"These aren't your good robes?" (They're green and gold, and they bring out his eyes.)

"You'll know my good ones when you see them."

He disappears and I flip through the Bible, aimless. He returns, handing me a glass, which I accept.

"Have you read it much?" he asks, pointing to the Bible in my hands.

"I've read enough to know it doesn't work," I say.

Then, because he doesn't say anything, I add, "For half this book God is vengeful and cruel. Storms and locusts. Bloodshed. Wrath. Then he's merciful, but what kind of mercy is it? Killing his own son? And anyway, I don't think we're made in His image. I don't think it's possible. He's something else, some other creature we can't fathom. If we could, we'd make the world ourselves."

(I don't know what I'm on about.)

"Men told these stories. The narrators are unreliable," I continue babbling. "It's basically gossip."

"If it were all fiction, would you believe it?"

"What?" (His sudden interruption startles me.)

"If it were fiction," Percy repeats, pointing to it. "Would you believe it?"

I sort of half-understand what he means. If this book were fiction, would I trust the themes more. Redemption and forgiveness and doing unto others. Fires and floods, plagues and virgins.

"I don't know," I say listlessly, "maybe."

I set the book down at the moment he steps towards me, and for a second I think he'll hold my hand. (Stupid.)

"What?" he says.

"What do you mean 'what'?"

(I am so, so stupid.)

"That," he says, frowning. "Where did you just go?"
"I don't know what you're talking about."

(I hate it, how much it thrills me to have his eyes, his attention. My skin crawls with humiliation from being noticed, from craving it. I devour it too quickly, swallowing it whole. Do it again, I want to beg.)

"That," he says again.

"You're being ridiculous," I say.

He regards me warily for a moment.

"Come with me," he says.

"You ruined our name, you know," my mother likes to remind me. "No one will ever have you now."

For the record, I thought I was being practical when I suggested turning Harry Potter over to the Dark Lord. Seems silly to think that was a problem once, given my current set of mundanities, but at the time I was only thinking: one life for many. His life for Daphne’s, for Draco’s, for all of my friends, for everyone I’ve ever loved. I wish I had said nothing, obviously. I don’t even think I meant it at the time, but this is my nature. I say things and can’t take them back, like I love you.

"I thought you knew this was sort of a casual thing for me," had been Draco’s response to that.

I don’t blame my mother for resenting me, or Draco for leaving me. I don’t blame Viridian for not wanting to be alone, and I certainly don’t blame my father for dying. I don’t blame Daphne for being cherished, for being beautiful, for being loved.

I suppose at this point I’m so numb I don’t blame anyone for anything at all.

Father Percy takes me to St Mungo’s, which is where he goes in the afternoons. This is what he meant by healing the sick. "Providing comfort," he explains. "It gives me something to do. Something purposeful."

"Why am I here?" I ask him.

"Because I thought you might want to feel something," he says.

We spend the day chatting with absolute lunatics, which gives me an unsettled sort of feeling, like I’m off-kilter and trying to catch my balance. Percy handles himself better, though he’s not necessarily a natural when it comes to caregiving. Even I can carry a conversation better than he can, though anyone can see he’s trying. (A woman hands me a wrapper from some sweet and I tuck it in my pocket, oddly touched. It’s a possession she wants me to have, which certainly feels like something.)

"The thing about drugs," Percy remarks uninvited, "is they destroy your natural ability to feel. And feeling things is so powerful, so potent. I was afraid to lose that, so I went somewhere safe. Somewhere quiet."

"You couldn’t think of another place besides a seminary?" I ask doubtfully.

"I wasn’t thinking," he explains with a shrug. "That was the beauty of it. For once I stopped
thinking and simply went, and then I thought, maybe this is God."
"Vengeful God or merciful God?" I ask him.
"Either," he says. "Both."
(I love his mouth.)
"What?"
"Hm?"
He stares at me.
"I think I'd like to do terrible things with you," he remarks, a bit resentfully.
I tighten my legs, sitting up straight.
"Maybe you should do them," I tell him.
He smiles, distant now.
"Forgive me, Father," he murmurs to nothing.
I look at his hand, which rests between us.
(Every fiber of me wants to take it and hold it.)
(I'm breathless with the mortification of craving.)
(Can he hear my heart beating?)
"I should take you home," he says.

This is not a love story because you can't love someone you've just met. You don't love someone on sight, because that's not what love is. It's an addiction, yes, chemical and hormonal, but that's the rush, that's not love. Love is knowing someone's ins and outs with intimacy. Love is trust and friendship. Love is acceptance and kindness. Love is mercy and forgiveness, even when it is vengeance and justice. It is patient and kind even when it is harsh and grim and cruel.

You don't love him when he takes your face in his hand, carefully holding your chin between his thumb and the crook of his finger. You don't love him when he brushes his lips against yours the first time. That's not love. It's not love when you fantasize about him parting your thighs with his knee, taking you in his arms, balling your skirt in his fist. Love isn't like sex; it doesn't just happen. The end to loneliness is not love, even if it looks a great deal like it.

Love is made. It's like peace. It happens over time, with acceptance.

This is a hope story.

I start to cry even before he holds me. It's embarrassing, but for a moment I'm blissfully ignorant, totally blind. I can't see anything but him.

"It's just madness, you know?" I say deliriously. "It's all so empty and pointless and still, I'm just so
terrified I'm doing it all wrong."

I imagine he'll taste like red wine, which is how I imagine Jesus tastes. Instead I can smell the aftershave, and his tongue is spiced with whiskey. (This man is not okay, not even close. He ran from his life and he's been seeking solace ever since.)

He cradles my head with his palm, smoothing his hand over my hair. I fantasize that I am his serenity, only I know he couldn't be so unlucky. (This is a good man, albeit a confused one. Even on his worst days, he surely doesn't deserve me.)

"I don't think I'm capable of doing right by you," I say.

"Good," he says. "I haven't hit my quota of daily wrongs."

He slides his hands under my skirt. The little white collar blinks from around his neck.

(Am I going to fuck the priest because I know my mother will be furious?)

(From I going to fuck the priest?)

"Will you forgive me?" he says. (His breath is hot against my ear.)

"For what?"

His lips brush mine again. "Not letting you go."

Ah yes, the sin that is many sins. Lust and passion and greed. The desire that is more than desire, because it is craving untended, longing unfulfilled. Men of the cloth are meant to be above such things, turning their intentions skyward, but this one is lost.

(Like me.)

"Perhaps," I say, "you should kneel."

He strokes my cheek with his thumb, and then he lowers himself slowly, trailing kisses gently down my torso until he rests on his knees.

When he meets my eye, I know my mother's wedding day is ruined.

This is a story about finding where you're meant to be.

Chapter End Notes

I suspect the sum total of these stories is going to be a sense of what it's like to live with a bipolar person's brain for four weeks. (Me. I'm the person.) Hope you're still enjoying it! Or at least something close.
Gossip Girl here, back with a special holiday update. As of today, finals are at an end, which means your Manhattan elite are finally out to play—or are they? Climate change is no joke bbs, and this year's snowfall means there's no place like home for the holidays. Even the private jets of Columbia's finest can't take the chill, while the Brooklynites are bailing on their upstate meditation retreats to settle their angst with some cruelty-free vegan cocoa.

With our reigning Park Avenue Princess cozing up to the Chosen One this December, will there finally be—dare I say it—peace? Not if D and H have anything to say about it. As far as I'm concerned, this year's snowpocalypse means the real winter games are about to begin.

"Sign it," said Pansy flatly, sliding the page across the table to Draco.

"It would really mean a lot to us," added Harry, though he had the requisite sense to address that particularly useless remark to the only person in the room who would bother listening to him to begin with.

Draco cast a glance beside him to Hermione Granger, who for some godforsaken reason still hadn't disappeared. Her scholarship to Hogwarts High had been bad enough for the last four years, but Draco had been sure there would be no further reason to concern himself with her existence once he'd started at Columbia. She was supposed to be at NYU learning about Nietzsche or animal husbandry or something, totally forgotten as a single, troublesome blip on his social and academic radar, but then by some cruel twist of fate she wasn't. She was at his school. In his life. Again.

He adjusted his Maison Margiela sweater and turned disinterestedly away until Pansy snapped her fingers twice in his face, prompting him to a scowl.

"You will get along," she warned, threatening him with a glance. "We're all going to be together at the Christmas party tomorrow night, and I will not allow you two to ruin this for us—again," she added with a glare, echoing his precise thought. "Am I understood?"

Beneath the table, Hermione tapped her heinous winter boots and sighed.

"Fine," she conceded to Harry, pointedly ignoring Draco as she reached for the pen. "But only
because it's you. And also because you'll owe me for the next hundred years."

"Understood," said Harry, obviously relieved.

Hermione swirled her name in script and handed the pen to Draco, who balked, glaring at her.

"Do it," Pansy said, "or I'll tell everyone what happened last year in Aspen."

"What happened last year in Aspen?" Harry asked, and Pansy pointedly arched a brow in Draco's direction, aiming it like a weapon. Hermione, still holding the pen, gave Draco a look like whatever, don't care, which was about as plebeian a lie as it could possibly be.

Naturally he'd rather die than have anyone find out, and Pansy knew it. Worse, she was certainly sadistic enough to call his bluff.

"Fine," Draco muttered, snatching the pen from Hermione's hand and scrawling his signature onto the page. "Let's just get this over with."

The contract, if one could call it that despite the fact that it would never hold up in any court as a result of being openly unconscionable and probably also extortion, was two parts: one, a peace treaty, and two, submission to one (1) day of forced togetherness so that tomorrow, at Pansy's parents' annual Christmas party that was the 'event of the season' (meaningless to Hermione, but so be it), the bourgeoisie of the Upper East Side could remain blissfully undisturbed. Why Hermione had to be part of it in any conceivable way was unclear, though Harry seemed to consider it a truce of sorts. "Pansy's just trying to be friends," he offered optimistically, though Hermione doubted it. It seemed more probable that this was all punishment from some atrocity she'd committed in a past life.

Hermione, thoughtfully winding her scarf around her neck, was fairly certain the only way she could survive a day with Draco (a favor she would perform for Harry and Harry alone) was to very deliberately keep from speaking. "We could see a movie," she suggested, annoyed that he was already eyeing her knitted scarf as if he'd rather she freeze to death than force him to be seen standing next to it. "There's a foreign film festival in—"

"Do not," snapped Draco, "say Brooklyn."

"It's in Harlem," Hermione informed him, irritated anew as she shoved the signed contract into her pocket, "but never mind, meaningless classism it is. Do you have any better ideas?"

"We're going to Barney's," Draco informed her, yanking the door open to wave her through it, while Hermione stared blankly after him.

"What?"

"I have shit to do, Granger. You can tag along like a good girl," he suggested with a snide expression of open challenge, "or we can tell Pansy you're the one who broke the contract."

God, he was the absolute worst. On the bright side, it was the worst possible time to be visiting a department store, so maybe he'd be trampled to death somewhere around the makeup counters.

"Fine," Hermione allowed, gritting her teeth. "I need new gloves anyway."

He slid a pursed glance to her current gloves, which had been knitted by her roommate. There were beets dangling from the fingertips, which weren't exactly useful or attractive, but she couldn't
exactly say no. She hadn't meant to use them today, but they'd been right beside the door, and, well…

"You certainly do," Draco said with displeasure, letting the door fall shut just as she turned to follow him.

"Let me guess," she sighed, which was almost certainly the unpromising and intolerable commencement of yet another nonsensical rant. "You want me to try on one of these dresses under the pretext of needing one as a gift, when really, you're just going to subjugate me with the usual chauvinism of the male gaze, all because Pansy's got some sort of dirt about your recreational drug use or, I don't know, teen fight club that'll prevent your future appointment to the cabinet?"

It was just like her to be so self-righteous. It was the same whether the situation was the final round of Model U.N. or a simple fucking errand. Hermione Granger, Brooklyn-born and hippie-bred on a lifelong diet of wheatgrass and liberalism, didn't have a single opinion that wasn't militantly socialist and/or built on a fundamental misunderstanding of capitalism as a whole.

She didn't belong in his world, much less in his comparative literature course. Or in any of the three classes they had together outside of his introduction to finance course, which was the one she actually needed.

"First of all, I have no interest in gazing at you, male or otherwise," Draco informed her impatiently. "I'm supposed to have a gown sent for my mother, who's at least six inches taller than you, so as far as I'm concerned, you can sit quietly until I'm finished."

He turned, expecting her to do as he'd instructed, but of course she leapt forward and collided promptly with his heel. "For fuck's sake," he growled, fully trod upon by the heavy tread of her stupid boots, but she ignored him.

"What's the gown for?" she asked.

"The Christmas party," he snapped, "obviously."

"Isn't it a family party? I thought your family and Pansy's were close."

Questions, questions, questions. "Yes, Granger, they are." Just ask Page Six.

"But then why—"

"Tradition, Granger, is what separates us from the animals," sighed Draco, rounding on her in agitation. "If you were part of this world in any conceivable way, you'd understand."

"But that's the point—I can't be part of it, can I? And anyway, tradition is inherently fallacious," she said, expressionless. "Most of the world's current traditions came from the Victorians and were spread via imperialism."

Jesus Christ. "So?"

"So," she retorted, liberally emphatic, "doesn't it bother you that you're contributing to a stratified class system that not only ensures continued inequality, but celebrates it?"

"Oh, please," Draco scoffed, having had enough of this argument from their final round of debate senior year with McGonagall, another notorious left-wing nutjob. "If you want money, Granger, get a job. Start a business. Whatever. I can't help those who don't help themselves."
"Oh right, a business," Hermione echoed. "Do you mean the one your father inherited from his father that got bailed out by Congress, or the one his father got a million dollar loan from his father to start? So difficult to remember which is which," she added facetiously, "seeing as neither one pays taxes."

Draco, exasperated, plucked a slinky black dress off the rack and thrust it in her hands. "Put that on," he suggested, letting his eyes travel pointedly down the bulge of her probably-recycled shapeless puffer coat. "I might be able to stand you if I had something decent to look at."

Hermione scowled, silenced by fury, and Draco smiled to himself. At least he still knew how to shut her up.

Pansy and Harry had almost gotten together once before, but then Hermione and Draco had gotten into an argument so heated it had gotten them both suspended. One thing led to another and Harry had sided with Hermione, Pansy with Draco, and for months the line was drawn somewhere around the East Village. Now they were trying it again, only Hermione and Draco were still… Hermione and Draco.

Meaning: he was still a total asshole and she still hated every individual atom of his guts.

"Let's just go back to my place," Draco said. "It's big enough that we can avoid each other all afternoon."

"Great," spat Hermione, only with the weather so bad and getting worse every hour, they waited outside for a cab only for her to give up in teeth-chattering exasperation, dragging him to the nearest subway entrance. From there, every train car was packed and suffocating, and Draco, princess that he was, wouldn't stop complaining at length about the assault to his senses as if she had somehow craved the smell of urine, or getting dick pics air-dropped to every phone on the train. Eventually, Hermione couldn't stand him or the heat, letting the crowd shove her out the door at what turned out to be entirely the wrong stop.

"I want some coffee," she announced, registering her error with a mild flame of frustration. She could never admit it now; he'd lord it over her forever. Or at least until Pansy and Harry had the decent sense to break up.

"From here?" Draco asked, patently doubtful.

"Yes," she said, shoving into whatever nameless cafe was nearest to where they'd paused outside the turnstiles.

The coffee was watery and acidic, but at least it was hot. Draco, meanwhile, looked at his cup like it might come to life and eat him. "This is disgusting."

"It's cheap," said Hermione, forcing cheerfulness. "Enjoy it."

"Whatever," he said, shoving it listlessly away before adding, "You really shouldn't drink Sumatra."

"Why," she scoffed, "is Indonesia suddenly too plebeian for you?"

He tossed her a glare. "They intentionally burn the forests, Granger. Contaminates the air in all the nearby countries. Shouldn't you already know that? Since you're so concerned about world peace or whatever," he added blisteringly, and she felt an uprise of annoyance.
He had so many terrible versions and somehow, the very worst one was when he was even moderately close to right.

"That isn't 'world peace or whatever,' Malfoy," Hermione snapped.

She glanced at her cup, and Draco launched one leg out, kicking her foot.

"Sorry," he said insincerely.

This was going to be a long fucking day.

"Let's just get an Uber and go," growled Hermione.

"You do know Lyft has cleaner track record as far as data breaches and corporate policy," drawled Draco. "Or do you not care about #MeToo?"

She wanted to slam his head into the table, but managed to suppress it. *Harry and Pansy are in love,* she told herself for the fortieth time. *Harry's in love, and also, I can't go to law school if I go to prison for murder first.*

"Whatever," she said, tossing out her coffee half-drunk.

Surge pricing in this weather was so heinously exorbitant that there was no way she was even going to *consider* it. Draco could see the hesitation on her face, and the delight of offering her money only for her to self-righteously refuse was too delicious to resist.

"Need something?" he prompted, the portrait of innocence. As predicted, she shoved her phone back in her monstrosity of a coat.

"Let's get a drink," she said flatly, and he scoffed.

"Granger, it's four in the afternoon. Just admit you can't afford the Uber." She was so fruitlessly immovable he suspected she'd gladly die before asking him for help. He was no different, probably, but this wasn't about him.

"It's cold and I want a drink," she said, proving him right. "So are you coming with me, or is Pansy going to have to tell us what you did in Aspen?"

Ah. So she *was* curious, then.

"After you," he offered in the most lofty iteration of his voice, waving her onward.

She glared at him, but for once, comeuppance was particularly expeditious. She slipped immediately on slick ice, landing hard on her backside while he took a long, deliberate step, leaning pointedly over her.

"Don't suppose you need help getting up?" he mused aloud.

"Fuck off, Malfoy." She was effortlessly predictable.

"Language," he drawled, tugging at his leather gloves while she struggled to her feet. Thankfully she'd bought herself a new pair at Barney's, as her old ones were properly revolting. These still weren't leather—something about cows, though he reminded her vegan leather was plastic and therefore equally problematic—but were at least moderately less embarrassing to be seen with.
She led them to a nearby dive bar, which upon entry was revealed to be filled with what Draco's mother liked to call 'the elements'—drunks half-passed out on the bar, lunatics chattering to themselves, plus an entire group of men who smelled like smoke and a couple more who would have been vastly improved by the smell of smoke. He would have dubbed it disgusting and left on the spot had Hermione not been just as uncomfortable as he was and twice as unlikely to admit it.

"We could leave," he murmured in her ear, taunting her with the possibility of admitting defeat, and she shoved him brusquely away.

"It's fine," she said, lyingly. "It's character. These are real people, Malfoy, which of course you wouldn't know anything about."

It was consistently astounding just how ridiculous she could be. "Granger," he growled, "just admit my way of life is preferable and let me pay the surge fee, would you? This is getting stupid."

"Or," she countered, "we could get back on the train. I've got an Italian roast in my dorm," she offered melodically, "if that's more suitable to your product ethics."

The idea of what sort of communal anarchy he might find in her dorm room was enough to reduce him to shudders. "I'm not getting on that train again. It's sweltering, and anyway, the tracks are probably frozen by now—"

"Well, then I'm not leaving here," she informed him stubbornly, plunking down on a bar stool and shoving her coat forcefully from her shoulders. "So either you drink or you tell Pansy the contract is void."

He stared at her, wondering just how much he wanted to push the limits of his father's friendship with the District Attorney before finally pulling out the chair beside her.

"Fine," he said, flashing a bill between his fingers at the bartender. "Then we're drinking."

He was much too pretty for prison, and anyway, he could definitely use a drink.

She preferred him silent, ideally comatose, so naturally he opted for revoltingly chatty. Within an hour she was pretty sure she had enough information for nearly all his bank codes. His mother's birthday, the city his parents met, his first pet. (A turtle named Herbie, called Herb as it matured. Narcissa had allergies.) He still lived in the same penthouse where he was born, so the street he lived on was easy enough, though apparently he had a second house in the Hamptons and a third somewhere on the Riviera, which offset her calculations.

She, meanwhile, was starting to feel it by the bottom of her first drink, though any further feelings had the courtesy to blissfully depart by drink three or four. Apparently she was being funny or something, because Draco was laughing. At her, not with her, probably, but she was too cold and miserable to care.

"You know, I'll never like you," she informed him, possibly a bit slurred. "If today's convinced me of anything, it's that."

"Personally, I plan to hate you as long as I live," he told her, flagging the bartender down for shots. "You're repugnant."

"Why," she scoffed, "because I don't have a trust fund? Or because someone else had to pay for me to go to your school?"
"Oh, don't sell yourself short, Granger. It's your personality I can't stand," he assured her at a drawl, sliding the glass of tequila in her direction.

"Ugh. Tequila. You would." Secretly, she liked tequila shots more than most other forms of alcohol. The ritual of it was comforting: lick your hand, pour the salt, lick it off, toss back the shot, bite down on the lime. Fluid, comprehensible, beholden to scientific properties. She performed the ceremony with furtive relish, wincing as the alcohol burned down her throat and then shuddering around the citrus.

Beside her, Draco licked the sheen of alcohol from his lips. "You're the worst," he told her, reaching for the lime wedge between her fingers and sucking at what little remained.

Her fingers brushed his Adam's apple as he swallowed. Perturbed and disgusted, she waved the bartender for another round, tossing the discarded lime aside.

"You're paying for this," she informed him.

"Should've just let me pay for the Uber."

"Lyft."

"'kay," he said, obediently lifting his hand. She paused for half a second, then licked it, sprinkled the salt over it, and handed it back to him as the bartender refilled their glasses.

This time, Draco raised the tequila to his lips and held it there, tilting his head back and downing the shot in one swallow. Then he leaned forward, replacing the glass on the bar with his mouth. "Yikes," he said, eyes watering.

It occurred to her that maybe this was not her best idea. Still, the opportunity to watch him suffer was too pleasing to resist, so Hermione shoved his head back, squeezing drops of lime onto his tongue.

He licked his lips again, sparing her a glare. "Your turn."

"Fuck you," she said, and took another lick from his hand, smugly challenging him to stop her. In apparent reprisal, he held the glass up to her lips, tipping the liquid so forcefully between them she nearly choked on her swallow. "Lime," she coughed up, reaching for it, but he plucked it from the dish first.

He raised it to his own mouth, holding it between his teeth. "Let me order the Uber," he said around the rind, taunting her with it.

This was the problem. When it came down to it, it was this: everything with him was a taunt, a dare, a challenge. Everything was push and pull, hot and cold, and she always felt mystified by him, caught up in a burst of confusion.

Time to make things simple.

She rose to her feet, grasping his jaw stiffly with one hand, and leaned forward, loosening the lime from his lips with her tongue. He shuddered, and she, triumphant, sucked the lime's juices dry before tossing it aside.

"I hate you so much," she said, pursing her lips from the tartness, pure citrus.

"Finally, something we have in common." He picked up his phone with a sparkling laugh.
They fumbled into his foyer, him stripping the coat from her shoulders and tossing it blindly away. Beneath it, much to his astonishment, she had an actual shape. A good one. He wanted to frame it on his mantle, wrap it in silk. He wanted to fight with her about Reaganomics in the bath. Wanted to sip champagne from her navel while she lectured him about Iraq.

"Jesus," she said into his sweater, half-melting into it. "This feels like butter."

"It's cashmere, sweetheart," he told her, reveling in the growl that followed. "But don't worry, I wouldn't expect you to know your textiles."

"God, I hate you so much," she said again, and kissed him to prove it, biting hard on his lip.

He laughed, dizzy and day-drunk, and sat her on top of the foyer's untouched baby grand, removing her stupid boots one by one. They spent hundreds of dollars to tune it only for it to sit here and shine, useless. Her narrow heel could dig into a flawless middle C, finally something worth playing, and it would be fucking extravagance. A perfect fucking waste.

"You," he said to her mouth, "are exhausting. I hate you so much it burns." Or more accurately, it throbbed.

In answer, she withdrew the contract from her pocket, tearing it mindlessly to shreds as he pulled his sweater over his head, tossing it aside.

"It's off," she said, letting the pieces scatter to the floor. "We can't get along. Peace canceled."

She was looking at him like she'd happily stab him with his mother's good crystal, burying the shards somewhere in his ribs. She could watch him bleed or curl her palm around his cock, same thing. Her impassivity was incandescent.

"Good." He slid his tongue in her mouth, laughing again when he tasted tequila and surrender. "Besides," he murmured, "it really doesn't matter who the fuck Pansy tells."

Hermione dug her nails into his chest, red crescents blooming from her touch. "What'd you do in Aspen?"

"Got drunk," he said, sliding a hand into her jeans. He shoved aside what was definitely not La Perla with a desperate clench of his jaw, finding its contents to be decadent enough without it. The only thing more impossible than basic amicability was clearly going to be restraint.

She tugged his head back by his hair, prompting him to a groan. "And?" she prompted, one hand clawed around his neck. Her teeth scraped over her lips, bitten and red, slick with promise. Vindictive with it.

Finally. Someone who could keep up. He hated her most for that, or for making him wait. For making him suffer, which only she could do. All of the above.

He dove his fingers deeper, possessive, and caught her moan on his tongue.

"Told her," he murmured to her mouth, "that I wanted to fuck you." He peeled back the cup of her bra with his free hand, sliding his tongue over the bead of her nipple until she gasped. "But no one would ever believe that, would they?"

"Nope," she agreed, tugging at his zipper and drawing him between her legs. "Not in a million years."
Well, would you look at that. It might be cold outside, but baby, it's hot in here. The planet might be in crisis, but these polar icecaps melting? That's my kind of fun. XOXO—Gossip Girl.

Chapter End Notes

Just saying, when a man sells his girlfriend for a hotel and repeatedly tries to convince her that her only value is his love, the only thing I ship him with is the bottom of the ocean. Cheers! XOXO, Olivie.
He's riding the bottom of some uppers when he sees her.

"Hey," he realizes, falling blearily to a halt. "I know you."

"Please. You hardly know yourself," she says, and doesn't stop.

"We fight like my parents," she whispers, and he's made her cry again, and there is nothing lower than knowing that's on him. There is nothing like this guilt, sickening. Nothing like his skin crawling with contrition and longing and fear.

He pours the wine from the bottle, letting it drip onto the contours of her stomach. "Thought you didn't want to see me again."

"I didn't."

He trails the tip of his finger from the base of her ribs to her navel, leaving a glaze of malbec behind. "What changed?"

Her eyes are closed when she says, "Saw it in my tea leaves."

For once, he hopes she's right.

"No, really, I know you," he says, catching her arm, and she gives him a slant-eyed look of distaste, or possibly loathing.

"You're dying," she says.

"God, I hope so," he tells her. "See it in your tea leaves or something?"

"I can see it on your face," she says.

Their first kiss is behind a locked door. He has kissed her many times before this in his head, and
he suspects the evidence of that is clear. This kiss, though, is spontaneous, unplanned, and it's difficult to tell which of them is more surprised. He kisses her like a sob, and she kisses him back like a scream. Ultimately it was probably an accident.

It gets heated quickly, probably because of the anguish and rage which has nothing and everything to do with both of them, and soon he has a handful of her hair and she's shoving his hand under her skirt and it's pretty clear where this is going, and the only thought going through his mind is how much he wants to see her naked. That won't happen here, not now, but someday he plans to look at her long and hard and carefully, conscientiously, committing her to memory. He'll dip his fingertips in watercolor to paint the sharp bones of her hips.

She seems to know he's a mistake. "You're going to break my heart," she says prophetically.

"No," he says. No, not yours.

She sighs when he fills her, or he does.

"I think I'm going to let you do it," she mumbles into his neck.

They fight about his drinking. They fight about her tarot cards. They fight about where to eat dinner. They fight about whether she should get a cat. They fight about her sister. They fight about his mother. They fight about the situation in the Middle East. They fight about his socks. They fight about his friends. They fight about him. They fight about him. They fight about him.

"You're not even trying," she says. "You're not even trying to be alive."

He can't figure out what the fuck that even means.

She snatches the bottle from his hand and brings it to her lips.

"Someday you won't have me anymore," she says. "Bet you won't even see it coming."

Then she throws the bottle at the wall, letting it shatter, and vanishes the glass.

After the first night he sees her he becomes mildly obsessed, which is not something he typically becomes when it comes to women (or men). For the record, there are an endless amount of ways their first meeting goes differently, and almost none of them end like this. "Hey, I know you." "Yeah, we went to Hogwarts together." "Hey, I know you." "I know you, too. Bye." "Hey, I know you." Silence. "Hey, I know you." "Who the fuck are you?" "Hey, I know you." "Fuck off."

"Hey, I know you." "Please. You don't even know yourself." This is the only outcome that has him scrambling for an explanation, thirsting for one. He learns her best marks were in divination and her best friend died during the war and now she works for some sort of wizarding art collective. She's not an artist herself but she manages their accounts, showcases their work. She has chosen to surround herself with beautiful things.

It's easy, then, to show up at her gallery opening in his most expensive tailored robes, buying a piece off the wall within five minutes of entering. He looks for her and doesn't see her.

"Why that one?" she says from behind him, and he jumps.

"Fucking hell," he says, spilling his martini on the floor. She vanishes it before it lands, the motion so quick he glares at her.
"Why?" she says again.
"Why what?"
"Why that painting?"
"Because I like it."
"No, you don't."
"Fine, because I like you."
"You definitely don't."
"What?"
"You don't know me. And you don't like that painting."
"What makes you so sure?"
"Because if you like that painting," she says, "there's something seriously fucking wrong with you."

He stares at her.

"It reminds me of my mother," he confesses eventually, feeling stripped down to his bones.

"Yeah," she says. "That makes sense."

Then she turns and walks away.

Inevitably he resorts to begging.

"Where is she?"

Her twin has different eyes, a different mouth. He is exceedingly aware that he has never kissed this mouth, and he hates it. It feels mocking and cruel.

"If she wanted you to know, Zabini, you'd know."

Some nights he holds her like he's going to lose her. "You'd tell me if you were leaving me, wouldn't you?"

"No, probably not," she says, but her legs are woven with his and her arms are tangled around his neck and she is pressed against him, every inch, and so he thinks fears are mostly impossibilities, irrationalities. She wouldn't go, not her, because she's not actually very good, and certainly not very healthy. A good person or a healthy one would leave and find something better, but she's a little fucked up, like him. Little things. When he puts on his shoes she always looks like she's going to cry. She trembles sometimes in her sleep. She flinches when he speaks too loudly. Little things.

He's never actually considered anything precious before. Money does that to a person, so he doesn't know how to take care of her. How to keep her without hoarding her. He only knows how to waste things, misuse them.
He buys her gifts she doesn't use, and it infuriates him. "I don't want this," she says, tossing the necklaces back to him, the lingerie, the bottles of expensive wine, the candied chestnuts and truffles. "Stop."

Her rejection of him stings. He's giving himself to her and she says no you're not.

"The money is all I am," he snarls.

The look she gives him is 99% pity, 1% rage.

"I told you," she says. "You're not even trying."

For a person with hard edges, she cries easily. Sad tears. Happy tears. Tears of frustration. Tears when he leaves. Tears when he comes back. Tears when he says I love you. Tears when he says you love me, admit it, just say it, just tell me you love me and come home. Tears when he paints her toenails for her. Tears during sappy romantic movies. Tears when she draws the five of swords. She has brown eyes, liquid ones. At first she looks like the sort of girl who'd be pretty if she smiled more but eventually he realizes that when she smiles, she becomes this terrifying thing full of lethality and violence, practically cavernous with her joy.

Her beauty is the enormity of her heart.

It makes him furious when people don't see her. It makes him less angry when they do, but still angry. It's some intrinsic ownership reflex, provider bullshit, possessive-jealous fuckery that embarrasses him and makes him sweat. He wants people to understand that a single glance at her is not enough. He wants to understand how other people look away. The way he feels about her is a mix of resentment and poison. She reminds him of black coffee stirred with lavender sprigs. He thinks: I have to fuck her. Then he thinks: I can never fuck her, I don't want to get burnt.

In the end he does fuck her, only he doesn't, because even with his cock inside her this isn't fucking, it's something cliched and full of rose petals and bubble baths. He feels Byronic about her, Shelley-esque. She does some twisted shit to his brain that makes him want to rhyme. Why her? Because shut the fuck up, it's obvious, he has no goddamn idea. Maybe because she's been mourning him from the start.

"You're dying slowly," she says. "I know I'll miss you someday."

Then, because she's a little bit cruel, she adds, "Or maybe I won't."

Imagine some fucking oracle says you're dying. What do you do, heal? He doesn't.

He writes her eighteen letters over the course of eight days and then drinks for three weeks and then cries over the letters he wrote her. He throws a knife into the painting he bought, the one that reminds him of his mother. Underneath the painting is another painting, just kidding it's another dimension, just kidding he's on drugs. He's high for another two days and thinks about jumping off his roof until he realizes oh, duh, that's what she meant. He's been dying slowly since the moment he was born.

But then he comes down from the high and takes a four hour shower and thinks oh shit, I wasn't even on the roof. What the fuck?

But she's still gone.
Their third kiss is memorable because he's holding her hand and he comments out loud how cinematic this all is. The wind in her hair and the flower he's just tucked behind her ear and all that; it's highly literary.

He says, "How did I get you?"

"Animal magnetism," she replies.

The truth is she's funny and scary and her heart is bigger than his and her mind has all these nooks and crannies, twists and turns, and she sees right through him and he likes it. She says, "You're such a fucking fraud," and he says oh shit I am and kisses her gratefully, hungrily. He kisses her like he's eating himself alive, putting his whole psyche in her hands.

"Want the truth?" she says.

"Never," he tells her.

"I like how fragile you are." She laughs. "You're so delicate you make me look strong."

He's insulted and in awe. He adores her, slavishly.

"What do you want? Anything," he says. "Say anything and it's yours."

"Me," she says.

Then she kisses him until his lips burn.

She gives him the third best blow job of his life on his birthday and afterwards, she says, "God, I debase myself a thousand different ways for you."

"How does it feel?" he asks her.

"What, debasing myself?"

"Yeah."

"Really good." She smiles at him and he thinks she'll probably cry later. The cake is really beautiful. She might cry about that. Or maybe he'll get too drunk and she'll cry. He is hit with a mix of intense, insurmountable shame and glittering, opulent affection. "Makes me feel absolutely filthy," she says. "Terrifically gone to shit."

She kisses him again, and she is happy-sad, or sad-happy.

"I'm going to miss you," she says.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Someday, yeah," she says. "Don't rush me, though."

Stay, he wants to say, but he doesn't.

"Come on," she tells him, dragging him back to the party. "Your degenerate friends are waiting."

He loses track of how long she's been gone. He sends so many owls to her gallery they start
sending them back unopened. Is she there? No, she's not here, please stop this Mr Zabini, it's becoming upsetting to the artists in residence. Miss Patil is on sabbatical, no we don't know when she'll be back. She didn't leave an address or a message. We don't know who to ask, try her sister. Try her friends.

The truth is she doesn't have friends. When he realizes it, he starts to understand: she doesn't have friends. Not really. He was her friend. He was her friend and he hurt her, he was mean to her, he was a bad friend to her, he let her down. He loved her badly, so she left.

She tells him his palm says he has a big heart, that he'll live a long life. He has "air palms," all anxiety and artistry, she's jealous. Three children or no children, unclear. One lover but also, many trysts. Sensuality abounds, she muses, either teasing him or lamenting it to herself.

She kisses the center of his palm and curls his fingers around it, which is the only part of that he actually believes.

"Thought you said I was dying," he says.

"You are," she says, "but you're going to live a long life while you do it."

"Do what?"

"Die slowly."

"Sounds painful," he says.

She gives him a fleeting look of sorrow and her eyes briefly water, red-rimmed.

"It will be," she says. "It is."

"I know you," he says.

She cut her hair and changed her perfume, but still, it's unquestionably her.

"Yeah?" she says.

"Yeah," he tells her, "but you don't know me."

"I don't?"

"Not anymore. Whoever that was before, he finally died," he says. "The handsome gentleman you see before you was just recently born. Possibly this morning."

She arches a brow, then beckons for his palm. "Show me."

He gives it to her, and she studies it for a long moment. Several long moments.

"I've seen this palm before," she says, delivering her verdict.

"I know," he tells her. "You have."

"But you're different?"

"Unrecognizable."
"Clean?"

"Virginal."

She pauses a moment, shading her eyes from the sun.

"Are you here to take me home?" she asks, after perhaps another minute of silence.

"I don't need to," he says. "I am home."

When the gallery aides drop off the painting, he's hungover and much more broke than he was yesterday. Still, he turns it over to inspect his new purchase, spotting the label on the back.

_Some People are Made of Death._

Oil on canvas, Parvati Patil, 2 May 1999.

"I wouldn't have answered that owl for just anyone, you know. I have a lot of clients. I can't meet with every rich prick who spends too much money on bad art."

"It's not bad art."

She arches a brow, disagreeing, and he changes his tactics.

"So, how often do you sell your own work?"

She sips her gin quietly. "Never."

(He will kiss her in ten minutes.)

"So this was…?"

"An exception."

(Nine.)

"You made an exception for me?"

"I didn't know it was going to be you, but yes."

"Why this painting?"

(His life will change irreversibly in seven minutes.)

"It was ugly," she says.

"It's not ugly."

"It is," she corrects him, sparing him a glance that says _don't argue_, and he obeys. "It is, and I wanted it to be. I wanted to make something ugly. If I made something ugly then maybe I would get it out of my sight. And if I got it out of my sight, maybe I could get it out of my body. And if it was gone from my body, then maybe it would finally be gone from my soul."

(Six.)
"Did it work?"

"No." Pause. "Not really."

"So what are you going to do about the ugliness?"

"Carry it, I guess. I don't know. Wear it like a cloak. Or a scarf."

"Or a noose?"

"Yep. Probably."

(Five.)

"I like it," he said. "The painting. Well, no," he corrected himself. "I don't like it. It makes me feel sick to look at it, and honestly I was drunk when I bought it."

(Four.)

"But," he said, "I don't want to look away."

(Three.)

"That's brave of you," she says, expressionless. "Or fucked up, I don't know. Perverse, kind of. Definitely a little sexy."

"Thank you? I think."

(Two and a half.)

(Two and a quarter.)

She drains her glass, rising to her feet and glancing toward her office.

(Two.)

"Want to go somewhere?" she asks him.

(One.)

"Yeah," he says. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter End Notes

The compliment I value most is people who will read whatever I offer them regardless of what pairing is listed at the top. I don't expect many to reach this point, but to those of you who are here: Thank you, you're my favorites. Title of the story from one of my favorite albums.
Prophecy

Pairing: Nottpott (Theo Nott x Harry Potter)

Universe: fairytale/Disney AU

Rating: T

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: 1) a Tangled AU; 2) archery; 2.5) There's Only One Bed.

Prophecy is a tricky thing. Anyone who has ever been the subject of one will tell you that, though in most cases said subjects are difficult to find. Take young Lord Voldemort, for instance, who is both not young and not a lord, but that's not the point. For the purposes of this story he's a cheeky young lad running around unattended, murdering left and right where it suits him with all the virility of youth, and then one day he hears an unfortunate rumor: A baby that will be his end will be born at the end of July! The worst possible news for any given Tuesday.

Things go wrong as they always do when one tries to bargain with prophecy, which is a bit like fate's kid sister, mostly in the sense that for all we know, fate may not care much for prophecy's shenanigans but there's still a sense of possessiveness there. So young Lord Voldemort, who is not the hero of this story but certainly a character of importance, runs off to kill his baby arch nemesis and then, surprise surprise, it doesn't work. So what does he do? He takes the baby. He disappears.

Why? Unclear. As far as the world can tell, both the baby and our dashing young antagonist are gone, and the world, including me, waits for both its hero and its villain with baited breath. Somehow, there's a sense for all of us that something, somewhere, is missing; Death Eaters and Snatchers wait one way, while the rest of the world waits another. A different boy turns seventeen and opts to disappear rather than choose a side, though nobody cares much about him. Another story, another time.

Well, this story, this time. But at the moment I don't have a lot of spare breaths, because you see, I'm on the run. Again. Most likely I will be on the run for the entirety of the story, if not the whole of my life. But what's important is, again, the prophecy, and it isn't about me.

It's about him.

The story starts here:

Two days before Harry's seventeenth birthday, he wakes to find his father standing over him and jumps. "Holy Salazar fuck," he says before he can stop himself, and his father leans back with a sigh.

"Language, Harry," is what comes from beneath the cloak. "Are you awake or not?"
"I am now," says Harry, who typically rises early, but this is so early as to still be night, and therefore closer to late. He rubs his eyes blearily, frowning around his room. "Did you need something, Father?"

Father is very mysterious, as he always is. He doesn't care for questions. "I have an errand to run," he says. "I came to tell you I won't be back until Thursday."

"But that's two days from now," says Harry.

"Yes," Father says. "And you mustn't leave here until I return."

Harry is never permitted to leave here for a variety of reasons; primarily, the muggles. Father tells him frequently of the dangers of muggles, which have enormous teeth and sometimes claws and who all want Harry to be dead. There are also mudbloods and apparently some half-breeds, which equally can't be trusted. Essentially, it's safest if Harry just stays here, where Father's untraceable wards can protect him. Even magic isn't enough to keep him safe among the outside world, though only Father has it.

"You've never been gone so long," Harry says uncertainly, and Father gives a weighty sigh.

"I found something I've been looking for, Harry. I need to fetch it. Just stay here," he says. "I've left you plenty of food. Read a book," he suggests.

"What a wonderful idea, Father," says Harry.

Eventually Father rummages around collecting things and prepares to depart, plucking his usual bottle of tonic from Harry's shelf. Father is very particular, and he must take this tonic each evening. It is Harry who procures the ingredients, though he doesn't stray too far. After all, outside of these wards, danger is lurking. Muggles are waiting to eat his flesh; to pick at their teeth with his bones.

"Behave," says Father. "Father loves you."

"And I love you, Father," Harry says solemnly, retrieving a book from his shelf and settling into his chair, beginning to read this particular story for the fourteenth time. "Have a wonderful trip," he says, and watches his father slip out the door, heavy cloak disappearing into the night.

Harry has a good life here in the forest, safe inside his untraceable plot of land. That much is unquestionable, as he is securely kept from harm and he is loved by his adoring father and he has quite a lot of books and also arrows for procuring his father's tonics. He has everything he could need.

Though, Harry also has a secret, and it is this:

He is deeply, prodigiously bored.

The next day, Theo is running, as he always is. The trick to stealing is not the stealing itself but the running, because anyone can snatch something up, but not everyone can disappear quickly. Sometimes he uses a broom, though Theo doesn't care for flying. He has long legs and an impossible stride and if he looks a bit weedy, that's only because of the long legs and impossible stride, which make him an uncommonly gifted thief.

Yesterday, Theo paid a visit to Hogwarts, which is not a school he attends, but rather a school he used to attend until recently and is now something of a veritable treasure trove he still uses in order
to eat. He went there long enough to learn Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, which means it was sufficient time to understand the only thing that truly makes food is money. So, from time to time Theo pops by and plucks up an odd book or a remembrall or something he can turn around and sell in Knockturn Alley, and on this particular capital venture he has stolen a bit of chatty silver, but also something else.

Theo, nearly briefly caught, was forced to hide inside a cupboard when the Headmaster suddenly burst into the kitchens, saying something to one of the elves about treacle or possibly nitwit, blubber, oddment, tweak. The most important thing about this story is the wand sticking out of the Headmaster's pocket, which for some reason (fun?) Theo steals.

The second most important thing about this story is that today, Theo, who was spotted by the castle's poltergeist upon scaling down from a second-floor window, is now, once again, on the run.

"Did ye hear?" wails one of the patrons at the Hog's Head. "Dumbledore's gone—killed, yesterday, and 'is wand stolen, too!"

An unfortunate coincidence, Theo wants to say, but doesn't.

"Who could have possibly killed Dumbledore?" someone asks, dismayed.

"Some sort o' weedy little thief. A former student, if ye can believe that—"

"No," gasps the patron's companion. "A student, really?"

"They say it's one of the purebloods," another patron says, overhearing. He glances around before adding under his breath, "Nott."

"The Death Eater, you mean?"

"The very same. 'Course it was Peeves who saw 'im," says the first patron, "and everyone knows what Peeves' about, but the bugger doesn't lie, does 'e? Dumbledore's dead, and it's Nott who's killed 'im."

Upon hearing his name, Theo thinks one thing: Fuck.

Then the barkeep locks eyes with him, brows furrowing, and Theo thinks another, more familiar thing:

Run.

Harry contemplates the line on the ground that represents his safety. It's a spell, his father tells him. Something to keep him safe, and to keep others out. Something untraceable. Beyond the line is danger. Here, though, Harry is secure, impossible to locate. Safe.

Harry eyes the line and toes it, then stops.

When nothing happens, he takes a step, and then another. One at a time, his feet plant themselves outside the line of his father's spell.

He takes a breath, free of his father's magic for the first time in his life.

Then something collides with him, and he goes tumbling down to the ground.

"Holy fuck," says something, which is evidently someone, and Harry wrestles himself away with
his usual quickness, producing an arrow from his quiver and holding it to the obstacle's face.

"Who are you?" he demands. "Are you a muggle?"

The thing, which is strangely familiar in that it is mostly Harry-shaped but with skinnier limbs and less wild hair, glares up at him. "What the fuck?" says the thing, which must be a person. "Is that a fucking arrow?"

Harry quickly loads the arrow in his waiting bow and shoves his foot down on the thing-person's chest, causing it to groan. "Are you a muggle or aren't you?"

"I hardly think it matters," coughs the man-monster. "What are you doing running out of nowhere like that?"

"Out of nowhere? This is my house!"

"Uh," the thing says. "What house?"

So then Harry stops, eyes widening, because he has forgotten something in his calculations: He has, up until this point in his life, lived in an untraceable house on an unfindable plot of forest where his father has assured him every single day of his life that no one, ever, would be able to reach him.

Now that he is outside it, of course he can no longer see the house.

Immediately, Harry panics. The arrow, strung tight in his bow, shakes a little in his hand. He has no method of safety now. He has the little wooden whistle in his pocket, which he blows to make the horned horses come, and he has his arrows, but he has no way of returning home.

Instead of panicking for long, however, Harry notices something about the boy-thing he's currently stepping on, which is a wand. A very familiar wand. Something he's seen before in a book he has read several dozen times, and which has always given his father a strange, disconcerting look.

"Where did you get that?" Harry asks. "You shouldn't have it."

"I know," says the man-boy-thing, though he adds afterwards, "Why, is it valuable?"

"It's invincible," says Harry, frowning. "And lost."

Whatever it is that's just collided with him smiles so archly Harry can see all his teeth, which are not pointed, though it's not unscary and Harry certainly isn't unscared.

"Not lost anymore," says Harry's new problem.

The person who calls himself Harry is essentially a feral thing, which is ideal, because he clearly doesn't read the Daily Prophet and therefore has no interest in turning Theo over to any Aurors. Theo suggests they get some food and talk about whatever wand this is he's procured, mostly for the conversation but also to be polite, but instead Harry draws his arrow lightning-fast, prowling into the woods, and within minutes sets up a spit for what turns out to be delightfully seasoned rabbit.

"It's the Elder Wand," Harry says, having at least the decency to chew politely, so he wasn't entirely raised by wolves. "My father's looking for it."

"Oh?" says Theo, realizing Harry's father will know how to find it quite soon if he reads the
papers, which could be either good news or bad. "Is he a buyer?"

"He's quite ill," says Harry. "He requires a nightly tonic I have to hunt."

By this point Theo has learned a few other things about Harry: one, he's a lunatic. He seems to be obsessed with teeth. Two, Harry seems to have never left his house or this forest, which means he knows absolutely nothing about anything if it hasn't existed in books, and therefore Theo is unsure what he means by tonic.

"Oh, I hunt the horned horse," Harry says. "Well, I summon it, and then—"

"The tonic is unicorn blood?" Theo asks with horror. "But anyone who kills a unicorn lives a half-life. A cursed life—"

Which would explain a lot, but Harry gives a happy-cheery sort of shrug. "I don't kill it," he says. "I just ask it for some and it gives it to me, and then I put it into a bottle for my father."

Theo is starting to think he's come across something very, very strange.

"About your father," Theo says. "Is he… normal?"

"He's a bit skeletal," says Harry thoughtfully. "Which is why he wears a cloak. But he keeps me safe," he adds with a shrug.

"He keeps you hidden," Theo corrects, "and he's looking for an invincible wand, and he thinks—"

Slowly, too slowly, Theo pieces this together. "Wait. He hates muggles?"

"Only the ones with teeth," Harry says, and Theo is about to say something like holy shit I think maybe your father isn't actually your father or if he is then you are in terrible trouble whoever you are, because suddenly I have an idea who actually killed Headmaster Dumbledore and also, I think I know what he was after and now, inconveniently, he's going to be after me, only someone interrupts them.

"Theodore Nott, put your hands in the air!"

Aurors. Lots of them. Theo winces, about to rise to his feet in surrender, but then Harry draws an arrow, and then another.

Harry, Theo realizes, is either the best thing that has ever happened to him, or the worst.

Theo rushes Harry out of the forest, which is not a place Harry has ever thought to have a beginning or an end. The forest was his entire world until this morning, but now Theo is dragging him into some sort of village and furiously wiping the blood from Harry's face.

"Do you realize what you just did?" Theo demands.

"Saved you," Harry says. "Why?"

Theo pauses for a moment, tense, but then sighs.

"Fine, yes," Theo tells him raggedly, "but still, be careful with those arrows."

"Were those muggles?" Harry asks him, feeling a wary concern for Theo's safety now that he knows they're both vulnerable to being eaten alive, and in answer, Theo gives him a hard look.
"Come on," Theo says, and sucks Harry into the air, into time and space, until they're standing somewhere bright and blinding.

This, Theo explains, is a place called London. Specifically, this is the British Museum, which is filled with a lot of interesting things, some of which Theo has tried to steal (a crime, Harry admonishes him, which for some reason Theo ignores) and others he just looks at.

"See these people?" Theo asks Harry, who can hardly see at all, it's so bright. "All muggles. The whole lot of 'em. Muggle from tip to toe."

"But—" Harry stares at them, awed, and clutches his bow tightly. "But their teeth are—"

"Normal? Yes," Theo confirms, and waves his wand again, sending them somewhere new this time, which Theo calls a pub. "Now, tell me about your father and this wand."

Harry repeats what he remembers from the tale about Death and the three brothers, which is of course every line, but then he realizes it's getting late and he tells Theo he'll have to get back before his father arrives home. Father was going to fetch something, but he'll be very worried if Harry's gone. They'll have to make it back to the unsearchable house before Harry's birthday, which is tomorrow.

Well, tonight at midnight, technically.

"I'll take you back," Theo says to Harry. "For now, though, come with me."

Theo takes Harry to an impossibly tiny room above the pub, which he claims is his flat. He tells Harry they'll stay there for the night, and then tomorrow, when Harry is seventeen, they'll be able to find Harry's house in the woods.

"How do you know?" says Harry.

"Just a hunch," says Theo, and adds, "Besides, I think your father might come looking for me."

For a moment Harry wonders where he'll sleep in the interim, but Theo just shoves him onto the bed and lies down on the floor, claiming it's not the worst thing he's ever done. Harry argues and they speak crossly until Harry points an arrow at Theo in frustration and Theo knocks the bow from Harry's hand, calling his bluff.

"You're not going to hurt me," Theo says, throwing Harry's only weapon across the floor, and for a second Harry is angry and a little frightened.

"No," he says miserably, "I'm not."

He misses his father. He misses his house. For a second he wishes he had never taken a single step outside those wards, but then Theo is standing in front of him and Theo curls his hands around Harry's face and Theo doesn't have claws and his teeth are carnivorous but normal and when Theo breathes, Harry breathes.

When Theo comes closer, Harry soars.

Theo's lips touch his and Harry changes his mind about missing things. He changes his mind about houses and wands. He changes his mind about muggles. Theo lips touch his and Harry changes, he's rebuilt from the inside out and reconstructed, piece by piece. Harry wants to take this new form and put it closer to Theo, as close as he can. He wants to be one with Theo, indistinguishable. He pulls Theo onto the bed with him and faces him and looks at him and breathes him and kisses
him and Theo does all of that too, like a mirror. Like a reflection of Harry himself.

Theo changes Harry and Harry changes Theo, too. He can see it happen. He watches Theo traverse from shock to hunger to wonder and Harry thinks enormous things, like how he wants to put an arrow in Theo's hands. He wants to put all of his arrows in Theo's hands, to give them to Theo to keep them safe. He wants to put his hands all over Theo until there isn't an inch of him untouched. Harry doesn't even get tired, not like he normally does. He doesn't miss books. None of this is in books. In books there are brothers and lovers and somehow, for Harry, Theo is both.

By the time the sun rises, this new version of Harry has lived an entire life in a night.

But then, like two days before, Harry wakes to his father standing over him, one hand closed around Harry's throat, and once again Harry is alarmed, though for different reasons this time. His father is looking not at him, but at Theo, and it occurs to Harry that actually, his father has strange teeth and ugly eyes and his hands aren't much different from claws.

Maybe his father's sickness can't be cured.

Prophecy is a tricky thing. It leaves out the details, like if you foolishly try to kill the boy born to parents who've thrice defied you and it doesn't work, then you have the option of either letting the boy grow up to be some sort of symbol of the resistance inevitably leading to your death or you can hide him in the woods, somewhere no one could ever find him. You could teach him to fear the outside world and make him dependent on you, force him to hunt fragile things for you. But of course, what a young lad like you might not understand is that beautiful things can still come from ugliness. They do it every day, so maybe you can raise a child with hate and he will still turn out a beautiful, prophetic thing.

Prophecy does not include the caveats, like how a baby with defiance in his blood might one day grow up and slip out from his cage only to find another, worse boy who comes blessed with a pair of long legs and light fingers. It doesn't tell you that if you fail to kill the baby who later becomes a man, then the world will conspire to save him. The world, in the form of a weedy, irresponsible thief, will point an invincible wand at you on the morning you planned to finally kill your abducted son/nemesis and say, "Neither can live while the other survives," which is this thief's way of saying hasta la vista, baby.

So then Lord Voldemort dies and the subject of this particular prophecy turns to me and I, irresponsible thief and freshly-minted murderer that I am, think well fuck, here we go, time to run again, but he kisses me, and I kiss him back, and the story doesn't end, because I turn the page and there's more story, endless, and I kiss him like that, like I have no end, because there's only one prophecy that matters, and at the moment, it's the one that says:

Your fate has just caught up with you.

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday to my love UnicornShenanigans!
With Love and Admiration

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With Love and Admiration

Pairing: Ronsy (Ron Weasley x Pansy Parkinson)

Universe: post-war, EWE

Rating: T

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: 1) meta commentary; 2) Molly Weasley and Lady Parkinson go to war when it comes to planning a Weasley-Parkinson Wedding.

SURPRISING BETROTHAL NEWS FROM WAR HERO WEASLEY AND HEIRESS PARKINSON

Fascinating development indeed following the announcement of an engagement between Ronald Weasley and Pansy Parkinson, writes social correspondent Rita Skeeter. Many in the wizarding world will be quick to register the sensation of surprise, perhaps even astonishment, at hearing the news that two such highly public figures have been carrying out what has obviously been an exceedingly furtive romance. While the highly public fallout from Miss Parkinson's previous relationship with Draco Malfoy and the even more recent disintegration of Mr Weasley's relationship with fellow war hero Hermione Granger have certainly been enough to send all four into hiding, it is perhaps safe to say that no one quite expected this news to break between two such unlikely parties.

While it may be rather out of fashion to discuss, there is no denying the Weasleys and the Parkinsons have had their disagreements over the past few centuries. Optically, this is a match that might make someone awakening from a coma consider returning to sleep! True, modern times call for modern sensibilities, as both families must be distinctly aware, but the couple have hardly been known for their amicability. While Weasley and Parkinson were Prefects together during their Hogwarts years, their personal history shows they interacted very little except to trade sharpened barbs, according to their former classmates.

"I can't say I find this to be anything less than a shock," adds Lavender Brown, an erstwhile paramour of Weasley's. "I had no idea they were even civil, much less romantic. Are you sure this isn't more of an obituary sort of thing? Did they both die, maybe?"

"I think it makes sense in a distinctly weird way," remarks Terry Boot, a prefect of Ravenclaw house while Parkinson and Weasley attended Hogwarts. "I mean, who else would have them, right?"

"I'd really prefer not to talk about this," comments Harry Potter. "I thought I made it clear you couldn't come to my office whenever you needed a stupid quote about Hermione. Oh hang on, this is about Ron? Wait. What's Ron done?"
... how pleased I was to hear of their engagement, Dahlia, how wonderful! You didn't ask, of course, but allow me to assure you I have no lingering qualms about your daughter's urgency to turn my adoptive son over to You Know Who. Assuming there are no other Dark Lords coming to power I will rest assured there will not be a repeat of former events. Bygones! Obviously we're thrilled, as I can't think of an acceptable reason we could possibly feel otherwise. As far as it goes with the details, I think it's best we keep it small, don't you? We'd be happy to host it. My eldest had his wedding here and aside from the small interruption by your husband and his warmongering comrades, it was a truly lovely affair...

... assure you not to concern yourself with the details! Your son is of course not what we would consider a traditional match, but I think we both know (some of us more than others) that nothing is traditional anymore. As for your offer to help financially, that was very charming, Molly, thank you, I quite enjoyed the laugh, but of course it's not a problem for us to take on the bulk of the society events. It's best if I handle everything, as I'm sure you're already aware my husband and I are very well connected. (You might remember Warwick from Hogwarts, I suspect? I was of course a mere child at the time!) In terms of the engagement dinner, if I could just confirm your wardrobe? The color palette in our ballroom is rather a challenging one for your complexion...

Do you really think this'll work?

*Of course it'll work. What do you think I am, an amateur?*

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**MINISTRY EMPLOYEE ASSAULTS FORMER HOGWARTS GOVERNOR AT SON'S ENGAGEMENT DINNER**

'Volatile' hardly begins to describe this evening's dinner celebrating the engagement between Pansy Parkinson and Ronald Weasley, writes social correspondent Rita Skeeter. While the event was practically aglow with the finest of wizarding society and also many members of the extended Weasley clan, it appears some bad blood still managed to work its way to the surface—literally! After what could only be called a hostile exchange of words between Arthur Weasley, department head for the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts department, and Warwick Parkinson, former governor for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the interaction soon came to blows alongside what will unfortunately not be the subject of this article: the truly breathtaking cake, designed by Diagon's own Winchester Ambrose of Ambrose's Ambrosial Delights. While there is no telling what initiated the altercation aside from generations of warring ideology, the bride and groom did not seem to take the family squabble to heart.

"Oh, them? Yeah, they're fine," remarks close friend of the groom, Seamus Finnegan. "Are you going to finish that, by the way?"

… on earth was I supposed to know Arthur would still be so sensitive about it? War is such an ugly thing, Molly, so of course Warwick would never have mentioned it had Arthur not brought it up. We would never have guessed you still considered the wound so fresh, considering at your age, there is so little time to waste on old wounds. I am still waiting, of course, for Arthur's apology, and if you could give your daughter something of a nudge, I'm sure Pansy would be relieved to hear from her. Bat mucus is extremely difficult to remove from silk and for her father to have had to take his formal portraits with such obvious blemishes will surely dampen what is otherwise an exceedingly joyous occasion...

… true, thank you for reminding me, Dahlia, that of course five years is long enough for anyone to have forgotten the carnage of having our world utterly turned upside down. I don't mean your
obvious hardships of Ministry fines, of course, though clearly that must have traumatized you deeply. Consider it all forgotten! Tell Pansy to rest assured, I'm positive Ginny will have passed along her condolences for Warwick's robes, and in the meantime I hope Warwick's nose is healing nicely. Frankly, I'm shocked Arthur was able to make such precise contact with such a peculiar target! I do so look forward to what our grandchildren will end up with...

It's not working, Parkinson.

How is it not working?

My mum's still driving me mad, isn't she?

It's not an instant fix, Weasley, Christ. Were you expecting me to kill her?

I can't believe I'm having to clarify this, but just in case: I'd really prefer if you did not.

Then sit quietly and let the adults do their work. By the way, those robes were a vast improvement. The portrait should be lovely.

You picked them out.

Yes, and I have magnificent taste.

I can't wait for this to be over.

It will be, Weasley, soon. My money's on your mother calling it off any day now.

Doubtful. Did you see your mum's face when my dad punched yours?

I did. And I positively relished it.

Funnily enough, so did I.

---

**GUEST LISTS REVEALED FOR FORTHCOMING PARKINSON-WEASLEY AFFAIR**

In today's social news, a shocking turn of events as the Parkinsons and Weasleys reveal their guests for the coming wedding breakfast and ceremony, writes social correspondent Rita Skeeter. While it's certainly not unusual to have an A-list and a B-list, this one is quite a baffling series of decisions, almost as if the two parties opted to throw some names arbitrarily into a hat, threw the hat away, and then asked an inebriated rabbit to choose for them. While there are certainly the expected names—Harry Potter and Hermione Granger on one side, Theodore Nott and Draco Malfoy on the other—they've all been mixed in with distant Sacred Twenty-Eight cousins, popular public figures, custodial Ministry employees, members of the Greek aristocracy, and what appears to be a small Icelandic village.

"I do not know vat I am doing here," comments Viktor Krum, another mystified ceremony invitee. "Does this mean Herm-ow-ninny is free?"

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... room for our many guests, of course. I'm sure you're having a similar problem; after all, Ronald is sixth of seven, isn't he? Or is it eight of nine? I tried to count during the engagement dinner but I'm afraid I was frequently having to start over. I must say, it's a wonder you can keep track of how many of them are coming and going, though by the sounds of it perhaps you don't...
... are quite frosty together, aren't you? Ronald and I are of course inconceivably close, I adore him, and I'm sure that must be uncomfortable for you, all that affection flying about unattended. So interesting to see there was one more Parkinson guest than there were Weasleys in the end; surely a coincidence. By the way, have we spoken about my Aunt Muriel's tiara? I'm positive Pansy will want to wear it, after all I think she gets enough coldness from your side of the family without having to add in their jewels...

You're mad.

Am I?

You're absolutely mad. What did you do, taunt your mother into expanding the guest list?

You sound impressed.

I'm not impressed, I'm in awe. Though my mum's head's going to explode any day now, and I specifically told you not to kill her.

It's not my fault they're doing precisely what we predicted they'd do. Are you trying to tell me you're out?

What, now? Absolutely not. Hermione's even owled me to ask if I'm dying or something.

You see? All we have to do is carry out the plan, and soon enough we'll both have precisely what we wanted.

AFTERNOON BRIDAL SHOWER ERUPTS IN FLAME, SINGES REPORTER'S BRAND NEW ROBES

This morning's celebration of Pansy Parkinson's forthcoming nuptials to Ronald Weasley were off to a lovely start until a startling turn of events involving what some suspect to be creature-related arson brought the whole thing to a fiery halt. While the event began beautifully, with many a society witch and also Hermione Granger joining Miss Parkinson for tea in honor of her highly publicized marriage next month, it appears there may have been some tension around the time of the fire, which blazed along the outer edge of the Parkinson estate.

Closest to the flames were the mothers of the bride and groom, Molly Weasley and Dahlia Parkinson, both of whom were later reported to be "a bit scorched around the boots, but otherwise unharmed" by the unlikely presence of what nearby party-goers suspect to be the usual incendiary behavior of wild Cornish pixies.

"Pixies? Is that what Mum said? What a load of hogwash," remarks Ginevra Weasley, sister of the groom. "Honestly, I haven't seen my mum lose her cool like that in ages, though if anyone was going to get set upon by her untended rage, it makes sense to be that awful w-"

"GINNY, COME ALONG," shrieked the mother of the groom calmly, flashing this reporter a manic smile as she dragged her daughter away.

... you have some sort of problem with my daughter's marriage to your son, then of course I would love to hear it. We have tried and tried to be accommodating but it appears your family has yet to reconcile what I can only imagine to be lingering Weltschmerz following the war. Have you tried meditation to soothe your petty grievances? Candor is such an important thing between family...
WAR HERO'S STAG PARTY RESULTS IN MASSIVE KNOCKTURN DRUG BUST

While out with the lads, future husband to Pansy Parkinson and current junior Auror for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Ronald Weasley happened upon some suspicious criminal activity this evening, writes social correspondent Rita Skeeter. Weasley is of course best known for being eternal sidekick to Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived and champion of the wizarding world, but on this particular evening it is, in a historic first, Weasley's own name in the spotlight. Upon departing a pub on the outskirts of Diagon, Weasley is said to have caught sight of former Snatcher and Greyback apostle Amias Sterling, ultimately giving chase. After a bit of dueling, Weasley and Potter apprehended Sterling inside a tavern that seems to have been a front for dark artifacts and illicit narcotics.

Weasley, who was injured by a blast from Sterling's associates, declined an interview, though his fiancée, also out and about for a hen do this evening, was summoned to the scene. Little could be heard from their exchange upon arrival, but Parkinson, wearing a custom set of sequin robes and a crown of phalluses, was spotted tending to her future husband's wounds.

"At first I thought this whole thing was a total sham and we were only getting sauced for a laugh," said Milicent Bulstrode, "but now I think maybe Weasley can legitimately get it. In fairness, Pansy's had quite a lot of Ogden's."

"You love to see it," contributed Tracey Davis fondly, adjusting her BRIDE TRIBE sash.

"I thought this interview was supposed to be about crime," said Amias Sterling, recent arrestee. "How am I supposed to know if they're serving quail at the reception?"

… feel differently now that my son the war hero is a hero once again! I believe you've spoken before about 'social credentials,' have you not? Of course, I'm aware you must assign value to other things, though I can't possibly think what; given the way Pansy is unemployed and has never contributed anything to the world or to society in any way…

… so adorable that he should have any sort of profession. A job, how quaint! The pressure of bearing a name like ours can be so deeply stressful, it's lovely that he has a hobby. What a relief, too, that he can accomplish anything without Harry Potter's assistance! You must be so very proud, and I am speaking of course of Ronald, who is one of your sons, in case perhaps you had forgotten which…

We can never do that again.

Agreed.

If you tell anyone I'll kill you.

I'll kill myself, believe me.
It was just the one time.

Yes.

Good.

Forgotten.

Absolutely.

Though it wasn't terrible, was it?

Shut up.

Right. Well, I'm sure this will all be over soon enough, and then we'll never have to speak again.

Of course.

Good.

Excellent.

Quite.

Apropos of nothing, what are you doing later?

You have wedding things for me to do, I take it?

Yes. Wedding things. Good idea.

WEDDING REHEARSAL ENDS IN TEARS, EXTENSIVE PROPERTY DAMAGE, DISSOLUTION OF HIGH-PROFILE BETROTHAL

A sad day for love indeed, writes social correspondent Rita Skeeter, as the saga that has been the Parkinson-Weasley wedding comes to an end this evening. Always an unlikely match, it is now perhaps fair to say that everyone involved expected this to end badly, and none could be disappointed by the results. A mix of charmed birds, bat-bogeys, accusations, and fists, this is one dinner not soon to be forgotten.

"Obviously we're devastated," said Ron Weasley, hands clasped with his former intended. "But it's become quite clear that neither our families nor our previous partners are quite ready for our love."

"It is with heavy hearts that we announce our official separation," added Pansy Parkinson somberly. "We do hope that one day, there will be a world where families like ours are not drawn into such terrible conflict."

Indeed, this reporter is deeply saddened to lose the entertainment that has been this unlikely affair. However, there is a light on the horizon! With Malfoy and Granger at each other's throats and Potter and Nott coming to blows this evening amid the reckoning between the Parkinsons and Weasleys, it appears there will be no peace anytime soon.

… SO ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED I NEARLY DIED OF SHAME. IT IS A RELIEF TO KNOW WE HAVE NOTHING FURTHER TO SAY TO ONE ANOTHER. THOUGH BEFORE I GO, ALLOW ME TO ASSURE YOU THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH BLOOD AND EVERYTHING TO DO
WITH YOU BEING A MISERABLE, CONNIVING LITTLE…

… any remaining costs and leave it at that. I must say, Molly, I'm disappointed you've managed such a poor showing, but of course it's no surprise. A return to the normality of your absence will be a marvelous reprieve, and it is with great pleasure that I look forward to a lifetime of never speaking to you again…

Hungry?

Starved. Why?

Thought we could get dinner.

What, like a date?

Sure. If you want to call it that.

You want to date me? Weasley, you poor thing. I thought this was just about getting back at our exes and ruining our mothers’ lives.

It was. But now it's not.

Interesting. So what's it about now?

I don't know. You?

Seems unlikely. Sex?

That works.

Such a dirty boy you are.

So you're in?

Why not? See you in an hour.

Excellent. Can't wait.

Chapter End Notes

Can you believe that despite three million words of fanfic, I've somehow escaped having to give Pansy's father a name until now? I couldn't either—but now, at last, we can all rest.
In Harmonia Progressio

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In Harmonia Progressio

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Nottpott (Theo x Harry)

Universe: eighth year AU

Rating: T

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: 1) dramione are assigned a toddler in a family planning class at hogwarts; 2) dramione/nottpott post-war at Hogwarts, Draco has to deal with issues of returning and Harry finds comfort in Theo. I didn't exactly keep to that first prompt, but… kinda.

"Harmonia harminetus," announced Professor Sprout, referencing what appeared to be a plump, leafy fern before her. "This particular plant is the source of most therapeutic balms and ointments, but it does have certain… preferences, as you'll soon learn. For this particular lesson, we'll be separating into partners. Let's see," she murmured, casting a glance around the room to where each pair of students stood before a pot of fresh soil. "Well, you've mostly arranged yourselves, haven't you? So let's have Nott with Malfoy, Potter with Granger—"

Hermione glanced at Harry with relief. "Thank god," she murmured under her breath, inching closer to him. "I was so worried I was going to have to work with—"

There was a sudden, wailing sob that became a scream, manifesting from somewhere in Harry and Hermione's seedling. At first it was easy to ignore, nothing more than a twitch of discomfort to the inner ear, but gradually, there was no denying that the plant's entire soul was in palpable hysterics.

"Oh no, oh no," fussed Professor Sprout, leaping down to shove Hermione and Harry apart, glancing over at the pot. "No, this won't do—Nott, come here—"

The harmonia harminetus screamed ever more distressfully, sounding as if it had been tortured.

"Fine, fine—Malfoy… Mr Malfoy!"

Hermione flinched as Draco sulked forward and the screaming abruptly stopped, settling to a tiny snifflle.

"Well," Professor Sprout said. "I did say they had peculiarities, did I not? Malfoy with Granger, then, and Potter, take a step to the left?"

There was a pause as Harry took a slow, unwilling step towards Theo's planter. Much to Harry's obvious distress, the plant began making tiny gurgling noises, cooing its approval.

"Marvelous," ruled Professor Sprout, exhaling in relief. "Well, that's that, then, isn't it?"

This was N.E.W.T. level Herbology, which of course Harry was only taking because it seemed like
a nice place to finally get a bit of peace and also, because Neville had all but begged him. Seeing as Harry had already decided he'd had enough of the Ministry to last him a lifetime, he figured he ought to test the limits of his interests. All he'd wanted was to be an Auror alongside Ron, but now that it was a possibility, he wasn't entirely sure what he wanted. He'd only come back because Hermione had thought it wise, and whatever Hermione thought wise was probably close enough to it.

Theo Nott and Draco Malfoy were the only Slytherins to return for their eighth year, and their reasons were both distinct from Harry's and functionally the opposite. The Ministry was requiring it, as far as Harry could tell; a rehabilitation of sorts.

Not that Harry could figure out how his reward and Theo's punishment were the same thing. Tending to an infantile seedling that grew finicky each time its whims went unacknowledged seemed like a poor substitute for governmental accolades and a flourishing career. The Harmonia plant seemed to require feeding at all sorts of odd hours, growing easily too warm or too cold depending on the slightest shift in humidity. On the second day of tending to their plant, Harry and Theo were fanning it more vigorously each time its tiny, recently-sprouted leaves went limp.

"I don't see why we both have to do this," grumbled Harry, frustrated. "I was supposed to help Ginny with the new recruits by three." He wasn't captain—it was her turn—but still. Better that than this.

"Oh yes, for your little game," drawled Theo. "The one where you fly around and toss each other the toy?"

Harry bristled. "Quidditch is not just a game, Nott, it's—"

"That's right, you catch the special toy, I forgot," said Theo. "Silly me."

Harry glared at him, rising to his feet. "You can do this alone," he said definitively. "It doesn't take two people to keep a plant from overheating."

He spun, preparing to head to the pitch, when their harmonia seedling gave off a high pitched whistle, gradually becoming a sound like "deeeeaayyyyyaaaaddddDDDDYYYY!"

"Did that just—" Harry stopped. "Did it just—"

"—dadadadADADADDAYYYYYYY—"

"—fine, fine, sorry," Harry said hurriedly, shushing the little sprouted leaves. "I'll stay, I promise. I'm right here," he soothed it. "I'm right here, I promise."

The plant gave a little shudder of relief, and Harry glanced up, spotting Theo hiding a laugh.

"What?" he demanded.
"Nothing," said Theo.

"What, Nott?"

"I told you, nothing."

"You obviously think something's funny—"

"No, no. I don't." Theo gave one of the plant's leaves a gentle stroke. "Poor little war hero," he murmured to it, glancing up just long enough to give Harry a broad, half-taunting smirk. "If it isn't one thing, it's another."

The mockery was the cherry on top of an already frustrating afternoon. "Why doesn't it scream like that at you?" Harry demanded, and Theo gave a shrug in response.

"Because," he said. "It already knows I'm not going to leave."

The harmonia plant had been alternating between loud moans and intense bursts of hiccups for at least the last twenty minutes.

"It's hungry," said Draco flatly.

"It's not hungry," retorted Hermione. "It's only half past two!"

"Look at it, Granger—"

"Look at what, Malfoy?"

"It's obviously in distress, and whenever it's hungry it gets a bit peaky-looking like that—"

"All the books say to keep a regular schedule, Malfoy—"

"Would you put down the books for a second, Granger, and look at the fucking thing—"

"Look at what? It's precisely the normal height for this stage of development—"

"Don't worry about its height, I'm talking about its needs—"

"Are you trying to tell me I'm not nurturing our plant well enough?"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH," wailed the plant, and Draco growled his frustration, rubbing his pounding temples as Hermione gave an exasperated half-whimper, bending to face the plant head on.

"What is it?" she offered coaxingly. "I'm right here, I promise—"

"—ahhhHHHHHHHHHhhhhhaaAAAAEEEEEE—"

"For fuck's sake," Draco snapped, reaching over her for the mix of water and salt. "Here, just give it some, would you?"

"Malfoy, it doesn't need an—"

"—YYYYYYYYYAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHRRRRRR—"

"Granger, just take it!"
"Fine, I just—here, HERE, here you go, EVERYTHING'S FINE! Everything's—" Hermione broke off, collapsing with exhaustion as the plant happily lapped up the fertilizer, suckling at the sodden dirt with cheerful gurgles.

"Everything is fine," Hermione said, and promptly burst into tears, falling onto the low stool behind her.

Draco stared at her, taken aback, before clearing his throat, crouching down until they were nearly at eye level. "Granger," he said, approximating a comforting tone.

She gave a little sniffle from behind her palms, shoulders quaking with silent sobs.

"Er," Draco said. "Listen, Granger. Ah. This is… it's fine. Really. If you need to, erm." He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Do you, if you want…? So. Yeah."

"I," she announced from behind her hands, "am less maternal than Draco Malfoy."

"Uh," he said.

"I," she repeated, abruptly surfacing from her hysteria to reveal her red-rimmed eyes and swollen nose, "am less nurturing than a war criminal!"

"Well," said Draco stiffly, "that's a lovely way to put it, thanks—"

"I don't know what people need," she sobbed, suddenly collapsing again. "I don't know what they want. I don't understand it. I don't understand anything."

She cried a few more minutes in earnest, though it seemed to not be about Draco at all. A relief, really, as most things seemed to be about him these days.

Mostly about how he'd fucked it all up, which he couldn't even argue with.

"Granger," he said. "The plant's telling you what it needs. You don't have to understand. All you have to do is listen."

She sniffled again, turning her overlarge eyes on him for a beat of silence.

Two beats.

Three.

"Sixth year," she said, startling him. "You stopped playing quidditch. You were late to class. Your eyes were shadowed and your exams…" She hesitated. "Your schoolwork suffered."

"I—" He frowned at her. "What?"

"You were clever," she said. "Terrible and smug, but clever. And then you weren't."

"That's a bit harsh," he said defensively, but she was crying again, only this time she had leaned into his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry no one heard you."

Half of him was frozen with shock, the other half with misery. He was the one who needed to apologize to her. He was the one who was apologizing to the world just by being here, just by existing. He was the one who had come back to the place he'd nearly destroyed, bathing in the
wreckage, and not once had he questioned whether his guilt was earned. It was. It was justifiable misery.

This, however.

This was something else.

"It's okay," he said gruffly, because she had offered him something and it would be rude not to accept, and then he gave her hair a tentative stroke, hoping that might somehow return the favor.

From the pot, their plant stretched slowly upwards, humming to itself with a wistful sigh.

"People don't talk about how much it sucks when your best friend leaves you," Harry said.

"No," said Theo. "They don't."

The plant had reached its adolescence, which meant it kept the same hours as a teenager: it rose late, well after their herbology class period, and then stayed awake well into the evening. At the moment they were in the greenhouse alone after midnight, for which they'd had to receive special dispensation from Professor Sprout.

"He left me," Harry said. "It wasn't just Hermione. It was me, too."

Theo was silent a moment.

"You'd make a shitty Auror," he said after a while.

Harry turned his head, arching a brow. "Better not," he warned blandly. "You know the plant hates it when we're cross."

"It's not an argument. I'm not trying to have a row."

"Then what are you—"

"People born in captivity," Theo said, "aren't meant to do it to others. People who live in a cage shouldn't be responsible for putting other people inside them. And people who get left behind shouldn't have to turn their lives into a chase."

Harry blinked, and across from them, the plant gave them both something of a conspiratorial eye roll.

"Why are you here?" Harry asked Theo eventually.

"Complicity," Theo said. "Plus the criminality in my blood."

"No," Harry sighed, impatient, "really."

"Really."

"Stop it or the plant will scream."

"Plant doesn't scream anymore."

"True. It swears, though."

They sat in silence another moment, and then Theo shrugged. "I'm righting my wrongs."
"You don't have any wrongs, Nott."

"Of course I do."

"You don't."

"I do."

"Not like Malfoy does."

"I do."

"Like what?"

"Like everything," Theo said. "I didn't lift a finger. I didn't stop any of it. I just sat there and watched it happen." He glanced at Harry again. "I'm guilty of all of it. Everything Draco did, that's on me just as much."

Harry shook his head. "You were just a kid," he said.

"So were you," said Theo. "And not a damn person tried to make that easier for you."

Harry hesitated, swallowing. "I didn't need them to."

"Yes," Theo said. "Yes, Potter, you fucking did, and they let you down."

A few seconds ticked by in silence as they stared at their angling plant. Out here it was so quiet they could hear a church bell chime the single hour from afar, followed by the sound of Peeves pelting Mrs Norris with something. Probably chalk.

"Is our plant smoking?" asked Harry eventually.

"I think it plans to get a tattoo," said Theo, "shortly."

He slid a hand over, brushing Harry's pinky with his. Harry didn't move.

"Don't leave," said Harry quietly.

Theo turned Harry's hand over without looking, brushing the tips of his fingers over the calluses of his palms and then lacing them together.

"I won't," said Theo, letting Harry hold on tightly.

Their plant matured more slowly than the others. Hermione took to checking on it between classes, sometimes reading aloud to it and otherwise bringing a thermos of tea for her own silent meditation. The third time she did this, she noticed Draco must have been there as well, because the plant's soil was freshly watered. The sixth time, the pot had been rotated to face the sun. The seventh time there was a note that said, "Noon?"

Hermione wrote back, "Noon."

He was sitting beside the plant, which was nearly fully grown now. It hadn't quite caught up to the others, but it would soon. Hermione was quite sure it would soon.

Neither she nor Draco said anything as she took a seat beside him. She was starting to learn things
about him, sorting out the language of his posture or his tone. Today he was mostly relaxed, though his hands were clasped tightly.

"Everything alright?" she asked him.

He turned his head slowly, like in a trance, and found her from a long distance.

"Bad news from my mother's trial," he said.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "It's justice. It's deserved."

Hermione chewed her lip, then leaned forward, taking a closer look at their plant. It had a lovely color to it, a nice sheen. She noticed that it bloomed most on sunny days, and also when she played music. She waved her wand and put on a bit of Vivaldi, and when she settled back, Draco had closed his eyes.

"I like this one," he said. "Spring."

"Feels clean, doesn't it?" she said.

"Yes." His mouth twitched. "That's precisely the word."

She pulled out her book, about to start reading, when she stopped, glancing warily at Draco a second time.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he said.

"Right," she murmured, and opened her book to the page she'd left off. She glanced over it, half-skimming, and then sighed, shutting it again.

"Draco," she said, and his eyes floated open, finding hers expectantly.

She hesitated a moment, and then leaned forward, pausing just shy of his lips. She waited, letting the syrupy sound of the strings carry from Spring's second movement to the third, and when Draco didn't move, she closed the distance lightly, gently.

It lasted only a moment, her pulse bouncing sweetly, and then she sat back, clearing her throat and picking up her book.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," she told him.

She leaned her cheek against his shoulder. He tucked one arm around her waist.

Tranquilly, their plant made a soft sound of satisfaction, unfurling its leaves with a contented yawn and sprouting a blade of blossoms as tall as it was wide.
I know, not exactly the request, but I hope it's enjoyable regardless. I've said this many times now (or at least I hope I have) but thank you so much for being here. I am very grateful to have you.
Where You At

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Where You At

Pairing: Parkgrass (Pansy Parkinson x Daphne Greengrass)

Universe: muggle AU

Rating: M

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: 1) Pansy x Daphne pairing; 2) Pansy x Daphne World Cup AU. I took a lot of inspiration from the EP Junk by Carlie Hanson.

Being a teenage girl is already gross and disgusting enough without having a perfect best friend to make it harder, but Daphne only looks perfect. In real life she swears and makes dirty jokes and complains about her zits, but only to Pansy. At school she's hot shit, all short skirts and fluttering lashes and whatever else it takes to get Michael Corner to do her AP Chem labs for her, but when it's just the two of them—at soccer practice, on Pansy's couch, in homeroom, anywhere Daphne might be avoiding being at home—it's different. It's natural. They have a secret language, they make pinky swears, they watch the same shitty tv shows and cry at the same parts of movies. They've been friends forever, longer than forever, ever since they were in diapers. They're practically sisters, as Daphne likes to say.

Pansy isn't allowed to do much on the nights before games, so Daphne usually comes over and they go for a run or something. Anything to get out of the house.

"Did you see Mr Lupin's sweater vest today?" Daphne asks with an air of being about to say something Pansy can never, ever repeat, though she wouldn't. They both know Daphne's secrets will go to Pansy's grave. "He has some real daddy vibes, you know?"

"You're disgusting," says Pansy disapprovingly, and Daphne shoves her off the back road they use that winds between the oversized McMansions of Pansy's gated community. In response, Pansy hooks one leg behind Daphne's knee, playfully tripping her up.

"God, I've been horny since I was like, twelve," sighs Daphne, tightening her ponytail as they both get back on track. "Too bad boys are fucking disgusting."

"And stupid," says Pansy. "Don't forget stupid."

"Totally stupid," Daphne drily agrees, "but they're just so boy, you know? Stupid boys," she laments. "So nice to look at. So totally inept."

"I really worry about what sort of stupid boy you'll end up with when I'm gone," scoffs Pansy unthinkingly, and for a moment, they both fall silent.

Neither of them date much, mostly because dating would take time away from soccer. They both worked hard to make varsity together as freshmen, then worked hard again to make co-captains as
juniors, then worked even harder to get offered spots on college teams. They wanted to both work hard for UNC-Chapel Hill after Daphne got offered a spot as a sophomore, but when Pansy was recruited to Harvard, her parents made it clear where she was expected to get her degree. She and Daphne have been spending the last year trying not to think about what's going to happen once they're apart.

"Worry about the stupid boy, not me," says Daphne, eventually breaking the silence.

"Yeah," says Pansy, because she does.

They decide to go to Draco Malfoy's graduation party because one night isn't going to kill them, or so Daphne is forced to reassure Pansy. Pansy is the serious type, always worried about what people think of her, but Daphne's sick of what people think of her. She takes a shot and convinces Pansy to take one. She sees Draco's eyes on her and decides to give him something to look at, pulling Pansy to where the music is loud and starting to dance with her. You know, *dance* with her. Sexy, or as sexy as Daphne knows how to be without actually doing anything with anyone. She let the Bulgarian foreign exchange student finger her in the bathroom last year thinking it'd be fun and exciting or whatever, but it mostly just hurt, so she hasn't really done much since then. Only Pansy knows about that.

Daphne leans forward to kiss Pansy, knowing every boy in the room is watching. She's sending a very clear message—*I'm a bad girl, look how bad I am, I fantasize about blowing my history teacher and I make out with my best friend, it's HOT*—but it doesn't quite work out the way she plans, because Pansy is clearly uncomfortable and the kiss is clumsy, so instead Daphne sighs and pulls her away to take more shots. She doesn't have to take very many before she's stumbling, and when she spills on Draco's t-shirt, he rushes off to change and Daphne's already bored. She takes hold of a half-empty bottle of Patron and grabs Pansy's hand, pulling her outside.

They collapse on the lawn, taking turns sipping from the bottle. Pansy is smiling, flushed.

"This feels so weird," says Pansy, who never does anything wrong, ever. She crosses one leg over the other and Daphne watches the muscle flex in her quad. Pansy is really fucking good at soccer. So is Daphne, but Pansy loves it more. She works harder. Daphne is pretty sure she wouldn't be doing this if Pansy hadn't started when they were five, though Daphne is unnaturally quick, effortlessly agile. She loves running. She specifically loves running away.

Daphne's head is spinning a little when she takes the bottle from Pansy's hand. She takes a sip, deciding tequila is disgusting but in a good way, and says, "Have you ever made yourself come?"

"What? Jesus." Pansy's already pink cheeks redden furiously. "Daph. That's... I don't do that."

"God, I do it all the time." The first time was so weird. Her hand cramped doing it and for the entire next day she made excuses about why she couldn't write properly. "I feel like everything gets me going, you know? Mr. Lupin. Draco. Tracey's pink sports bra." That's a secret; it slips out. Pansy says nothing. "I've just got all this energy or something. There's something in me that's constantly on fire. I just want to burn out."

"Don't," says Pansy.

Daphne turns her head, and because she's drunk and sad about them parting ways for the first time ever and also a little curious about Pansy's lip gloss, she leans forward and kisses her again. This time it's just for them, and it's different. Daphne left her hair down for the party, but Pansy's is in her customary ponytail. Daphne grabs it, tugging Pansy's head back, and Pansy lets out a moan in
Daphne's mouth that makes them both gasp a little, electrified. This, Daphne realizes, this is it. This is what makes the buzzing stop. This is the most fun she's ever had, and it's scary as fuck, too. In a good way.

No one can see them from here. Daphne slides her hand under Pansy's shirt and Pansy moans again, though she looks guilty about it. Daphne laughs, "Oh my god, your heart is beating so fast," and Pansy kisses her angrily, like it's a betrayal. Her kiss says *don't talk about it, just keep going,* and Daphne thinks maybe Pansy wants this—maybe all that good behavior keeps her locked up in a cage—so as a favor to her best friend, she decides to be the baddie she pretends to be. She takes off her shirt and Pansy's eyes widen. She takes Pansy's hand and pulls it to her breasts, which yeah, are not very big, because the two of them are both skinny and shaped more like athletes than supermodels. Daphne's palm rests on Pansy's flat stomach, the abs beneath them going firm as Pansy holds her breath.

"It's just me," Daphne says, and she kisses Pansy's neck. Then she kisses Pansy's collarbone. She draws her lips downward, kissing Pansy's cleavage. Her stomach. She pulls up Pansy's dress and Pansy still can't breathe and Daphne leans forward, parting Pansy's thighs. Things are about to get really serious if Daphne lets it.

So she does.

She slides her tongue along Pansy's clit and thinks this is weird, this is so weird, it's hot though, it's so hot, and Pansy gives another moan and buries her fingers in Daphne's hair and Daphne remembers that Pansy's never come before and holy shit, wouldn't it be crazy to do it now? It would be, so Daphne sucks and licks and it's so weird and different because Pansy is so soft here, silky and sweet, even though she's hard muscle everywhere else. Pansy's legs tremble and she pulls Daphne's hair hard and when she comes she practically cries.

Pansy shoves Daphne onto her back and when she works her fingers under Daphne's thong it doesn't hurt this time. Pansy's touch is gentle, stroking, but she won't look away and Daphne is a little embarrassed so she closes her eyes, breathing like she does after the team runs sprints. It feels the same, almost like flying, like winning, like scoring, and she comes *so fucking hard* and she opens her eyes and Pansy's still staring at her.

"I love you," Pansy says raggedly.

Fuck, Daphne thinks.

Time to run away.

Daphne makes excuses for the rest of the summer and then they go to college. Pansy calls often, every day, and then every week, and then less frequently. Once a month. Then once every other month. Then it's summer again and Daphne doesn't come home because she has a training camp. Her Instagram pictures are full of parties and short skirts and Pansy can't tell whether she's more worried about the pretty girls—Daphne's team at UNC and her sorority sisters—or the boys, who seem to always have their hands on Daphne's bare midriff in the pictures. Daphne's eyes are often unfocused, too, just slightly. Daphne almost never calls Pansy, though when she does it's usually at two or three in the morning when she's just getting home.

Their teams rarely play, but senior year they manage it. Pansy comes to Chapel Hill in Harvard crimson, and Daphne looks perfect in that North Carolina baby blue.
"Are you okay?" Pansy asks.

"I'm *amazing,*" says Daphne, who has just finished telling Pansy about how she fucked her hot comparative literature professor on his desk last week. UNC is undefeated this year. Daphne's on top of the world. "Like, seriously. The best."

"Right, but like… are you okay?" Pansy says.

This time Daphne can hear what she means. Her brow furrows.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm just worried about you, Daph," Pansy says. "I just don't want you to, you know. Get lost."

"Meaning?"

"You're—" Pansy hesitates. "They just don't know you like I know you," she says. "I'm just worried, that's all."

Unfortunately Daphne takes this poorly. Pansy can see it, the way Daphne shuts down. She saw it three years ago, too. The last time she saw it everything ended, and it's about to end all over again.

"You don't really know me anymore," Daphne says, and it's mean, and the way Daphne says it—the look on her face—is cutting, designed to stick. Pansy hasn't said anything about how she tried to date one of the girls on her team but then that girl shattered her heart, because she doesn't really trust Daphne anymore with anything that hurts.

UNC wins. Pansy leaves.

Daphne goes to play for the Sol in L.A. and Pansy moves to Chicago to play for the Red Stars. She still calls Daphne every now and then, though Daphne never answers.

"Thinking about you," Pansy says. "Call me back."

She hears on Entertainment Tonight that Daphne has some sort of quickie marriage to some musician with swoopy hair, though it falls apart a couple of months later. Daphne is traded to another team, the Portland Thorns, and then to the Utah Royals. She sits out a few games. People no longer write NSWL highlights about how Daphne is the most talented player of her generation; now the articles are all about Daphne being 'difficult to work with' and how her team has concerns about her health. Daphne tears her ACL the year that Pansy has her best professional season, and when Daphne comes back, she's a little better, closer to her old self. She gets traded again, this time to the Washington Spirit. They encounter each other frequently—it's a small league, obviously—but they never speak. It becomes notorious: Daphne Greengrass and Pansy Parkinson, former teammates turned rivals. Two superstars battling to sell out stadiums when they play.

Pansy dates a journalist for three years. They move in together, then it falls apart. Pansy is just looking for a new apartment when she gets the call she's been dreaming about since she was eleven fucking years old: She made the U.S. World Cup team. There's only one problem.

So, her manager tells her, did Daphne Greengrass.

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They have a reputation for being nemeses or something, which is Daphne's fault. She never looks at Pansy because looking at Pansy means looking in a mirror, and that's the absolute last thing Daphne wants to do. It has nothing to do with Pansy's game, which is solid, or the fact that Pansy is
an outspoken supporter of good things, like women's rights, and Daphne is mostly known for fucking a guy from a British boy band. Things are looking up, but not enough for her to face it. Not enough for her to tell Pansy that Pansy was right all along, and the thing burning inside Daphne has been slowly eating her up.

Their first few practices together are kind of a disaster. The chemistry with the team is all off, and a lot of the girls have their doubts about Daphne to begin with. Daphne's reputation as an athlete is a disaster; she dragged it through the mud herself. The girls look to Pansy, who was just on a magazine cover for a speech she gave about equal pay, instead.

Eventually, after a week of awkward encounters, Daphne and Pansy collide (physically) and then they combust (psychologically) and Daphne swears and Pansy fumes and their coach says get in the locker room, now. Work your shit out, ladies.

So they do.

Daphne throws herself onto the bench in frustration and Pansy lingers in the doorway, hesitating.

"Look," says Pansy, but then she gives up and doesn't say anything else.

They both know it's Daphne's turn to speak. It's been Daphne's turn for years.

What is she supposed to say, I'm sorry? You scared me shitless, Pans. You didn't just make me come that one time when we were drunk in high school, you made me feel special, you made me feel loved, and don't you understand how fucking terrifying that is? Can't you see how badly I take it?

She says the only thing she knows to be true, which isn't much.

"I," Daphne says, "am not okay."

Pansy hesitates another moment and then sits beside her.

"I know," she says.

"I don't know if I've ever been okay."

"I know."

"I was with you, I think. You kept me… balanced. But then—"

"I know."

"It was too much. It was way too much. I'm not good at this. I'm not good."

"You are."

"No, I'm not. Everyone knows I'm not."

"I know what you are."

"You don't know me anymore. You don't know what I turned into."

Daphne wants to cry, which is not very sexy. She doesn't cried much, never has. She only ever cried while watching The Notebook with Pansy, but they were girls then. Stupid.
They sit in silence for a long time before anything breaks it.

"If you don't like where you are," Pansy says quietly, "you can always come back."

"Jesus," Daphne says, only she weeps it, fluidly, mumbling that she's sorry, she's so, so sorry, and Pansy pulls her into her arms and it's a mix of sweat and tears and eyeliner bleeding into the fabric of their uniforms. She sobs and Pansy doesn't have a long ponytail anymore, and Pansy's different now and somehow, Daphne's still the exact same. Still just a fucking mess trying to make people believe she's something different.

When Pansy kisses Daphne she gasps into her mouth, sobs a little, kisses her back with desperation. Pansy slides her hand under Daphne's jersey and manages a hoarse laugh of, "You're not even breathing." Daphne swallows and tugs Pansy's jersey free, peels her sports bra off. Pansy wrestles her into the showers and slides to her knees, trailing kisses down her torso, and Daphne is ashamed to tell her how different this feels. How many people she has been wrong about. Pansy most of all.

They let the water run long after they're done, hair slicked back from Pansy's temples while it lies matted around Daphne's shoulders. This, success, the World Cup—this is what they talked about doing when they were girls, and now they are women and doing a terrible job of it. Or at least Daphne is.

"I've always loved you," Daphne says sadly, because she knows it's about ten years too late, but Pansy only looks at her, half-smiling.

"I told you," Pansy says. "You can always come back."

Chapter End Notes

Here we are in week 3! Are you still alive? Barely? Same.
Masters of Ink

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Masters of Ink

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione), Nottpot (Theo x Harry)

Universe: muggle AU

Rating: T

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: 1) Theo on a TV game show; 2) Ink Master AU. If you've never seen Ink Master, it's a reality show in which tattoo artists compete in a series of artistic challenges, and it's my favorite thing. Tragically, this is not as absurd as my usual reality shows. Try not to be devastated.

Lee Voiceover: "Welcome back to Ink Master! This week, the final ten competitors will compete for a feature in Inked Magazine along with the grand prize of $100,000."

[Footage rolls of the final ten competitors: Hermione Granger, wearing a demure set of oversized glasses with curls piled on her head. Latin script is interwoven with ivy in ink along her forearms. Parvati Patil, with long plaits and a neck tattoo of delicate lilies stretching up to her throat. Lavender Brown, with a crescent moon tattooed beside her eye and her signature bandage dresses, revealing celestial black-and-grey artwork that traverses her thighs. Pansy Parkinson, who flips her long hair over one shoulder and arches a brow at the camera. Her tattoos are vibrantly colored, most of them arranged like jewelry. Daphne Greengrass, wearing a crop top and black jeans, smiles serenely. Her tattoos are largely hidden, though she has a dagger stabbing a rose on her inner arm. Harry Potter, in a short-sleeved button down patterned with lightning bolts buttoned to his neck, shrugs amiably at the camera. His arms are patterned with a cohesive sleeve design involving imagery of flight, castles, dragons, and armor. Theo Nott flips the camera off, detailed runes on his fingers filling the screen. Draco Malfoy folds both arms over his chest, emphasizing the tattooed dragon and family crest on his forearms. Blaise Zabini cracks his knuckles, winking. His tattoos are minimalistic and geometric, his clothing fashionable and high-end. Neville Longbottom brushes his shoulder off in a way that was clearly posed by the producers, apprehensively fingerling the line of one hipster suspender. A sword stretches up the inside of his left arm.]

[Stock footage of New York City plays over a hard rock guitar riff as the judges, Sirius Black, Minerva McGonagall, and Remus Lupin, all enter the warehouse for the flash challenge.]

Lee: "Welcome, artists! This week, your subject is: Adaptability."

[Camera shows Draco smiling thinly at Hermione before cutting to Pansy's interview.]

Pansy: "Adaptability is just being able to do everything that comes your way. Hard canvas, easy canvas, light skin, dark skin, any artistic style…" [Shrug.] "Everything comes down to adaptability."

[Cuts back to Lee.]
Lee: "This week, each person will be creating a design for someone on the other team to tattoo."

[Camera pans to Theo grinning broadly before cutting to his interview.]

Theo: "I'd like to see Granger be adaptable. Or Potter, for that matter. The guy's got one trick."

[Cut to Hermione interview.]

Hermione: "This would be a fun challenge if I were back at my home shop, but I'm pretty sure the other team is going to try to trip us up somehow. I wouldn't put it past them."

[Scene cuts to the Slytherin and Gryffindor teams whispering on opposite sides of the room.]

Harry: "Look, we already know Malfoy's a front runner, but he only does that fine line black-and-grey bullshit. Let's give 'em something big, something color."

[Cut to Parvati interview.]

Parvati: "Potter's clearly shooting himself in the foot, but it wouldn't be the first time. I guarantee we'll have to do our own designs later, and right now Potter's drawing a twelve-hour back tattoo for Nott to do in six hours."

[Footage shows Harry drawing an enormous photorealistic lion as the camera cuts over to the Slytherin team.]

Draco: "Obviously we should do this smart. We know Lavender's going to do the same girly watercolor shit every time—"

Pansy, lips pursed: "Watch out for Neville. He got us last week."

[Cut to Neville interview.]

Neville, cheerfully: "My philosophy is why make enemies? I just want to support my team."

[Cut to Daphne interview.]

Daphne: "Sure, we're all on teams now, but eventually it's every man for himself. By which I mean every woman for herself."

[Footage cuts to the artists at work.]

Daphne, brightly: "How's it going, Blaise?"

Blaise: "Not very fucking well, Daph."

Daphne: "Oh nooooo!"

[Draco walks by Hermione and pauses.]

Draco: "Let me guess, another lion, Granger?"

[Across the room, Harry looks up from his drawing with a frown.]

Hermione, without looking up: "Can you quit running your mouth, Malfoy? Just shut up for five seconds."

[Cut to Pansy interview.]
Pansy: "There's been some definite tension in the house lately. Some of it good, some of it gross."

[Cuts back to Hermione and Draco.]

Draco: "No need to be so testy, Granger. Nervous?"

Hermione: "About you? Please. I think we've all seen enough mandalas to last the whole competition."

Draco: "Whatever, Granger. You don't get to stay up all night studying like you did for pin-up day this time."

[Cut to Hermione interview.]

Hermione, clearly apprehensive: "Malfoy? No, I'm—I'm not worried, no. I mean—" [She hesitates.] "No, it's fine. I'm fine. I've read all the books, so—" [Nervous laugh.] "As long as it's not like, a Japanese Hannya mask or something. Those have a lot of specific rules and take years to really do properly, and—" [A pause.] "Oh god."

[Footage cuts to the canvases being introduced as the artists swap drawings. Hermione's design, drawn by Draco, is an intricate Hannya mask that is clearly tripping her up. Theo's, drawn by Harry, is a photorealistic lion. Harry's, drawn by Blaise, is an illustrated snake and skull.]

Harry, muttering to himself: "Seriously? Hasn't this been done?"

[Cut to Blaise interview.]

Blaise: "Yes. It has. But Potter's got a weird thing with anatomy. Also, the guy can pull a clean line, but can he shade?" [A pause.] "Well, I don't know, maybe." [A frown.] "Personally, I think he's cheating."

[Footage of the artists tattooing. Hermione is visibly frustrated as footage cuts to her interview.]

Hermione, distressed: "My canvas is extremely sensitive. His leg keeps twitching and it's screwing up my lines."

[Footage shows Draco walking by as Hermione pauses tattooing.]

Draco, gleefully: "How's it going, Granger?"

Hermione: "Jump off a bridge, Malfoy."

[Theo walks by and observes Harry's tattoo, frowning.]

Theo: "Potter, I think you're missing something."

Harry: "Whatever, Nott."

Theo: "Maybe somewhere around the… mouth? Is that a mouth?"

Harry: "Nott, I'm busy."

Theo: "Seriously. Is that a worm?"

Harry, irritably: "Fuck off."
Harry, head in his hands: "Fuck. I fucking forgot teeth."

Harry wipes down his finished product and from afar, Theo is smirking. The snake now has a pair of adequately sized fangs. Elsewhere, Hermione is forcing a smile as she and her canvas part ways. She is obviously unhappy, and Draco walks by, hesitating.

Draco: "Granger—"

Hermione, sighing loudly: "Malfoy, I can't do this right now, I don't have time f-"

Draco, interrupting: "It was a tough canvas. Just… fight for it, yeah?"

Hermione, glaring at him: "What's that supposed to mean?"

Draco: "If you get sent to the bottom—"

Hermione, viciously: "Fuck you, Malfoy—"

Draco, impatiently: "—I said if you get sent to the bottom, just… fight for it. You're good, okay? Just… don't get defeated before you even have to defend yourself."

[Theo is first as the judges critique his work.]

Minerva: "This lion got away from you a bit, I think. It has a slightly unfinished look to it."

Remus: "Still, you can see the complexity of the drawing, and as far as the overall feel… I'd wear that, for sure."

Sirius: "I agree, I think it's a great tattoo. Not perfect, which is a problem since we're down to the final ten, but it's very cool. Very different from what we're used to seeing."

[Theo says nothing, pointedly not looking at Harry as he resumes his spot and Draco is called forward.]

Minerva: "It's a great tattoo, but we've been seeing a lot of the same from you. If you're going to be Ink Master, you're going to have to branch outside your comfort zone."

Draco, mouth tight with disagreement: "Understood."

[Harry interview.]

Harry: "Whatever. What does she know? [A pause, and then quietly:] "Fuck."

[Camera shows Hermione's face, expressionless. Harry is called forward.]

Sirius: "Now this is an amazing tattoo. That snake looks totally fierce."

Remus: "I agree, it's really tough. Plus those lines are super clean."
Minerva: "This is great. Definitely a surprise from you!"

[Behind Harry, Theo glances at his feet, setting his jaw.]

Sirius: "I'm going with Harry for tattoo of the day."

Remus: "Me too."

Minerva: "Harry it is! Congratulations Team Gryffindor, who will now have the opportunity to
decide to send one person from Team Slytherin down for elimination."

[Footage cuts to Team Gryffindor meeting in private.]

Parvati: "Okay, so, we're here to decide on who had the worst tattoo from Team Slytherin."

Lavender, lips pursed: "I really didn't like Daphne's rose. Neville's drawing was way more intricate.
I don't know why the judges didn't like it."

Neville, troubled: "What about Pansy's galaxy tattoo?"

Parvati: "But we need someone who can—no offense, Hermione—but someone who did worse
than the Hannya mask."

Lavender, jumping in: "Daphne's lines are cleaner than Hermione's, and the judges seemed to like
Pansy's galaxy more than Neville's surrealism tattoo. We have to send someone down who can
lose, right? And Theo's was spotty, definitely—"

Harry, firmly: "Not Nott."

Lavender: "But—"

Harry: "Not his."

[Cut to Harry interview.]

Harry, fiercely: "What?"

[Cut back to discussion.]

Parvati, frowning: "Nott's probably going down to the bottom anyway."

Harry, aggressively: "Right. So let's pick someone else."

[The others exchange a glance before Hermione speaks.]

Hermione: "I vote we send Draco's down."

[The room is taken aback in unison.]

Neville, stunned: "What? But his execution of Lavender's drawing was nearly perfect."

Hermione: "Yeah, but the challenge was adaptability. He didn't adapt. I did."

[The others consider this information as the footage shifts to their return to the house. Theo pulls
Harry aside angrily.]

Theo: "Listen you motherfucker, if it weren't for me—"
Harry: "Thank you."

Theo, whispering: "Shitbag."

Harry: "Say it like you mean it, Nott."

Theo, huskily: "Fuck you."

Lee: "Who has Team Gryffindor chosen to send down for elimination?"

Harry: "Team Gryffindor is sending… Draco."

Lee: "Alright artists, so why did Team Gryffindor choose to send Draco down to the bottom?"

Hermione: "We just feel he's been doing a lot of the same work. Everyone else here did something different from their usual, but Draco didn't bother showing much adaptability."

Sirius: "That's true. If the theme of the day is adaptability, then Draco's is in the bottom for sure."

Remus: "Still, is it worse than Hermione's tattoo? Those lines are shaky."

Minerva: "Yes, but she still adapted enough to alter her technique. The outline isn't perfect, but is it worse than the other three?"

Sirius: "Well, if we're going technical—"

Minerva: "Neville's is the bottom for me, unfortunately."

Remus: "Yeah, mine too."

Lee: "Stay tuned for next week's episode of Ink Master!

Cut to future montage: Hermione and Draco are fighting."
Draco: "—can't believe you threw me under the bus like that—"

Hermione: "You told me to fight, so I did!"

Draco: "I didn't mean you should send me home!"

Hermione: "Well, you know what, Malfoy? If it comes down to a choice between you and me, I choose me!"

Draco, outraged: "Fuck, I hate you."

Hermione, red-faced: "I hate you more!"

[They kiss passionately as footage shifts to Blaise and Theo.]

Blaise: "Is anyone in this house not fucking?"

[Daphne looks up from where she's perched on Pansy's lap as Lavender toys with Parvati's hair. Harry walks out from one of the bedrooms shirtless, glances at Theo, cocks his head, and walks away.]

Theo: "Dunno, man. Gotta go, though."

[Blaise frowns at the camera as footage cuts to end credits.]

Chapter End Notes

TURNS OUT a one-shot is not enough to do remotely anything with, but here, I tried my best. Also, for anyone else who watches the show, let me just say on a personal note: Chris Nuñez can totally get it. It's those disapproving vibes.
I'll Tell You How the Sun Rose

Pairing: Blaise Zabini x Neville Longbottom

Universe: mythology AU

Rating: M

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: Blaise x Neville as a Greek myth. Title from the Emily Dickinson poem of the same name.

His father is mad, or so they say. The more favored members of the Dark Lord's court certainly say it to Neville freely, gleefully taunting. Everyone knows his father's mind is going, or perhaps it is already gone. The worst of it is that Neville himself doesn't know the difference.

He can tell people suspect it of him as well. People with less privilege than the Carrows or the Lestranges do him the kindness, at least, of merely avoiding him in the street, mocking him only once his back is turned. By now Neville's grown up to be inordinately tall, which renders him difficult to miss in a crowd, even for the unprivileged. He doesn't interact with anyone much, and his shoulders have only one shape: hunched protectively, like armor.

"You shouldn't hide," says a voice, and from where he stands in the Hogsmeade market sorting through his options of figs, Neville looks up to find himself blinded. A man with dark skin and sleek features gleams languidly in the sun, and only after Neville shades his eyes can he even tell the difference between the rays themselves and the man's golden robes.

"I'm not hiding," says Neville.

"Sure you aren't," says the man.

"Call me Blaise," he says, which Neville mishears at first.

"Blaze?" he echoes, thinking of their first meeting, the glint of the midday sun.


At first Neville is convinced that Blaise is a hallucination; a manifestation of his own impending madness, inherited from his father. It becomes clear over time, however, that he could not have hallucinated Blaise, because Blaise is nothing like him. It's not as if Neville could have created some imaginary friend from the depths of his own mind, because Blaise is unapologetically, undeniably mean.

"Why doesn't anyone seem to like you?" is an example of something Blaise asks Neville, without batting an eye to the mockery inhabiting the remark. His tone is both luminous and dry while he inspects his glossy fingernails, the sound like flat champagne.
"People seem, no offense, visibly repulsed," Blaise says.

"Well, my father's mad," says Neville uncomfortably, though he finds it a difficult subject to speak aloud.

Blaise, helpfully, scoffs in the face of Neville's existential torment. "Your father isn't mad," he says. "But nobody ever likes someone who sees things differently. It reminds them of everything they'll never be."

Neville thinks this is patently false, probably. But it's interesting to be rebuked for something other than his genetics.

"Why do you care whether people like me?" he asks.

"I don't," says Blaise. "I don't care about you."

"Then why are you here?"

"I don't know," Blaise says, sounding like he means it. "But I suppose you're quite interesting to watch."

On good days, Neville's father is an inventor, a highly skilled architect. It's the only reason anyone puts up with him, because his madness does occasionally create things of use, or it did once. He used to be more prominent at Hogwarts, but it's possible the Dark Lord has required too much of his brilliant mind. Now, he mostly rambles to himself about darkness.

"What we need is an escape," Frank mutters. By now their chambers in the castle's highest tower are littered with drawings of what looks like birds, though Neville looks closer and sees they are actually keys with wings.

An escape, Neville knows, is exactly what they will never get.

Lately his father has been much worse. As far as Neville can tell, the Dark Lord has asked Frank Longbottom to hide something inside the castle, building a new chamber within that which Frank himself designed. It's like Frank is planting a labyrinth inside his own creation, giving his own life's work a tumor, which is becoming a perennial maze inside his mind.

Some days, Neville suspects he and Frank are both trapped inside it.

"I'm afraid I'm too much like him," says Neville.

"No," says Blaise lazily, "you already know you're like him."

"Then what am I afraid of?"

"Everything," Blaise says. "It's my least favorite thing about you, actually," he adds with a sidelong glance. "All that fear."

"I don't know who I'd be without it," Neville says honestly, and he waits for Blaise to mock him, to berate him, only he doesn't.

"True," Blaise says, as if maybe he wouldn't watch so closely if Neville were someone else.

When Frank babbles on about a monster with no face, Neville spends more time with Blaise. He
never knows where Blaise comes from or how he arrives—sometimes it's as if Neville catches a glitter out of his eye and then suddenly Blaise is standing there, or sometimes when light pours into his tower window Neville squints, and the strain to see becomes, inexplicably, Blaise—but the longer Blaise lingers, the more Neville wants him to stay.

Blaise has a fascinating way of seeing the world. He, unlike Neville, looks down on it. Nothing has ever lessened Blaise, never diminished him, and he mocks Neville for wanting silly, petty things like being accepted, or being liked.

"Haven't you ever wanted more?" says Blaise, sounding exasperated with Neville's mediocre longings.

The truth is that Neville has never actually wanted anything. That has never been apparent to him before, but now it is as inescapable as his father's maze. The longer Blaise is there beside him, the closer Blaise gets, the more intensely Neville registers the sensation of wanting. The hunger of it is shiny and new, vibrant and insatiable.

Before Blaise, Neville wanted only to be invisible, and now that Blaise exists, he wants only to be seen. Which is why Neville is the one to take the step that startles Blaise, forcing him against the tower's cold stone walls.

"You think I like this?" Neville forces through his teeth. "You think I enjoy being nothing?"

Blaise's lips curl up derisively.

"No," he says. "I know for a fact that you don't."

Neville swallows, because he was bold for a moment, but now he can feel the way Blaise's warmth is scorching him; punishment for going too far. Their proximity is uncalculated now, and therefore dangerous. Neville knows if he brushes Blaise's mouth, if he even grazes it, the tips of his fingers will burn.

"Why are you here?" Neville asks again, hardly able to speak it aloud, and Blaise reaches up to trace the shape of Neville's throat, smoothing over the motion of his swallow.

"Imagine," Blaise murmurs, "being so distant from everything that nothing matters. Imagine being so caged, so interminably alone, you feel nothing at all."

"I don't have to imagine it," Neville says, lousy with truth; rotten with it, spoiled to the rind.

Blaise's breath is warm along the side of his neck, edging towards his jaw.

"I know you don't," he says, and Neville shivers with heat.

Scalding, blistering. Neville radiates with this, whatever it is. Sensation overflows in his veins, tiny incisions in his abdomen peeling open, ripe from every echo of Blaise's touch. He blooms and bursts, begets himself, forgets himself. It unfurls from his toes and takes shape in his lungs. He sobs in silence, in euphoria. Ecstasy is anguish melting from his chest.

In the wake of golden sheets and bleeding whimpers, Neville thinks of darkness. It fills the castle from every corner, and even the light in Neville's tower is insufficient, paltry, small. He thinks of his own smallness and suffers in shame, feeling the expansion of himself like an ache, excruciating. All he is now is waiting. The absence of Blaise's warmth measures itself in tiny cuts along his arms and legs, so that whenever the Highland winds blow, Neville shrinks from the chill. He climbs the
steps to the tower he shares with his father and wants to scream at him WAKE UP, only it's
madness. Neville knows this is his madness, just like Frank's is Frank's.

When Blaise is gone everything is the same. The Carrows, the Lestranges, the Dark Lord,
everything his colorless and shadowed. Everything is cruelty and taunts, darkness and threats and
manic laughter. Neville is useless, of course, always has been, only this time when they use their
wands on him for sport, it doesn't hurt. It used to be pebbles of discomfort, bouncing pointlessly
off his back, but now he is a man burning alive, so he swallows it up, incendiary. He becomes the
pain, and it becomes him.

Blaise glitters into his room in a shower of gold while Neville lies curled atop his blankets. He
feels Blaise crawl into the bed, curling himself around Neville, and then Neville can feel his
scalding warmth again, sharp around the angle of his hips.

"You could be free," Blaise says.

It's the cruelest thing that Blaise has ever told him.

Neville returns home to find Frank muttering to himself again, only this time his father's thoughts
feel more fragmented than usual. Frank's mind is trapped in its own labyrinth again, paralysis
incarnate. Frank relives the same nightmares, cyclical and perpetual and stifling, and whether they
are real or dreamt, Neville wakes one day to discover that Frank is unable to rise from the floor.

"An escape," Frank says, teeth chattering. "Neville… Neville, run."

Neville no longer believes that his father can ever escape.

"Run, Neville," Frank says again, and inside his mind, Neville can see his father is no longer
screaming. He was once—there used to be other things in there, genius and brightness and
cleverness, like lightning—but it's gone now, and Neville knows the feeling. Frank has been
cauterized by his work, burned to numbness by the conscience he tried so long to fight.

Neville plucks one of his father's drawings from the floor, carefully, so as not to disturb the fragile
pages. The room is littered with them, overflowing, and they are all variations on the same thing:
winged keys.

An escape, Frank says, and Neville understands now that the darkness is a curse, it is madness
undiscovered, and when Frank says to run, he means something else. From inside the maze of his
thoughts, he is giving Neville the key to save his life. Unlock the door and push it open.

When Frank says run, Neville knows he means fly.

Neville stands at the top of the castle tower, a bit of stone breaking loose beneath his feet. It
crumbles to the ground, and above his head is darkness, a pitch of open sky. It will glow rosy soon
with waking, when this castle full of monsters will all stir their malevolent heads.

He closes his eyes and thinks he'll burn for this.

Then he steps over the ledge, letting himself fall—

And fall—

and fall
and fall
and
fall
and

when
he
should
land

he
doesn't.

"Are you ready now?" Blaise's voice says in his ear, and it envelopes Neville like the whole of the sun, a sigh unfurling like a pair of tufted wings to gather him in its embrace.

Not afraid anymore. Not afraid.

Dauntless, gleaming. Blazing and adored.

"Yes," Neville says. "I'm ready."

Chapter End Notes

A bit of Helios x Icarus for your Wednesday.
Until March, Pansy's sorority house getting kicked off frat row was the worst thing that had ever happened to her. Then it was the suspension by the university they were dealt in April. By late May, the worst thing that had ever happened to her was her rejection from campus housing for the summer. By the first of June, it was her new address: the very last available studio in a dilapidated building well at a distance from the rest of campus, where she would be spending her summer and, by the looks of it, her final year.

Hardly a victory lap, she thought with the opposite of relish.

"Great," Pansy muttered aloud, pulling into her parking spot in the alley and catching sight of motion from the rearview mirror. She climbed out of the car just in time to see a group of boys wandering into her new building, all four of them shouting to each other about weed or Zeppelin or something else unintelligibly male.

"BIG D," yelled one, prompting one of the larger boys to turn in answer, and Pansy grimaced, hitting the alarm button a second time on her white BMW.

Disgusting.

"Hey," said a voice behind her, and she turned to find a boy with messy black hair calling out to her from his car window. "You're in my parking spot."

"Harry," bellowed the boy called Big D. "Hurry up, asshole!"

The boy who was apparently Harry (or Asshole) rolled his eyes, or so she guessed through the mirrored lenses of his sunglasses. "Hey," he said to Pansy again, ignoring the other voices drunkenly calling out for his attention. "Come on. Move."

He was better looking than the others, or maybe it was just the way he was driving the car. He had the windows down, one elbow resting on the door, one hand at the top of the steering wheel while he looked at her. He was rumpled and at ease and she would have bet money that his white t-shirt smelled like sea breeze laundry detergent, or something within that category of quintessential boy smells. From the angle she was looking, she could see the lines on his long legs, tan up to the point where his shorts had ridden up on his thighs.
Boys driving were their own genre of unhelpful appeal.

"My spot," she corrected him. "Landlord said so."

"Are you sure?" he prompted, dropping his sunglasses to look at her as if she were the kind of sorority girl who maybe didn't know how to read, and she gave him the sort of smile that suggested he was the sort of boy who maybe shouldn't try to push her buttons.

"I'm sure," she said sweetly, putting her headphones in and turning to go inside as he growled after her in frustration.

Living with his cousin Dudley was the goddamn worst. Luckily, it was short term; only for the summer while his usual roommates, Ron and Hermione, were off working their various internships elsewhere.

Still, having to live with Dudley's gang of idiot thugs coming and going was enough to make Harry ponder the potential benefits of being homeless. Piers, for example, was constantly sleeping on his couch, and Dennis and Malcolm were always touching his recording equipment. His Victrola (a gift from Hermione) had coffee spilled down the side, and he was pretty sure Gordon was eating his cereal. He had to keep his guitar with him all the time now, just to make sure they didn't touch it when he wasn't looking.

All of that might have been fine, but then there was the girl who lived above them. Priscilla or Princess or something. She kept parking in Harry's spot, and every time he asked Dudley for the lease agreement to show her, Dudley insisted he would get around to digging it up and then, shock of all shocks, didn't. (Harry would've called the landlord himself, but sublets were... frowned upon, and/or expressly forbidden.)

At first Harry tried to be nice about it, which didn't work. Then he tried being a dick about it, which definitely didn't work. Eventually, it became clear they had totally different schedules. She was gone all day, doing whatever it was she did—her nails, probably—and he was gone at night, when he used the university recording studios. By the second week he simply pulled into the spot when she wasn't home and locked his car, satisfied.

One night he came home to find a cone in the spot and rolled his eyes, getting out and moving it out of the way like a normal human being with opposable thumbs. The next time, she had posted a sign with his license plate number saying *DO NOT PARK HERE*, which he removed. Again, with his working thumbs.

Very infrequently did they run into each other in person. Only once did they actually speak, though it wasn't especially noteworthy. She had been looking over something at the time, a frown painted on her lips in coral-pink, and for half a second he thought about asking her what was wrong until she looked up, conjuring a snotty layer of impatience at the sight of him.

"Can you keep it down?" she offered snidely, glancing at the guitar case in his hands. "Seriously. It's getting ridiculous. And stop parking in my spot."

"It's not your spot," Harry said. "For the last fucking time—"

But she left, walking away as if he hadn't even spoken at all.

There was constant music from his apartment. There were people coming in and out at all hours, waking Pansy when she was trying to rest for her internship. It had been hard enough to try and
squeeze in all the courses she needed to graduate pre-law with a double major in history and econ, and now that she was having to take a creative writing course over the summer for her fine arts elective in addition to the hours at work, she was losing her mind.

She'd always been bad at writing; she had always preferred math because there was always an answer. History, too, had already happened. There was nothing to invent. Writing was a pain, and if she couldn't get something passable together, her 4.0 was going to take a hit from her pass-fail arts elective, of all things. What a fucking joke. Unfortunately, she doubted Yale Law was going to be thrilled with her being president of a sorority that had gotten itself kicked off the row, much less whatever this did to her grade point average.

But Harry what's-his-face was always playing that heavy metal shit and distracting her and keeping her up at night, and the one time she wanted to try leaving to get coffee, she came back to find Harry was parked in her spot again. Furious, she left a note that said she would absolutely tow him if he did it again; don't test her.

When she came out the next morning, the note was taped to the wall with an irreverent scrawl beneath it: Go for it, princess.

She was livid. "I'm going to fucking murder him," she said over the phone to Daphne, who was sympathetic, albeit not nearly as enraged as Pansy needed her to be.

"Don't kill him," Daphne suggested unhelpfully. "Just like, make a schedule or something. Compromise."

Fuck schedules. Fuck compromise.

"Yeah, sure, a schedule," Pansy said, googling numbers of towing companies as she spoke.

"What the fuck did you do to my car?"

"What car?" she demurred, theatrically bemused.

To her credit, Harry's storming up to her apartment hadn't seemed to faze her much. Passive-aggressive notes were one thing, but he'd expected her to cave under the pressure of someone actually protesting to her face.

Turned out, no.

"It was parked in my spot—"

"My spot," she said, glancing at her nails.

"—and now it's go- Oh, okay, so you admit it, then," Harry fumbled retroactively, a bit taken aback. "What did you do to it?"

"Made it disappear," she said, smiling thinly. "I'm a witch."

He glared at her, and the irksome smile broadened. She was pretty and monstrously awful, like some kind of glittering, toxic snake.

"I take it you had it towed?" he prompted, exasperated by the runaround she was still all too happy to give.

"You parked it in my spot," she replied, impassive.
"It's not your—" He broke off, about to pinch the bridge of his nose before remembering he was wearing his goddamn glasses. "Look," he began, "Penelope—"

"Pansy."

"Fine, whatever, sure—look," he said, "please. I can't afford to get my car out of an impound lot right now, okay? I can't." It was going to be hundreds of dollars he resolutely didn't have. If he did, he wouldn't be spending the summer here in the first place, would he?

"Probably shouldn't have parked in my spot," she advised, and Harry tightly clenched a fist, gritting his teeth.

"Can you just—"

"Maybe we can come to a deal," she suggested. "A contract, if you will."

This, Harry suspected, was going to be a lot like bargaining with the devil.

"Yes?"

"The spot is mine," said Pansy. "Non-negotiable."

"It isn't y-" He broke off, stopping himself. "Fine. Where am I supposed to park, then?"

"The street," said Pansy, obviously fully aware that street parking in this neighborhood was impossible to find. A mere myth, like Santa or the tooth fairy. "And I have two more conditions."

"What? No," Harry snapped. "Giving up my spot is already a condi-

"The first of these conditions," Pansy continued, again as if he had never spoken at all, "is that you will stop playing so much loud music."

"I don't play any music," Harry said, frustrated.

"You have a guitar. I've seen it."

"What? No." He blinked. "I mean yes, but—"

"And as for the second," she went on, "your friends have got to stop coming and going at all hours. It's impossible to think, and—"

"Wait," Harry said, staring at her in disbelief. "You think those are my friends?"

She gave him a look of impossible boredom.

"So should I get my coat?" she asked him, opening the door just enough for him to see that her keys were hooked on the wall beside the frame. Her apartment, unlike Dudley's, was spotless and fully furnished. Harry hadn't lived in a place that nice since… ever. Not that he could think about it now, nor do anything but seethe in the glow of her privilege. "Or are we going to argue some more?"

He stared at her.

And stared.

For half a second he considered taking her keys, but then no, she'd probably have him arrested. Or executed. Or deported.
"You know what? No," he said. "No. Fuck your conditions."

She blinked, and aside from that one moment by the mailbox, it was the first time he had ever seen her look vulnerable. Her eyes, usually narrowed beneath dark brows, suddenly went wide and soft, almost fearful.

Just as quickly, though, she was back to her usual portrait of entitlement.

"What are you planning to do, then?" she demanded. "I'm not helping you get your car back unless you do something about the noise and your shitbag crew, and certainly not if you're going to keep parking in my spot—"

"I don't need your help," Harry snapped, and reached forward, closing her apartment door on himself as her face promptly flamed with fury, the slap of a half-formed expletive just audible when the door fell shut.

Harry dug out his phone as he stomped down the corridor, dialing the first contact on his speed dial when he reached the stairwell.

"Hermione?" he said, descending irritably to his apartment. "Yeah. I, uh. I need you, please."

Pansy was already exhausted after a long day at the library when she caught sight of him sitting atop the trunk of his car, elbows resting placidly on his knees. She pulled up next to him, double-parked, and glared at him through the window.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said, but before she could make any threats, he had already pulled open her rear passenger door, tossing his guitar into the backseat and then sliding into the passenger side. "What the—"

"Can't use my car or I'll lose my spot," Harry said, and she glared at him. "Just take a left when you get to the light," he added, buckling his seatbelt.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"That," he said, twisting around to point to his guitar case, "is an acoustic guitar."

"So?"

"So," he said flatly, "just drive."

The last thing she wanted to do was play some sort of maniacal guessing game, but it seemed like Harry wasn't going to move until she indulged him. That, and he was clearly in her parking spot. Again.

"I could just dump you in the river," she said.

"What river?"

"Doesn't matter. I could find one."

"Great," he said. "Drive."

So she drove, reluctantly. He said nothing except to direct her to campus, and specifically to the music school, where he instructed her to park and then wrenched open the door, pulling out his
guitar and snapping his fingers when she didn't move.

"Come on," he said.

She rolled her eyes and followed, wanting to punch him. Maybe she still would. But on the other hand, she was curious now. He let her into the building without any further explanation, swiping his access card, and then pushed open one of the doors on the left.

"Get in," he said.

She glared at him, but entered.

She walked in to find a girl with extremely curly hair looking up from where she was perched on a stool, holding a violin. A thin, gangling redhead was seated at the upright piano.

"These," Harry said, "are my actual friends. Hermione is poly sci and a classically trained violinist. Ron is in the screenwriting program, though he plays when we need him." He paused to pull his guitar out of its case, revealing a smooth, worn looking wood. "This," he said bluntly to Pansy, "is an acoustic guitar, not an electric guitar. What you're hearing all night is my cousin Dudley's music."

"Okay," Pansy said uncertainly, bristling. "So?"

"Harry, hang on," interrupted Hermione, frowning at Pansy. "Isn't this the girl who had your car towed?"

Ron's eyes narrowed. Agitated, Pansy lifted her chin. "He was in my spot," she said.

"It's not your spot," Hermione and Ron said in unison, but by then Harry had already tossed the guitar strap around his neck, taking a seat between the other two.

He strummed something for a moment, and for whatever reason, Pansy waited without argument. Curiosity, she supposed.

"We have a folk band on the side," Harry said to Pansy. "Ron and Hermione are both working this summer, but they came back for the weekend." He glanced at Hermione, who reluctantly raised her violin. "Thatta girl," said Harry approvingly, grinning at her, and then he turned to Pansy. "Sit," he said.

Astoundingly, she sat.

Harry strummed a little more, tuning with Hermione and Ron, and then after a few runs from each of the instruments, he tapped out a rhythm. "Alright?"

"Alright," said Ron, with a nod from Hermione.

And then Harry was… singing.

"She take my money," he sang in a silky baritone, "when I'm in need—"

Pansy blinked as Hermione played an irreverent riff on the violin.

"—yeah, she's a triflin' friend indeed. Oh, she's a gold digger, way over town—"

Pansy glared at Harry, who stifled his obvious laughter, cutting the other two off with a wave of
his hand.

"Wrote that for you," he said.

She rose to her feet with a scoff of disgust, but he caught her arm.

"Sit down," he said again. "Just listen."

Again, Ron and Hermione gave Pansy matching looks of displeasure, but Harry tapped his foot four times, and Hermione grudgingly raised her violin to her shoulder.

"Entitled in the worst way," sang Harry, "feelin' nothin' that I wanna put in words. Wanna maybe take my mask off, so I can see what's under yours."

He glanced up at her, expectant. She sat very still, and he continued strumming.

"Don't need to read your lips to know what you're tryna say, think I can see damn well what's written on your face. Doll, you make me crazy, make me such a maniac. You make me wanna drive away, make me wanna come right back."

He finished with another strum, slowly fading into nothing, until finally the song ended, or it stopped.

"You wrote that?" Pansy asked, clearing her throat after a moment of silence.

"It's not finished," Harry said. "But yeah."

She glanced down at her hands, feeling a wave of something she hated to call by its name.

"I can't write shit," she admitted.

Harry rose to his feet, taking a step towards her, and then reached for her cheek, carefully lifted her chin with one finger.

"Give me back my parking spot," he said, "and maybe we can work something out."

Ultimately, it didn't matter. By the end of the summer, they mostly took one car.

Chapter End Notes

My D/Hr Advent fic, **Run the Gauntlet**, posted separately yesterday if you are interested in a tale of dramione working at a magical renaissance faire. (I will post it in this collection next week.) As for the above, the lyrics to Gold Digger are, tragically, not mine. The others are, and the moment I start my long-deserved folk band it will be my lead single.
Could've Been Worse

Pairing: Bill Weasley x Hermione Granger

Universe: post-war, EWE

Rating: M

Summary: Olivie Advent cont'd.

Prompts: a Bill x Hermione with a conceivable way to end up together, a request based (I'm guessing) on their brief and ill-fated pairing in Nightmares and Nocturnes. I've previously been very adamant about why that form of these characters would not/should not result in a happy ending, but have made changes to make it theoretically possible here.

Near miss. That's what they were calling it.

"It might've worked," said Ron. "But it didn't, and that's fine."

Yes, fine. Definitely. That's what Hermione was thinking, too.

"Could be worse," Harry assured her. "You heard Bill and Fleur are splitting up, right?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Not that she was surprised to find Harry's input profoundly unhelpful. He was a lot of things, but never especially comforting. "Just because I'm not married to Ron it's somehow… not as bad?"

"Well, it isn't, is it?" he replied in his most earnest form of optimism, and he was probably right, though she couldn't quite put it in those terms. It had still been three years with Ron, plus the seven in the making.

"Misery's not comparable, Harry," she told him with a sigh. "It's not a competition."

"Well, I know," he said, shrugging. "But hey, Voldemort's dead, right? War's over. So yeah, it could definitely be worse."

She avoided all things Weasley for a considerable amount of time, for obvious reasons. After a while, though, she caught wind of something odd.

"A self-defense class, you said?" she asked, interrupting Harry, who had been sort of vocally meandering while her mind drifted. "Like the D.A. meetings we used to do, you mean?"

"No, not particularly," said Harry. "It's sort of a mix of muggle and magical techniques, though much more physical. I tried it out once last year and it's quite good, actually. Very useful."

"I suppose wizards do rely a bit overmuch on their wands," Hermione remarked, frowning in thought.
"Yes, I think that's Bill's point."

Hermione considered the mention of Bill. "I don't really see him as any sort of martial arts instructor."

Not that she saw him as much of anything, or ever had. Though, once she thought about it, she supposed the Greyback scars probably added to his legitimacy as far as credentials went.

"He had some experience as a curse-breaker, I think. Hand-to-hand combat is part of the training. Plus, you know. After everything with the war, and with Fleur gone…" Harry trailed off. "Maybe you should try it out," he suggested. "See if you like it."

"Self-defense? Harry," Hermione scoffed, "don't be ridiculous."

He shrugged. "Just an idea," he said. "Can't be worse than sitting at home alone."

The nightmares about Bellatrix Lestrange she'd been having for years were unfortunately more problematic without Ron in her bed. She would wake to a weight on her chest nearly every night now, leaving her kicking and flailing for escape. Would things have been different if she'd been able to fight back? Difficult to tell what was psychological trauma and what was her rational mind trying to be sensible, but the opportunity to do something about it was starting to loom. Eventually she opted to give it a try, walking into the Diagon Alley studio to find a much larger group than she anticipated.

"Oh, hello," came a voice behind her, and she turned, startled, to find Bill Weasley at her heels. "Didn't know you were coming. Need help with your wraps?"

"Wraps?" she echoed, uncertain.

He smiled. He'd cut his hair differently since the war, having done away with the ponytail for what she presumed to be practical reasons. It made the jagged scars across his cheekbones more stark, though not unpleasantly so. His temples were starting to grey, peppered with tiny flecks of white. *Probably stress,* Harry had said, *seeing as he's only twenty-eight.*

It suited him, aging. It made him look distinctive; manly, un-boyish.

"Here," Bill said, pulling a roll of what looked like bandages from the pocket of his athletic shorts and tossing one outward, floating it like a ribbon across the studio floor. "Start here," he said, looping it around her thumb. "Wrap four or five times around your wrist, then four around your knuckles."

"Like this?" she asked, probably clumsily.

"A bit lower."

"Lower?"

He reached for her hand, brushing a thumb coolly across the midpoint of her fingers.

"Here," he said. "Otherwise it slips down."

"Oh." She swallowed. "Right, okay—"

"Bill?" came someone else's voice, and Bill, turning to follow the sound of his name, released her.
"Sorry," he said over his shoulder, distractedly addressing Hermione again after a brief communication across the studio. "Anyway, wrap between your fingers, okay? Like this." He traced the motion into the air around her hands. "Then a few more times around the knuckles, yeah? I'll check on you in a second."

"Sure, of course," Hermione said, watching him go.

After he'd gone, she could still feel his touch as if he'd marked her.

She expected to pick it up quickly, as she had with everything at Hogwarts.

She did not.

"Just keep coming," Bill said at the end of class. She was rubbing the sting from her eyes, unable to tell if she'd somehow been inadvertently crying from exhaustion or if her eyeballs were merely sweating. "It's muscle memory," Bill told her, sounding factual. Detached, even. "Eventually you won't have to think so hard about getting things right."

Thinking was the one thing she did well. The moving part came less naturally.

"Yes, okay," Hermione lied, fully intending to never return, but Bill caught her by the elbow.

"It'll get better," he said. "Trust me."

She was pretty sure it was only meant to resonate one way, but it seemed to flood her temporarily in waves of impact. She felt it in her chest, and then in her head. It slid from her arms and legs, trickling down her spine alongside the hour's worth of sweat.

"You promise?" she said wryly, half-joking.

His mouth twitched.

"I promise," he said.

In the shower she marveled at the pain in new places, growing distinctly sore and stiff throughout the day. Then she glanced down at her knuckles and thought of his touch smoothing over them, healing and soft.

"How was it?" asked Harry in the Floo.

"Well, I didn't die," said Hermione. "So I guess it could've been worse."

She started coming twice a week, finding that Bill was at least right about one thing: it got easier each time. After about a month she was starting to counter naturally, the motions becoming more reflexive than planned. It continued to hurt, but either she was quietly masochistic or the pain was somehow cathartic. Eventually it became a relief of sorts, learning the limits of what she could take, pushing them as far as she could. That she could take a blow and return it became a certain reassurance, proof of life. Her lungs, so long paralyzed in the aftermath of what she'd left behind, gradually re-learned how to fill.

She and Bill spoke politely, though infrequently. People typically required his attention, though in December his class had all but emptied.

"Holidays," he explained when she walked in to find herself alone, shrugging in answer to the
question her furrowed brow must have implied. "Mind if I do a work out with you? I wasn't expecting anyone to be here."

"Oh, no. No, of course not." She let her bag slide from her shoulder, beginning to wrap her knuckles. Bill was wearing an old t-shirt, the fabric thinned around the blades of his shoulders, and his hair was slick with sweat.

"Are you going to the Burrow?" she asked him.

"Not yet." A pause. "Or maybe not at all."

She blinked, surprised. "No?"

He looked over at her from where he'd been stretching. "It's a bit odd now. My mum," he began, and hesitated. "She… fusses."

"Right." Hermione cleared her throat, approaching him in the center of the room. "Should I get on one of the bags, or…?"

"Nah. We'll spar." He beckoned her forward, and she blinked. "Don't worry," he said with a laugh. "We'll keep it light."

"But—"

"Just try not to think so much."

Right. This again. "You know that's actually impossible, right?"

He shrugged. "Just focus on slipping. Watch my shoulders," he said, tapping one. "If my right one comes forward, your right shoulder comes forward. Same with the left."

He motioned slowly, and she watched. Movement for him was fluid, natural. She could see the muscle beneath his shirt and followed the lines of it, his planes of mechanization.

She watched him, and swallowed.

"Right," she said, taking her place opposite him. "You sure?"

"Just feel it. It's the same with magic," he said. "Trust it."

"I'm not so good with trust," she said before she could stop herself, and his tongue slid out between his lips, moistening them briefly.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I know."

She got him in the chin with an uppercut and he praised her for it, making her want to die a little from the mix of confusion and pride; elation alongside dismay. Then, once people returned to class in January, Bill started summoning her to the front of the room, using her to demonstrate their drills. She learned him, adding his motions to her database of reflexes along with her own. If his shoulder came forward, so did hers.

A demonstration of possible attacks to the body had him slowly modeling a shot to her stomach. His hand lingered, instruction droning in and out.

"—aim it up, not swiping to the side—"
Each motion brushed her ribs, his proximity to her suddenly unavoidable.

"—like that," he finished, pausing with his hand in place. "Got it?"

There was a mutter of agreement as Hermione glanced down, noticing the pebbled flesh across her arms with a mix of embarrassment and longing.

"Got it?" he asked again, murmuring it to her privately this time.

Her body sang it back to him, rising up from her chest with certainty: Yes. Yes. Yes.

"Sure," she said. Too softly, but at least she managed to find her voice.

"You seem much better," Harry commented later during one of their usual chats. "Come to think of it, Bill seems better, too."

"Probably the endorphins," Hermione said. "Or something."

Harry's reply was a grin over his salad. "Well, I suppose there's worse ways to get those," he said.

"What happened with Fleur?"

She surprised herself with the question, finding it immediately too personal the moment it left her lips and regretting that she'd asked it. They were alone in the studio once again, with her lingering in the doorway to face his back. Valentine's Day made for another unpopular evening where it came to exercise.

Bill, however, didn't seem to mind. His shoulders, which she knew how to read by now, didn't visibly tense. He turned to glance over his shoulder with expectancy, as if he'd been waiting for her to be standing right where she was.

"Nothing. Everything." He kept his chin angled over one shoulder. "Woke up one day different people than we were."

"Near miss?" she asked with a grimace, letting her bag fall from her shoulder.

"No." He was wearing the same old t-shirt, the fabric thinnest in all the spots his frame was most broad. "We didn't miss. But just because something lands doesn't make it last forever."

"Think you might have lasted forever without the war?"

He shrugged. "No point wondering. It happened, and it made me. It made her." He paused before adding, "And it made you, too."

This, she thought, was what she had been trying to get Ron to come to terms with. That she couldn't remove what she'd been through from who she was; not one piece of it. Not the nightmares, not the need to fight the things she couldn't see. Not the fear that she should have been stronger, quicker. The version of her that had not seen war was somewhere else, with someone else, doing something else.

That version didn't exist, and she didn't want to pretend it did.

"Right." She stepped towards him. "Spar?"

He met her in the center of the room, and she waited for him to start the timer. Two minutes, light,
playful, same as always. *Keep it light*, he always said, so frequently she'd memorized the cadence of it in his voice. Sometimes she paused to find herself contemplating the shape of his words in her head, wondering how they'd sound if he ever changed his mind.

He stepped forward and reflexively, she stepped back.

Another step, another dance backwards.

Another step, another, until her back hit the wall behind her.

His right shoulder came forward.

Hers did, too.

"Stop me," bled from his lips.

From across the room, she could see the reflection of his shoulders in the studio's mirrors, the blades of them coiled and careful.

"Don't think," she whispered.

He kissed the side of her neck, her clavicle. His lips traveled lower, fingers following the shape of her tank top, folding back the material of her sports bra. He ran his tongue over her skin slowly, letting her shiver in his hands.

The kiss, when it happened, took her like a blow.

A quick motion had her up against the wall. Another motion had her legs over his shoulders, another quick toss propping her hips on his arm. His mouth slid against her, tongue pressed to the material of her workout crops, working her through the fabric.

"Shouldn't," he breathed to the curve of her thigh, breath hot against her skin, and it occurred to her that he might be right.

Oh well, she thought, mindless with rapture by the time he peeled the lycra from her skin, her gasp in reflex slowly learned for months.

Could've been worse.

**Chapter End Notes**

I had two similar requests: one for Bill x Hermione, one for Bill x Narcissa, and in the end this won out only because there are more epilogical diaries being added to Modern Romance that deal with the latter.
He was sure Flint was going to give him hell.

He was sure of it.

"What the fuck," Marcus said aloud, mockingly awed.

Oliver had been finishing up a workout on the pitch when Marcus showed up, predictably unexpected and uninvited. They'd had a little tiff, trading insults as they always did, and when Oliver picked up his bag to storm away it had unhelpfully ripped open, a litter of contents pouring out. He typically carried nothing unusual, really, just a quill and some water and a potion for sore muscles, so on any other day it would have been nothing more than a simple annoyance and an easy repair, but today there was also… the book.

The book, which Marcus summoned from the ground before Oliver could think to prevent him.

"The Witch and the Rake?" Marcus read aloud from the cover, mouth contorting in what Oliver was sure would be a sneer. "Seriously, what the—"

"It's nothing," Oliver snapped, snatching the book back from Marcus, or trying to. "It's just a laugh, that's all," he attempted with a hollow scoff, but Marcus held it at a distance, forcing Oliver into a collision with his chest when he reached for it again.

"Didn't take you for the chick lit type, Wood," Marcus drawled, and Oliver, down to the last straw of his patience (or possibly the last remaining thread of his pride), wound up and hit Marcus as hard as he could, sending Marcus staggering backwards as the book fell to the ground with a conclusive thud.

Oliver threw it angrily into the torn remainder of his bag and looked up to find Marcus staring at him, one hand pressed to the little dribble of blood from his nose.

"You motherfucker," said Marcus. "You're gonna pay for that."

"Make me," Oliver spat, challenging Marcus with a glare.

In the end it happened as it always did, and as it always had. When they were at Hogwarts it was
usually after a match, maybe in the showers. Maybe it would happen outside when everyone else was at the Three Broomsticks. Maybe it would happen in one of the classrooms with the door spelled shut, charmed from the corridor to let them know if someone was coming. No matter what, though, it would always happen like this: someone hit first, and then someone hit back.

This time, Marcus took hold of Oliver's shirt and tugged him closer. "Tonight?" he said, rasping it.

"Yeah." Oliver swallowed, watching the little trickle of blood from Marcus' nose as it drifted solemnly down to his lip. "Yeah. Fine. Tonight."

"Explain the book," Marcus said later.

Oliver had slid in from the floo without a word, and subsequently, Marcus had shoved him into the wall beside the fireplace and kissed him. It was the sort of kiss that was powered by frustration and loathing, because neither of them technically wanted to do this. Neither of them wanted to want this—and yet here they were, same as always.

Being drafted to the same quidditch team meant it was even harder to resist than it had been at school. Now they were inseparable by vocation as well as the petty consequence of vice.

Oliver tensed and turned onto his side, sliding a glance to Marcus. "Thought this was just sex."

"It is."

"So why should I explain anything?"

"Because it's one thing if you're fucking me for convenience," Marcus said. "Another if you're hiding some sort of bizarre bodice-ripping kink I'll only be dragged into later."

"Shut up." Oliver shoved himself upright, reaching for his shoes, and Marcus yanked him back with a groan of annoyance, wrapping one arm around his chest.

"Tell me."

"Fuck you."

His slid his arm up, catching Oliver's throat with the crook of his elbow. "Tell me," he said again, and felt Oliver swallow. His free hand traced the side of Oliver's ribs, thumbing over them like the strings of a guitar.

"It's… Katie said…” A pause. "Apparently I—" Oliver broke off again, muttering, "Apparently I'm not good at fucking women."

"You don't say," Marcus drawled, and Oliver elbowed him sharply.

"Fuck off. She says I don't—" Hesitation. "She says I can't—"

Pause.

"I just needed to know what the fuck she wants in bed," Oliver mumbled, and it occurred to Marcus that the reason Oliver had broken his nose that afternoon was not because of anything Marcus had done at the time, but because of what he had inadvertently discovered.

"Oh. Well." Marcus cleared his throat, releasing Oliver. "Okay then. Was that so hard?"
Oliver refused to look at him, and he sighed.

"Look, it's not a big deal," he said. "Gimme the book. Let's see it."

"What?" He felt Oliver's spine go rigid. "No, absolutely not—"

"Come on. I'm not exactly… you know." He shrugged. "It's not like I have a girlfriend either, do I?"

"Oh." Oliver's voice was gruff. "Well, fuck, fine. If you really want to."

He leaned forward, sorting through his things, and tossed the book over his shoulder to Marcus, who caught it easily with one outstretched hand. That was Marcus' thing, catching things. Catching things, scoring points. Fucking Oliver Wood.

Just sex, he reminded himself. Just sex.

"Alright, what the fuck's a rake?" asked Marcus.

They didn't get along on the pitch for obvious reasons. Oliver considered the rules something of importance, while Marcus had never heard of 'rules' or 'regulations' or 'basic human decency,' and therefore half the time they were slapped with unnecessary penalty calls because Marcus had knocked someone off their broom. Not to mention that if Oliver ever missed a save, Marcus immediately became a monster. As if Oliver weren't beating himself up enough as it was.

"If you just worked the lateral drills a little harder—"

"Don't talk to me about lateral drills until you've gotten a few more points in the crease!"

"Fuck you, Wood—"

"Fuck off, Flint!"

And from there they'd have to be separated by the coach, or by the referee, or by whoever was standing nearby who wasn't afraid of tremendous and unavoidable bodily harm.

If someone wasn't standing there—if, by coincidence, no one was around to separate them—then things went rather differently. Fuck you became fuck me which became fuck yes, and what none of the rest of their team could understand was that if Marcus and Oliver worked it out alone, if they sweat out their enmity and worked off a little steam, then everything was fine. It was normal.

Or something.

"This one's halfway decent," commented Marcus, thumbing through the pages of their latest read: *A Wicked Kind of Wizard*. "I liked this book more than the last one."

"The one with the fake dating, you mean? And the duke?"

"No, that one was fine. I meant the one with the arranged marriage," Marcus said, making a face. "I like this better. A makeover," he said in the same reverent tone he frequently used to describe the intricacies of a quaffle, "is a great fucking trope."

They were in bed together; Oliver's this time. It had been a few weeks now of reading these stupid romance books, both separately and together: *The Warlock and I. To Tame a Witch. What a Wizard Wants*. 
"I'm not sure it's helping at all," Oliver remarked with a twinge of disappointment. "As far as I can tell, women just want a rich man who tells them they're beautiful because they don't know it."

"What? Fuck off," said Marcus. "It's the devotion of it, fucker."

He punched Oliver's shoulder, probably to drive the point home.

"Women want a man who makes her feel wanted," Marcus said.

Oliver wondered if maybe that had been the problem with Katie. They kept trying to make something work—they had all the same interests and sure, he traveled a lot, but she was one of those independent girls who liked her own space—but still, in the end something was just… off. He liked sex with her just fine, but he could tell it was underwhelming on her end. That was why they'd decided to keep things open, each committing only to the idea of not being entirely committed to the other.

"Maybe I don't touch her right," said Oliver.

He leaned forward, resting his chin on Marcus' shoulder. He could feel the dip of Marcus' posture relaxing, settling his head more comfortably in place.

"Probably would do it better if you ran the right drills," said Marcus.

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you—"

"You really think that's helping?"

"Wood, I'm obviously not trying to help—"

"Just come here," Oliver said, only realizing he'd been pleading after Marcus' mouth was already on his.

Marcus walked into Oliver's flat to find him setting out two plates, then two sets of silverware.

"What the fuck?" he demanded.

"It's… you know. Food," Oliver said, cheeks reddening. "Like a proper book club or something."

"Jesus." Marcus' stomach growled in response to the smell of food wafting through the air, which he resolutely ignored. "We're not a book club, Wood. And what part of 'just sex' remains unclear?"

"Fine. Don't eat, then," said Oliver tartly, sitting down to the shepherd's pie he'd made. "Stay there."

In the wake of Marcus' opposition, Oliver took a bite directly from the dish, immediately choking on how hot it was, and then forced a swallow. After the initial discomfort, he promptly took another bite, repeating the process, and then again, until Marcus was forced to launch forward in annoyance, snatching the fork from Oliver's hand and casting a cooling charm on the pie.

"Idiot," he muttered, and dug Oliver's fork into the crust himself, thinking but not wanting to marvel aloud at how respectably flaky it was for someone he assumed was unable to cook. (Reading bodice rippers together was one thing, but enjoying the finesse of another man's pie crust was too much.)
In answer, Oliver reached around, sliding one hand down Marcus' spine. "Did you like the book this week?"

A troubled knave and a high-spirited, free-thinking witch. He was a duke in need of a wife to inherit his fortune! She was in need of a wealthy man to fund her alchemical research! They loathed each other on sight, as was only right and proper, but the inevitable roadside robbery led to a revelatory night in the nearby tavern's single bed, ultimately concluding—to everyone's astonishment—with the usual wedding and babies.

"Well enough, I suppose." Marcus took another bite. "Though I found the trope far-fetched and frankly, a bit contrived."

"Oh, absolutely," Oliver agreed. "If they hated each other so much, why find so many reasons to spend time together?"

"Ridiculous," Marcus agreed, handing Oliver the fork.

Oliver took a bite in silence as Marcus sat in the chair beside him, waiting for him to finish chewing.

Then, when that wasn't close enough, Marcus hooked one foot around the leg of Oliver's chair, dragging it closer.

"Sex and occasional dinner," he proposed, apropos of nothing.

"Sex and regularly scheduled breakfast," Oliver countered, equally unfazed.

Marcus set his jaw, sighing.

"Sex," he conceded eventually, "and book club. Along with all the meals 'book club' implies."

Oliver took another bite, contemplating it for a moment before handing the fork back to Marcus.

"Done," he agreed, running his thumb along the line of Marcus' inner arm.

Marcus shook his head as he leaned over to take another bite of the pie, inwardly lamenting the things he did to keep the peace.

"Alright," he said, mouth full. "Let's talk themes."

Chapter End Notes

Mr Blake is sick, so here's me reminding you to drink some water. Best of luck to anyone else facing the trials of holiday travel!
Imagine my surprise upon discovering the Noble House of Black was not as noble as it appeared. True, I had questioned upon some occasions why my mother had platinum blonde hair that didn't seem to grey as other mothers' did, but there were other things on my mind for most of my conscious adolescence. Quidditch, for example. The heinous murder of an authority figure whom I did not technically respect. The Yule Ball. You understand, I'm sure, the quintessential hallmarks of youth, hence why I did not question until my early twenties why something odd seemed to be separating me from my peers.

It started when people began to fall into a trance of sorts whenever I came around. Initially I thought they were all having a laugh, or possibly avoiding me because I had recently become what some called an "unjustly exonerated war criminal," but eventually I started to notice it happening with undeniable frequency. People struggled to recall my name or any details they had once known about me, peering at me as if through a fog instead.

Naturally, I knew there was only one person I could ask.

"Oh yes," remarked my mother, thoughtfully reclined in her cell at Azkaban. "I wondered if you might start to see some signs. Granted, you're less than half, but I suppose now that you've reached sexual maturity something was bound to show up sooner or later."

"Mother, I lost my virginity ages ago," I informed her. After all, I'd been a virile, sexually active human (?) man since I was sixteen.

"Well, I'm sure you tried your best, darling," remarked my mother unhelpfully, adding, "You really ought to be careful, sweetheart. I suppose you've noticed the… side effects, by now?"

"People not remembering me, you mean?" Even Pansy and Daphne had struggled to recall my name recently, and the two of them, at least, should certainly know it, though thanks to my mother I'm beginning to doubt myself profoundly.

"Yes," said my mother, offering the salivating guard a lascivious glance over my shoulder that made me supremely uncomfortable. "Your lovers, for what it's worth, likely will not remember you either. My mother certainly didn't remember her own tryst that led to me," she added, lifting her pinky on a delicate teacup I now suspected was not typically given to Azkaban captives. Come to think of it, most cells, my father's included, were not so lavishly decorated, either.
"Father seems to know who you are," I reminded her, reconsidering their relationship from an entirely new and upsetting perspective, and she gave something of a lofty shrug.

"Oh, you know how these things go," she said. "Skips a generation, I suppose."

She went on to tell me that I, much like a werewolf, would be at the mercy of some sort of aggressive hormone; something like an animal in heat. I would be overcome with a specific kind of need, which ultimately would be wiser to indulge than to fight.

"Just be careful, dear," added my mother, and she made an excellent point, as it was no small thing I'd been cursed with, and though I didn't realize it at the time, I might now have preferred to be locked within a cell like she was, or even contaminated by a werewolf, for that matter.

You see, the problem isn't that veelas bite, my friends.

They fuck, and only one of us remembers.

---

I first saw her in Diagon Alley, five years after the war. Unlike the others, she did manage to recognize me after a blink or two, though I could see it was a strain. That brilliant mind I'd loathed and envied in equal parts was piecing me together like a set of ancient runes, clarity swimming before her eyes like something long-forgotten.

"You," she said with all the derision she could muster, and as you might have guessed, given the nature of the universe, it was the Tuesday of a full moon and I was suffering all sorts of indelicacies. I was noticing things I didn't quite know I was noticing, like the little sliver of skin I could see from the parted neckline of her simple Oxford. When her lips parted to acknowledge my presence, I could only process the exquisite red of her mouth, the pink of her swollen lips. She seemed to me to be the only thing for miles, my vision altered irrevocably, and so I said something utterly nonsensical to her.

"I'm sorry," I believe were the words in specific. They caught her by surprise, and then I pushed it a bit further. "Let me buy you a drink."

She protested, glaring at me, but I reminded her that prejudice was the very thing she had fought against, and therefore if I were making amends it was only reasonable she should accept. "One drink," I said.

One drink turned into two, which became three, which was then five and eventually, perhaps, more. She was waxing poetic about her breakup, though of course I had forgotten Ron Weasley even existed (and not in a magically-altered sort of way). I was straining at the time, unable to look away from the juncture of her knees or the way her tongue slid across her lips, moistening them. I looked at the curve of her throat with only the image of my own fingers tracing over it playing in my mind.

Eventually she seemed to gather some awareness of the things coming to fruition in my head, so when I offered to get us a room, she accepted. I don't know if this was a result of fluid conversation or excessive alcohol or my natural hormonal secretion; perhaps a combination of all three. In any case, I summoned a key and we fell into a sparse, undecorated room, tumbling together onto the bed. Her breasts, I remember, fit perfectly into my palms, and running my tongue over them was sweetly satiating, like lapping at a pond of cool water. The parting of her thighs was my oasis, and I quenched my thirst all night.

She seemed to remember her hatred of me throughout the whole of the encounter, because she
tugged at my hair and bit hard at my lip, and I think there was conflict within her (that is, alongside my cock). I think she hated me, or hated that she did not hate me quite enough to stop herself. I know she was thinking only of me when she came that night, because she said my name like a shudder of relief. I think she was exorcising me for herself, and had no intention to see me again.

Nor did I have any intention to see her. I woke early, pulling on my clothes, and was already fully dressed when she opened her eyes, staring at me.

"What on earth are you doing in my room?" she demanded.

It was back. I could see on her face that she saw Draco Malfoy, junior Death Eater and unrepentant idiot, rather than me, Draco, the man who had whispered to her how sweet she tasted while she used my hand to stroke herself.

"Wrong room," I said, and saw that she could find nothing amiss in my obvious lie.

"Get out," she told me coldly, and so, on that particularly lovely morning, I left.

I think there was something especially odd about the fact that it was her mind doing the forgetting. Easy enough for other people to fuck me and forget me, considering I'd never known them to be the brightest to begin with, but for the labyrinth that was Hermione Granger's mind to lose track of me entirely felt somehow… disappointing. Never fuck your heroes, as they say. Not that she was my hero, but she was a hero according to the Daily Prophet, and that was all that mattered. I watched her for any sign she could recall having spent a night with me, but as far as I could tell, she didn't. Typically my partners' minds fill in the gaps with something they can stand; her mind had told her she spent a relaxing evening alone in a tavern room, avoiding her bed at home where Ron Weasley no longer slept.

She moved out of her flat and into a new one. After a week, she began taking her coffee at the same little cafe, answering her correspondences and then stepping out to go to her job as a newly minted Ministry employee. She worked in the legal department, and also had a longstanding weekly appointment with someone in a nondescript building near the cafe.

Upon occasion of my next heat, I manufactured a little stumble in her path, colliding with her as she struggled to place me. "You," she groused through her teeth, and unfortunately I timed it poorly, because I was much too far along in my hormonal cycle by then to restrain myself. I kissed her, and she shoved me away angrily. "What on earth do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

I'm a bit ashamed to say I begged. "Please," I said. "Please, I need you."

She looked stunned, so I tried my best to backtrack. Unfortunately, I was clinging to her fingers, and physical contact sometimes makes things worse. I must have looked desperate, because she pulled me up to her flat and made me a cup of tea. As she poured it, I felt my eyes glued to the motion of her hips, the swell of her breasts as she bent over the table, tucking one rose-scented curl behind her ear.

I inhaled raggedly, and exhaled, as solemnly as I could, "I'm sorry."

That night I made a note of the books she kept in a pile beside her bed, most of them marked with little slips of parchment to contain her many thoughts. I wondered what she was taking note of, though later I realized they were descriptions of sensations that I, too, had somehow felt: "I am a restlessness inside a stillness inside a restlessness." "Sometimes we reveal ourselves when we are least like ourselves." "Perhaps only people who are capable of real togetherness have that look of
being alone in the universe."

I devoured the books, and the next time I put myself in her path, I made sure to be in a more manageable state of mind.

"Listen," I said before she could speak, "I know you don't want to see me—"

She gave me the derisive look she usually paired with the word you, and I couldn't tell whether I was relieved she knew me at all or displeased she couldn't seem to rid herself of her continued loathing.

"—but I have to know something," I said. "Could you ever forgive me?"

I watched her mouth twitch with excuses to leave. I wanted to tell her listen, we've spent two nights together by now, surely you must remember something! That great brain of yours, Granger, it can't be a total sham—

"Give me a reason to forgive you," she said, and so for the rest of the afternoon we talked about our school days, about the war. I told her I had been a fool and she told me she had known it. I assured her that I had repented my wrongs, and she seemed as if she might believe me.

She was the one who kissed me that time, and I remember feeling a strange, haunting sadness, because I was unsure whether she meant it or whether something in my blood had awoken something in her.

"I should go," I said. "Shall I come by tomorrow?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, tomorrow."

But when I arrived, it was more of the same.

"You," she said through her teeth again, staring at me as if I'd cost her everything.

I was starting to wonder if perhaps I had.

I suppose there are many ways to view what I was doing as abhorrent, perhaps even repulsive. After all, I was repeatedly tricking a woman that I had now slept with dozens of times. Each time I told myself there wouldn't be any more sex, but every time there was, because of course there was a little seedling of truth between us: What we had in the bedroom together was riper and more undeniable than anyone else could possibly give or fathom or believe.

Even after months, I have only watched her stare into nothing after any sort of sexual encounter with another man, her brilliant mind half-remembering something she had once clung to like some intangible craving. Worse, by now I've started intervening. It's upsetting, I know, but I can make her come like no one else.

I can make her smile like no one else.

I was beginning to think I was getting a bit mental, so I booked an appointment with my old friend Theo Nott, who is some sort of counselor these days. An odd choice of profession, though I suppose he was always good at listening intently to things and fading into the background while doing it.

"Oh," he said when he saw me. "How odd. You remind me of someone."
"A friend, I hope," I said when I took a seat, and for a moment his eyes seemed to glisten.

"He died," said Theo. "My old friend."

I told you, didn't I, that people's minds give them something they can make sense of once they've forgotten me? I suppose it's no wonder that Theo's mind would tell him I died around age eleven, or certainly well before age sixteen.

"In any case," Theo said, throwing one long leg over the other, "what's the matter?"

"I may be in love with a woman who routinely forgets me," I said.

"You mean she isn't particularly thoughtful?"

"No, she's very thoughtful," I said, because she is. Sometimes she frowns to herself when she inexplicably guesses how I take my tea. Other times she kisses the spot beneath my jaw where it makes me growl a little in my throat, and then she stiffens, as if she's feeling the echo of knowing how I like my cock sucked.

"It's more of a…" I clear my throat. "Well, I'm always having to prove myself to her."

"An unfortunate consequence of love," said Theo. "All the proving oneself. Terribly inconvenient."

"Oh, I agree," I said, "though it's… a bit more of a challenge than it sounds."

"I'm sure it seems that way," Theo demurred. "Every love is some new and different oddity. A unique and solitary language. Have you tried discussing it with her?"

"Well—" I hesitated. "I suppose not."

"Open communication is the key to a healthy relationship," said Theo.

"I suppose," I replied, because I had a feeling cognitive recognition was equally of consequence, but wasn't entirely sure how to point that out.

At that moment, however, I heard the sound of familiar footsteps, and it occurred to me (belatedly) that this was the building where she had the longstanding weekly appointment. I had forgotten, which was ironic. Normally she was the one doing the forgetting.

"I should go," I said to Theo, resolving to return, and then I slipped out just as she came in, sparing me another hateful glance.

"You," she said derisively.

"Yes, me," I sighed, waving her inside.

At the last moment I waved the door open just slightly, just enough to hear. Invasive, I know, but this is not a story about my morality. Besides, I have a tendency to escape punishment for my crimes.

"How is the recurring dream?" asked Theo.

"I seem to be having it more often," she said.

"You said before it made you feel unsteady. Like you woke not knowing where you were."
"Yes."

"And now?"

"I still wake without knowing where I am," she said uncertainly. "It's... very vivid. Unsettling."

"Still the same, then?"

"No, not the same," she said. "I feel... safe, actually. As if I'm coming home somewhere."

"Would that have anything to do with your sense of loss? It's been a difficult couple of years for you, losing your parents and then Ron."

"Oh yes, it has, but it's not like either of those things, I don't think. I don't feel loss at all. In fact, I feel... free." She swallowed. "Untethered. As if I'm finally given permission to be myself."

A pause.

"You can't live in dreams, Hermione."

"I know. I know." Her voice was small. "But sometimes I wish I could."

I left around then, finding the situation to be quite private, though I waited for her outside. She collided with me outside the door, distracted with thoughts from her session.

"I," I told her, "am a restlessness inside a stillness inside a restlessness."

She stared at me, taken aback, and I said, "May I buy you lunch?"

That night we made love three times on her sofa. Normally she's very ritualistic about where the fucking takes place, but we'd just finished watching a film that she and I have seen together seven times and I know her fondness for cunnilingus, so when I slid between her legs she didn't argue. Before I left, I wrote her a note detailing everything that had happened that day. What I had said to her and what she said back to me, the positions I had fucked her in, the details I understood of my family tree. I cited a book about veela behaviors from a Romanian professor whose work she respects, and then I wrote: I will be back for you tomorrow at ten. You will not remember any of this, but if you read this letter, then you already know what I'll say to you—I am a restlessness inside a stillness inside a restlessness—and you'll know I wasn't lying.

Then I slipped out, hoping Theo had been right.

I was waiting for her at the cafe. She stopped dead when she saw me, and I could see the letter with my handwriting clutched tightly in her hand.

"You," she said, but this time, it sounded more like a question.

"I am a restlessness inside a stillness inside a restlessness," I said in answer to the thing she hadn't asked, but she still blinked uncertainly, so I pushed out the chair across from mine.

"Sit," I said. "I'll tell you all about it."

There may not be sex tonight. In my experience, she'll have a lot of questions, and I plan to answer every single one. To the best of my knowledge, anyway. Besides, maybe the letter will be more effective in the future if she writes it herself, or if we write it together. Then tomorrow I can tell her all over again, at which point we can both start to prepare for the next full moon.
"Okay," she said, and slowly took a seat.

"Does it feel familiar?" I asked her.

She chewed her lip for a second before answering.

"Yes," she said eventually.

"Like a recurring dream?"

She glared at me. "Have you been stalking me?"

"Yes and no," I said. "But again, I'll tell you all about it."

For a second she looked like she might still hate me, but then I caught the look that followed.

Relief.

"Alright, fine," she said, choosing to believe in me, and then I thought: Maybe this is love. "Talk."

Chapter End Notes

Getting close to the end! Also, the literary quotes come from I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith, Henry and June by Anaïs Nin, and Lady Chatterley's Lover by D.H. Lawrence, respectively.
"He's weird, right?" Theo murmured to Draco as the new deputy sheriff walked away. "I told you. Something's off with him."

"He's really fuckin' by the book," said Draco, grey gaze narrowed in disapproval. "Jesus," he added after a breath's calculation, "if Slughorn doesn't keep him on a leash, we're fucked. We've already got Greyback and his goons to deal with. Last thing we need is Diagon PD."

"Yeah," said Theo, adding after a split-second, "Think I'm gonna go after him."

"What? Nott, for fuck's sake, I don't need another search of the Manor," Draco started to growl in his wake, but Theo was already taking off, briskly catching the police officer's heel.

"Hey," he said. "I need a favor."

The deputy, Potter, turned with obvious unwillingness to face him.

"What?" he said, condensing his feelings on the matter into one insoluble word.

"So, you know my dad, right?" prompted Theo. "Scary big dude, rides a bike like maybe he's got an anvil between his legs? Arrested on five separate occasions, zero prison time?"

Potter's mouth tightened. "I'm familiar," he said warily.

"Yeah, well, I need someone," said Theo. "To bring to dinner with him. Christmas Eve."

One dark brow arched. "What, like a date?"

"Sure. Whatever."

"I don't think I'm what your father wants you to bring home," he said evasively.

"Yes," Theo confirmed. "Exactly. So you see why it's brilliant."

Potter paused a moment to consider this.
"Why me?" he asked after a second.

"Because," Theo said, "he'll fuckin' hate you. His pretentious asshole of a son bringing home a cop? A dude cop? Think about it. Like really fuckin' picture it. It's some once in a lifetime fuckery, man. Dickmanship to the highest degree."

There was a pause as the cop in question pondered the offer.

"There's nothing in it for me," Potter observed eventually, which was true enough. Not that Theo made a habit of letting rationality stop him.

"Not very philanthropic of you, Officer," admonished Theo.

Potter fixed him with another expressionless glance, eyes shifting from the Manor behind Theo back to Theo himself.

"Fine," he said. "Give me your phone."

"Not without a warrant," Theo scoffed, and Potter rolled his eyes.

"Fine, then you can find me yourself to tell me the details. Call me Harry," he said. "More intimate."

Then he unlocked his police cruiser and slid into the driver's seat.

There were no good reasons for Harry to say yes, other than having nothing else going on. No family of his own, and Ron would be off with his own obligations. The Weasleys had invited Harry to join them for dinner as well, but there was something a little stifling about latching onto Ron's family traditions. Besides, Harry had already agreed to spend Christmas Day with the Weasleys. One night out wouldn't kill him, unless the elder Theodore Nott tried to. In which case at least Harry had a gun.

Unfortunately, he figured it wasn't a good idea to waltz into a Death Eater's house packing his Diagon PD-issued Glock 19, so he tossed it into the glove compartment of his car instead. He was about to climb into the driver's seat of his Civic when a loud engine ripped from down the street, gradually revealing the narrow form of a heavily leather-clad Death Eater.

Not exactly a fitting sight, considering the houses were currently bedecked in garish Christmas lights, oversaturating the street in reds and greens. The asphalt was glossy and slick with rain, the sky fading early to black the way December evenings always did. It made the appearance of the man on the bike seem briefly like the arrival of Death himself.

Theo Nott took off his helmet, giving Harry a hawkish once-over.

"Get on," he said, smacking a gloved hand on the seat behind him.

"Absolutely fucking not," said Harry, and Theo threw one leg over the bike to rise to both feet, striding up the driveway and thrusting a helmet into Harry's abdomen.

"Get," Theo said, "on."

Harry supposed it was moderately hilarious that he was the one being brought home to scandalize a parent when frightening people was obviously Theo Nott's wheelhouse. He had a swallow tattooed beside his eye, his hair buzzed, a pair of leather gloves on the slender fingers of his
restless hands. Beneath his leather cut was a v-neck that slid back from his collarbone, where the shape of a hawk's wing was stretching up to the base of his jaw. Harry didn't have to look to know there was a pistol hidden somewhere below the excess of leather.

"Do I need my Glock?" Harry asked, half-serious about grabbing it from the glove compartment.

"You can use mine," said Theo, unblinking.

Jesus fuck, Harry thought.

Theo shoved the helmet against Harry's chest again. "Put it on."

"Concerned for my safety, Nott?"

"Call me Theo in front of my father," suggested Theo. "Say it like you mean it, too."

His smile was carnivorous and deeply troubling.

"Yeah, fine," said Harry, putting on the helmet. "Whatever."

Theo strutted back to the bike and Harry grimaced.

"I can grab a lovely sidecar if you'd prefer it," Theo called over his shoulder. His voice had the particular register of a sneer from time to time, though more often it was dry and sharp; consummately impatient.

Harry rolled his eyes and straddled the bike behind Theo as the latter picked up his own helmet and strapped it on.

"Ready?" asked Theo.

"What exactly am I getting into?" said Harry.

"I'll take that as a yes," Theo replied over the sound of his engine roaring mockingly to life.

It would have been worth it for the look on his father's face alone. The moment Deputy Sheriff Harry Potter walked in the door, it was enough for the elder Theodore Nott to choke on about a thousand simultaneous expletives, though lamentably, none of them were lethal enough to stick.

"What. The. *Fuck*," muttered Nott, glaring at Theo. There were quiet sounds of conversation coming from the living room; the voices of whoever Nott was fucking these days, probably, and then whoever her sister was. As far as Theo's calculations had produced, there was almost always some hanger-on sister with a drug problem and more babies than she could logistically count.

"You said to bring someone, Papa," Theo reminded him blithely. "You know Harry, don't you?"

They knew each other quite well, as Theo understood it. Harry had recently pulled his father over for speeding, and only after Nott had bellowed red-faced at Slughorn while waving his gun around had the mess eventually gone away, though Theo suspected Harry knew nothing of the aftermath.

"Nott," said Harry to Theo's father, which was less respectful than it was factual, as if Harry could have read it off some fast food uniform and not the emblem of stature on his father's worn leather cut. "A pleasure."

Nott's face contorted briefly before he dragged Theo into the kitchen by the collar of his jacket,
furious. "You're fucking joking."

"I did inherit your terrific sense of humor," said Theo, obligingly.

"Listen to me you little piece of shit, I've put up with enough bullshit from you over the years without having to deal with some sort of—"

"Something wrong?" asked Harry, draping himself in the door frame as if he might have wandered in by mistake. It took everything Theo possessed not to shout triumphantly at the perfection of the moment: Harry in his oatmeal-colored sweater and worn grey jeans, his father looking like he'd pull a knife on Theo any second. Harry's hair was still wild from the helmet, the tips of the raven-black sent anarchically in every direction, while his green eyes remained steadfastly focused on one thing: Theo's father's hands on Theo's collar.

Theo practically shivered from the irony, delicious, because while he had known there was something odd about Harry, he hadn't pinpointed until that precise moment that it was Harry's focus that had unnerved him so blissfully. It was the way he fixated on something without releasing it, without any intent to let it go. Theo had noticed it subconsciously when Harry was working his way through the Manor, finding all their most important secrets without even lifting a finger. The door to the meeting room where only Death Eaters could enter. The shelf that sat atop the trapdoor to the basement where they kept the AKs. The desk that held their most prized possession: the ledger containing the debts on which they had yet to collect, but inevitably would.

Harry had seen through all of them with a single glance, without blinking, and he had said nothing. He, unlike most people, didn't have to throw his weight around making threats. He had taken one look at everything he would need to remember and then he had stored it away like a fucking assassin, knowing what he'd come back for when the time was right.

And now he was looking at Nott's hands like he would cut them off at the first given opportunity.

"Is there a problem?" Harry said, before lifting his gaze to Theo's face, and all of a sudden Theo realized he had not been looking for an obstacle. He was obstacle enough already.

Whatever he had been looking for, he found it.

"Let's eat," said Nott gruffly, half-throwing Theo aside.

It became rapidly apparent that Harry's presence at dinner had started a war, and no one was pleased to see him. Darian Mulciber had walked in with Caleb Avery and shoved a bottle of something into Theo's hands as a gift, eyes narrowing as they strutted past Harry. Rookwood. Rowle. Malfy. All the same story, and then Draco Malfoy, who followed behind his father. He muttered something in Theo's ear and beckoned him away, calling for a sidebar. Theo glanced at Harry, giving him a half-nod that was more informative than apologetic—*I'm leaving, I'll be back when I'm done*—and stepped outside.

Five minutes passed, then ten. By the time Tom Riddle, president of the Death Eaters, walked in wearing a Santa hat and giving Harry a smile so thin he felt it scratch across his brain, Harry had waited long enough. He walked into the kitchen, glancing around, and stiffened when he heard the sounds of someone following him.

"How's it going, Officer?" came Theo's low drawl, and Harry gratefully unclenched his fist. He released the tension one knuckle at a time, hiding his relief.

"Where's your recycling?"
"That's so fucking cute," chuckled Theo. "Love that."

Harry turned stiffly as Theo took a step closer. He was, for better or worse, contemplating what might happen to him if anything at this party came to blows. Every single guest had a visible weapon, plus surely more invisible ones. Harry, meanwhile, was an outsider, a cop. The opposite of everything they stood for, and now he stood in the snake pit unarmed.

But suddenly it seemed other dangers were more interesting to consider.

"Come on," said Theo, beckoning Harry with a motion of his chin. Harry, however, hesitated a beat, resenting the summons.

"What'd Malfoy want?"

"Nothing." Another chin thrust. "Come."

Harry's jaw clenched, but he followed. Theo led him on a serpentine path out to the backyard, circumventing an enormous and ill-cared for tree before bringing him through a side door into one of two garages.

"This is mine," Theo said, pulling at a string overhead to illuminate a buzzing, uncovered bulb.

The space was neat and orderly, unlike the rest of the backyard, which had been filled with lumber and auto parts and unmowed grass. Here there were a variety of bike parts as well, but they had clearly been arranged in some purposeful context. Two motorcycles that didn't appear to be in working order sat against the wall, leaned obligingly for attention. Theo ran a hand over one of them fondly, like saying hello to an old friend.

"We don't have to go back inside," Theo said.

Harry scratched his forehead, folding his arms over his chest.

"You shouldn't let him talk to you like that," he said.

Theo didn't even blink. "It's not worth fighting."

"Then why come home at all?"

"Because fuck him, that's why."

"In what way are you fucking him?"

"Gross. And that's not the point."

"Enlighten me."

"Just spite, I guess. Reminding him he made me. The misery of it," Theo said with a grim smile, "keeps me going."

It wasn't enough for Harry. "But—"

"Jesus," Theo said, exasperated, and took two long strides to have Harry's face in his hands.

If pressed, Harry would confess that he had known it was coming; that he had long suspected the kiss that followed wouldn't be soft. It did not take him by surprise; not entirely.
It wasn't soft. It was angry, and precisely as spiteful as Theo's many mannerisms had suggested it might be, but blearily, out of the corner of Harry's eyes, he could see the black ink from Theo's knuckles stroking his face; the cold metal from Theo's rings brushing gently across his cheeks.

So he pulled Theo closer, turned to shove him against the wall of the garage, the two of them stumbling to circumvent the obstacles on the floor. Theo's hands slid under his sweater and he inhaled so sharply, so rapidly it hurt. The breath that escaped Theo in return was ragged and torn, closer to a sob than a gasp, and then Harry shoved him again for good measure, fitting their feet like puzzle pieces on the floor. He leaned his hips against Theo's and stayed there, and gradually, the kiss soothed to a softer, more manageable pace.

Harry's lips were still brushing Theo's when he said, "Nothing would spite him more than your happiness."

"How do you know?" asked Theo hoarsely.

"I know," said Harry. "Believe me, I know."

He kissed the edge of the hawk's wing where it met Theo's neck, running his tongue over the place where it met the base of Theo's jaw.

Outside, they could hear the sound of Christmas music alongside the sound of glass tinkling, the clink of beer bottles and cheap wine. Shouts of something incoherent about fucks and bikes, the sound of Nott's slurred speech.

"You want revenge? Come home with me," said Harry. "Wake up in my bed."

"He'll hate that," Theo mused aloud, toying with Harry's hair.

"Yeah, maybe, who cares. Do it because you want to," Harry said. "Because someday he'll be dead and you'll be old, and you'll be the only one thinking about all the time you wasted." He kissed Theo again, angrily this time. "Do it," he murmured, "because I know what the fuck I'm doing in bed."

"Jesus," Theo groaned again, his eyes closing briefly before refocusing on Harry's face. "Sure you want trash like me dirtying up your sheets, Officer?"

"I," Harry said, "can set you straight."

"Ha." Theo's laugh was free of melancholy, perfectly amused, and Harry recalled the furtive conversation Theo had just had with Draco, the state of the Death Eaters' clubhouse, piecing it all together and wondering if he'd still feel like this if Theo's true vocation was anything close to what the evidence suggested. "I'd like to see you try."

He made his calculations quickly: It didn't matter. It didn't fucking matter. Maybe it would eventually, but that was future Harry's problem. They kissed again, Theo's hands fumbling for Harry's zipper this time, but Harry took a step back, beckoning him with a glance.

"Make a call, Nott," Harry said. "My house. My bed. Or—"

"My rage?" Theo guessed drily, and Harry shrugged.

"You can bring it with you. Two whole bedrooms. Plenty of space."

There was a pause.
"Don't you have somewhere to be Christmas morning?" Theo's voice was heavy with suspicion, or with dread.

"Not anymore," Harry said.

The idea that maybe they were two people who didn't belong anywhere at all seemed enough to persuade him. Theo glanced over his shoulder to where the party went on outside before turning back to Harry, running his thumb over his lip and flicking it into the shape of a smile, like lighting a match.

"Same," said Theo, turning over his shoulder with the motion of his chin. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

Some updates: the last episode of Olivie Blake is Not Writing for 2019 just posted on youtube, and the discussion for this month's S.P.E.L.L. read is now available on tumblr. One more day remaining in the advent! Thank you so much for following along.
"It's quiet for Christmas Eve, I'll say that much," Ron remarked in a dull tone, spooning a bit of sugar lethargically into his tea and glancing over his shoulder at the passing form of Padma Patil. "Still," he sighed, watching her sit beside Parvati before dragging his attention back to the subject at hand, "better than the dreary alternative of joining Bill and Fleur at the cottage. What's in your letter, Mione?" he asked tangentially, leaning across the table to where Hermione had just finished reading the note an owl had dropped into her lap five minutes earlier.

"Oh, um. Nothing," she said, forcing brightness. Unfortunately Harry, who was now a person who had defeated a Dark Lord and therefore one who had little time for bollockery, arched a brow in open disagreement. "Alright, fine," Hermione grudgingly conceded, setting the letter on the table between them. "See for yourself."

Just as Harry reached for the letter, Ron's owl Pigwidgeon arrived, struggling overhead with the weight of a rather ordinary-sized package that was several times larger than the owl itself. The package fell to the table with a slap of contact, drawing attention from the other few people scattered across the room.

"Viktor wants you to come to Durmstrang?" Harry read aloud in bewilderment, at precisely the moment Ron had unwrapped his package.

"Bloody hell, what the—"

"Durmstrang?" sounded above Hermione's head, prompting her to look up as Draco was walking by with Theo at his side. "You can't be serious."

She flushed briefly at the sound of his voice, feeling a bit unprepared for his presence despite its relative frequency these days. They had just finished a potions assignment before the holidays, for which they'd both done remarkably well and managed, miraculously, not to kill each other. Lately, instead of being combative in the classroom they'd been courteous, and in private, there were moments when he was almost…

Something.

No, nothing.
Certainly nothing that was worth mentioning, whatever it was.

"Not that it's any of your business, Malfoy," Hermione said primly, bristling a little as Theo's lips thinned in obvious preemptive derision, "but Viktor was… Well." She cleared her throat, finding the presence of an audience abruptly discomfiting. "He was merely suggesting that if it's too difficult to sit for my N.E.W.T.s at Hogwarts, I should consider, erm. Staying with him," she coughed up. "To sit for my exams at Durmstrang instead."

"Ah yes, it's your exams he's concerned about, I'm sure," Draco sneered. It was a tone she hadn't heard from him in years, or at the very least in months, and within Hermione's chest, an old impulse seemed to tighten and constrict, launching her back to her younger self as she struggled not to sting with insult.

Evidently she'd been right; nothing had changed between them after all. He was clearly just as unbearable as he'd always been.

"So," Draco prompted, folding his arms combatively over his chest. "The golden girl runs off and leaves her broken castle behind for someone else to fix, then?"

Hermione flinched. "First of all, if anyone's gone and broken the castle—"

"Oi," Theo cut in, jutting his chin across the table. "Looks just like you, Malfoy."

The others stopped talking as Ron gingerly plucked the strange item he'd received from its box, staring at it in total bewilderment. It was a small wooden doll, or so it looked at first glance, wearing a soldier's uniform.

"What the fuck is that?" demanded Draco, shrinking back from it.

"A voodoo doll, I hope," muttered Ron under his breath, turning it over to toy with the little wooden lever.

"It's a nutcracker, you dolts," Hermione grumbled as Draco flicked his wand, summoning it from Ron's hand to scrutinize it with a scowl.

"Well, whatever it is, it has your eyes," commented Theo to Draco, "not to mention your milky complexion."

"For fuck's sake, Nott, do shut up—"

"Give it back," Hermione snapped at the two of them, and Draco glared at her, slamming the nutcracker down in front of Harry in response.

"Well forgive me, Granger, but as ever we have better things to do than linger," Draco drawled. "Enjoy Durmstrang. I hear the sun shines almost three whole days out of the year," he remarked, and then practically slithered away, leaving Hermione to turn to Harry with a roll of her eyes.

He, however, was ignoring Draco entirely, waiting for something from her instead. "Well?"

"Well what?" she demanded, prompting him to cock a brow in answer. "Oh, I don't know," she grumbled irritably, snatching the letter back from him. "It's just… Well, he might have a point about needing a change of scenery, just for sanity's sake. I mean, it's a bit odd, isn't it?" She swallowed, glancing around the room. "So many people gone, and after such a horrid year…"

She trailed off, and Harry and Ron exchanged a glance.
"I suppose it isn't the worst idea," Ron managed unwillingly.

Harry said nothing.

"All he said was that I should think about it. Nothing final. Anyway, what's this about?" Hermione demanded, nudging the nutcracker back towards Ron. "Some sort of bizarre gift from your mother?"

"I suppose," Ron said with a shrug, "or possibly some oddity from my father, but whoever it's from, they've forgotten a note."

"Well, it's certainly quite odd," Hermione judged with sudden, blistering impatience.

Again, Harry and Ron exchanged a glance in silence.

"Yeah," said Harry eventually, directing his attention to his toast. "A bit odd, that's all."

The three of them went up to their respective bedrooms very infrequently, particularly now that classes weren't in session due to the onslaught of the holidays. That night, they were huddled together in the Gryffindor common room; Hermione in the chair beside the fire, Harry lying on his back beside the hearth, and Ron taking up the entire sofa with his interminably long legs. The nutcracker sat on the side table between them, face turned up to where Hermione was reading until she frowned at it, unnerved.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe it's really over," Ron commented, breaking the silence.

They all knew what he meant. It was difficult to sleep these days, owing mostly to the difficulty of recovering from the war. Harry in particular didn't sleep well, according to Ron. He often sat upright in a cool sweat, ringing out his t-shirt in the bathroom and then returning quietly, unaware Ron had witnessed the whole thing.

When neither of the others spoke, Ron stretched out from where he was lying on the sofa, knocking the nutcracker from where it sat upon the table onto the floor.

"Ah, buggering fuck," he said, and Hermione rolled her eyes, leaning over to pick it up. The arm had broken off, so she repaired it with a quick charm, setting the nutcracker back down on the table and then running her finger carefully over the thin fracture where the break had been.

"Sometimes I think maybe it's not over at all," Hermione murmured, though it was buried beneath the sound of the fire crackling in the hearth.

Hermione woke sometime after midnight to find that Harry and Ron must have finally gone up to bed. She sat upright, groggily stretching to her feet, and realized that something, somewhere, was off: as her eyes adjusted to the low glow of the aging fire, she could see the common room sofa had been torn apart by what looked like claws. The upholstery was ripped, the frothy white down from the pillows littering the floor, and there was a pool of dark liquid where a cup had been overturned.

Hermione shot to her feet with a gasp as she heard a low hiss, a heavy slither on the floor. She hunted for her wand, digging helplessly through her pockets, but there was nothing. Rapidly, it was as if the room had started to grow, or else she had started to shrink; the sound of the snake came closer and closer, and when Hermione stumbled backwards she collided with what once had been a table leg, fear compressing her lungs as she struggled to run.
"Harry," she shouted desperately. "Ron!"

"Get down," hissed a voice, and she turned to find the nutcracker speaking to her in Draco's voice, his face and limbs wooden and stiff. The arm that had broken was held carefully to his chest, slung there with uncertainty as if he had his doubts it could be used. "Have you lost your mind?"

"I have to find them!"

He yanked her back again with his free hand and she rounded on him, furious.

"Listen Malfoy, or… Nutcracker, or whoever the hell you are—"

"Stay down and be quiet," he snapped. "Do you want to fight with me or do you want to survive?"

"I—"

She watched the snake's shadow morph from where it was silhouetted by the flames, becoming the shape of a hooded figure.

"No," Hermione said, scrambling backwards into the nutcracker's chest. "No, no, it can't be—"

"You have fought," said a cold, high voice, "valiantly."

She wanted to scream. She wanted to be sick. She squirmed as the nutcracker held her back with his good arm, her stomach wrenching at the thought of it: I knew it. I knew he wasn't gone. He'll never be gone, not really—

"If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste."

It'll never be over, if I stay here it'll never end—

"Lord Voldemort is merciful," the voice said, but the rising volume of Hermione's panic seemed to have reached a breaking point, contorting something for her. Somewhere, something in her head seemed to snap.

"Oh, fuck you," she suddenly said, and then she tore furiously from the nutcracker's reach, tripping over the shoes Ron had left beside the sofa (as he always did) and plucking one up from the ground, lunging forward. "FUCK. YOU," she said clearly and calmly, tossing Ron's dirty old trainer directly into the head of the resurrected Lord Voldemort.

It was hopeless—she knew it was hopeless, even if rage was hardly ever rational—but somehow, she watched in amazement as the cloaked figure suddenly careened to the ground, twitching and falling still. There was a whorl of wind around her, the flames from the hearth dancing up to the height of the ceiling, and then, as the cloak of Lord Voldemort went up in flames, the nutcracker grabbed her arm, yanking her out of the common room.

They kept running until they reached the forest, the castle blazing behind them. Hermione doubled over upon planting her feet on sodden earth, panting from the effort; she rounded on the nutcracker the moment she caught her breath, managing, "We have to find them. We have to find Harry and Ron, we have to make sure they're safe—"

But before she could continue, there was a glimmer from the corner of her eye, and she turned to find… Harry.
Only it wasn't Harry.

Was it?

"Hermione," said Harry in relief, proving that it was, in fact, him, but she had never seen him like this before. The glasses and the gangling were gone, and in their place stood Harry in full prince's garb, wearing a coat so fine he shone an opalescent gold, like spun sugar. On his head was a crown edged with diamonds, its many facets glinting in the sun, and behind him the forest was thoroughly white with snow, the trees blanketed with powder.

"You did it, Hermione," he said adoringly, seeming to float towards her as he took her hand. "You defeated Lord Voldemort."

"What? No, I—you did that," she reminded him, baffled and therefore flustered, but Harry only smiled.

"Come," he said, beckoning her after him. "You should see what the world looks like now that you've set us free."

"But—" She followed him uncertainly, blinking. "But Harry—"

"You can come too," Harry said over her shoulder, and Hermione turned in confusion, finding to her astonishment that the nutcracker, wooden and hardly moving just moments before, had somehow been transformed by a flurry of snow. Where once had stood an odd, moderately damaged toy was now a familiar form: another prince, this one bedecked in silver. He was so radiant it nearly hurt Hermione's eyes to look at him, reflective from the gleam of his pale hair to the thrill of his grey eyes.

"Well, I thought you'd never ask," drawled the nutcracker-prince, his hair glinting amid the snow's pale sheen as he turned to Hermione. "Shall we?"

He offered her his arm, but she, skeptic that she was, set her jaw.

"Let's just go find Ron," she muttered, shoving past him to enter the forest alone.

The Forbidden Forest was nothing like Hermione remembered. It was filled with lush evergreens, just as it had always been, but now the air smelled like baking sweets, the ground a deep, saturated chocolate. Harry offered her a lift atop a thestral, which she accepted. Before she could say anything else, though, the nutcracker had climbed on as well, settling himself behind her.

"Who said you could come?" she hissed at him.

"That's quite the thank you for helping you escape," he observed.

"You didn't help me escape, you just—"

But she broke off as they entered a forest clearing bedecked in paper lanterns that glittered with color, pigmented dew drops in a celebration of light. The lanterns littered the trees like ornaments, filling the height of the forest as far as Hermione's eyes could see, and on the ground were a series of silks below little tongues of flame: candles that glinted joyously upwards, leading them down a narrow path. Overhead, Hermione caught the signs of fireworks and stared for a moment, forgetting entirely what she was saying as another familiar form came into view.

"Oh good, you're here," Ron said cheerily, manifesting from beneath a canopy to reveal himself in
a tunic fashioned with red silk. "I'm so relieved you saved us."

"I didn't save you, Ron," Hermione said uncomfortably. "Don't you remember? Harry saved us, but if Voldemort came back once, he could easily come back ag-"

"Ron?" came a voice through the clearing.

Hermione looked up to see Padma Patil standing at the other end of the clearing, wrapped in a floaty red veil that perfectly matched the silk of Ron's tunic.

"What's Padma doing here?" Hermione asked, turning in befuddlement to address the question to Harry before realizing that he and his thestral were both gone. "Oh no, not again—Ron," she said, turning back to him in apprehension. "Ron, listen, we have to—"

But Ron had taken Padma's hand, pulling her into his circle of light and beginning to dance with her, slowly. He revolved in place, his eyes never falling from hers, and Padma reached up to brush his hair from his forehead, both of them behaving as if Hermione wasn't even there.

"Ron!" Hermione said in desperation, but the nutcracker's arms tightened around her, taking the reins gently from her hands.

"Let them have their peace," said the nutcracker, spurring the thestral further into the forest.

Beyond the lights and silks came the unexpected sound of water. The forest had somehow cleared away to the sea, and from the emblazoned greens and reds came a deep, cerulean blue. To Hermione's astonishment, Bill and Fleur rose up from the waves in robes of chiffon, manifesting from the ocean foam like gods from the deep. The sound of the sea itself rushed like blood in her ear, filling her lungs with salt while the path beneath them turned to soft, unblemished sand.

"Looking for someone?" asked Bill, though he didn't look up from where his gaze was currently fixed. He had his arm around Fleur, whose sea-robes were clinging to her hips and shrouding her breasts as she gave a little siren-laugh, melodic and lustfully sweet.

"I need to find Harry," Hermione said, feeling a little flush in her cheeks as Bill's hands started to wander, caressing his wife's backside. He lifted her up from the waves without any concern for Hermione's presence, Fleur's long legs wrapping around his torso to settle herself astride his hips. "Bill, have you, um… Have you seen him, or…? I'm just a little worried," Hermione called, blinking rapidly as Bill's tongue emerged to slide along the arch of Fleur's pale throat. "You know, since Voldemort came back," she hastily explained, "I'm not quite sure if he's safe, so—"

"He's gone, Hermione. It's over." Bill growled it into Fleur's neck, and Fleur laughed, tearing free from his arms and darting playfully into the sea. "He's gone," Bill called again, and then swept Fleur up with one arm like a tidal wave, dragging her under the deep and disappearing with a husky laugh, leaving Hermione behind to swallow uncomfortably.

"Well," Hermione said, suddenly conscious of the nutcracker's arms still around her waist where they rode astride the thestral. "That was unhelpful."

The nutcracker chuckled in her ear. "They don't care to be disturbed, I suppose."

"I… suppose not," Hermione said uncomfortably. "But still, if Harry's in trouble, we ought to go."

"We could stay," the nutcracker suggested, gesturing with his chin to where Bill and Fleur had disappeared. "They seem to be having fun, don't they?"
She squirmed a little in his arms.

"Let's just go," she said, giving the thestral a nudge with her heels.

"I told you," she said the moment they arrived back in the forest. This time the thickness of the canopy blocked out the sun, and within seconds they were enveloped in unrelenting darkness. "I told you he was still here somewhere!"

She struggled down from the thestral, searching for a source of light, when suddenly the nutcracker pulled a sword free from the sheath around his hips, wrenching a blade of blinding illumination from his scabbard as if he'd cast a *Lumos* along its edge.

"Here," he said, handing it to her. "Try this."

"Oh. Thanks." She cleared her throat gruffly, venturing forward with him in her wake. "Well—"

"Herm-ow-ninny," came a voice, and Hermione swept the blade upright, catching the glint of Viktor's face at what seemed to be a distance. "You haff decided to come! Vat excellent news," Viktor said, half his face shining with pleasure from the sword's edge as he stepped closer. "I am so pleased."

"Viktor, it's… quite dark here," Hermione said uncertainly. "Don't you have, um… something?"

"It is dark everyere, Herm-ow-ninny," said Viktor sagely, stepping towards her again. "You know this."

"Well, right, but if Voldemort is still here somewhere, we really ought to be able to see, so—"

"Don't be silly," said Viktor, one of his hands closing around Hermione's wrist. "Come, let us hide over here, you haff nothing to fear anymore—"

"Wait, Viktor don't—Nutcracker, help!" Hermione shouted, panicked, and felt his hand slip around hers, tugging her out of the darkness as the light of the sword's edge was swallowed up in a sudden, encasing gleam.

She stumbled in his arms, finding herself at the edge of the forest clearing again. This time, when the nutcracker released her, Hermione looked up to find Harry standing there with a placid smile, confusion evident on his face.

"What are you doing?" he asked, guilelessly puzzled. "You look frightened."

"Harry, I'm—"

She shrank back as a shadowed figure emerged once again from the corner of her eye; just like the snake. Just like Lord Voldemort. Once again, someone was approaching Harry in a mask, shrouded arms outstretched beneath a heavy black cloak.

"Harry," she gasped. "Harry, WATCH OUT!"

But the man had already slid the mask from his face, tossing it to the ground for it to be swallowed up by a yawn from the forest floor.

"Oi, Potter," said Theo Nott. "Been looking for you."
To Hermione's continued disbelief, Harry turned with a smile, reaching for Theo's cheek with one hand and tugging him closer. "There you are," Harry said, before doing the absolute least possible thing and kissing Theo's lips lightly, gently. "I was just about to tell Hermione how we're safe here," he explained to Theo, turning back to face Hermione with a look of contented rapture. "It was a long journey, wasn't it?" he asked her wistfully. "So perhaps you don't know yet how everything turns out. Voldemort's gone, but you're still here. And I promise," he said, lacing his fingers blindly with Theo's, "there is peace eventually, Hermione. For all of us, there is peace."

"But," Hermione said, and frowned. "But… is this…"

The word real lingered on her tongue, but in the span of her inability to voice it, Harry soon lost interest. Theo pulled Harry into him again, and Hermione felt a familiar touch on her arm coaxing her backwards, towards the castle.

This time, she let herself be led, dizzily numb and uncertain until the moment the nutcracker paused, turning towards her and waiting in silence for her to speak.

"What if he isn't really gone?" she finally managed to whisper in confession, and the nutcracker took her face gently in his hands.

"You're safe here," he told her. "You can stay here."

"But what if I'll always be afraid? What if I never believe I'm actually safe?"

She looked up to find him observing her in penitent silence, that familiar grey gaze settling gently on hers as if he'd already seen the future. As if he already knew she would wind up here one day, with her hands held securely in his.

"You're safe here," he said again, and when he leaned forward, Hermione felt the words blooming over her lips like spring itself, rising up to heat her cheeks and warming her from the inside out, like the crackle of a midnight fire.

"Don't go," the nutcracker whispered to her lips, and Hermione clung to him, wanting to say I won't, I won't leave, I promise, but the warmth was pulling her elsewhere, out of the snow, away from the trees, and she slipped away from him gradually, one finger at a time.

Hermione opened her eyes to find embers dying in the hearth, a little drool on the pillow beneath her cheek. She sat up, glancing from Harry to Ron, and frowned, blinking, as she remembered the nutcracker sitting beside her chair, still staring lifelessly at her.

It was morning by then, the sun creeping in through the tower windows to fill the common room with early light. It was Christmas morning, she remembered, and decided it would be best if she busied herself by fetching some cocoa for Ron and Harry when they woke.

She crept into the corridor, still a little shaken by her odd and vivid dream, and suddenly collided with someone outside the portrait.

"Fuck, balls, I—"

She looked up to find herself leaned against Draco Malfoy's chest for balance, having staggered unexpectedly into him.

"You really do look like that nutcracker," she remarked without thinking, and he opened his mouth, then closed it.
She could see him battling with himself to prevent saying something dickish in reply, so she sighed, figuring it was best to just get it over with, and managed a slightly stiff, "What are you doing here?"

That was when she noticed the envelope in his hand, her name sprawled across it in careful, premeditated script.

"Nothing," he muttered, "I was just—"

He winced, catching her swift glance of confusion, and then sighed, shaking his head.

"Don't go," he said miserably. "I've been a prick, I know, and you've no reason to stay, but—"

A pause.

"Don't go," he repeated softly, and she blinked, disarmed by the tone of sentiment.

Before she could reply, the portrait opened behind her, Harry and Ron's voices pouring out from the common room in their wake. Hastily, Draco released her, turning gruffly towards the stairs and shoving the note back into his pocket as he went.

"—should've figured it was from George. Apparently he put some sort of hallucinogenic vial inside it to smuggle to seventh years? Doesn't care whether I'm his intoxicant drug mule, obviously, plus then he forgot to put the note with instructions inside the—Oh, Mione," Ron remarked with surprise, colliding with her precisely as she'd just collided with Draco. "What are you doing out here?"

Someday, Hermione was pretty sure she would have to tell him to talk to Padma instead of staring longingly at her from afar. But for now, she was already running, catching hastily up to Draco on the stairs and tugging him back before he could settle both feet on the landing.

"Wait," she gulped, pausing breathlessly as he turned to face her. Above their heads, a little sprig of mistletoe unfurled and stretched its leaves, blossoming with promise.

"Yes?" he prompted, but by then, she didn't bother with a reply.

The kiss she gave him, steady and safe and sure, was answer enough for them both.

Chapter End Notes

We did it! A miracle. Thank you so much for your prompts and for following along with me this advent; I really wanted to give you all a little something as a thank you for being here another marvelous year, so I hope you found it enjoyable (or, at the very least, a pleasant distraction).

In personal news, you can now find my next release, THE ATLAS SIX, on my website. Also, while my personal advent has concluded, I will be back tomorrow to post my D/Hr Advent fic. Until then—Merry Christmas Eve, Happy Hanukkah, and many besos from the wasteland!
Run the Gauntlet

Pairing: Dramione (Draco x Hermione)

Universe: Post-War, EWE

Rating: T

Summary: Written for the 2019 D/Hr Advent. When the Ministry of Magic announces a renaissance faire to benefit families affected by the war, everyone agrees it's probably a stupid idea —except for Draco, who has amends to make, and Hermione, who has an ex to avoid. Seeing as artisans and performers don't interact, they're convinced it won't be a problem. Much to their joint dismay, fate intervenes to prove them wrong.

You can find this one shot here: Run the Gauntlet [AO3]. Again, just posting the chapter on FFN without disturbing the matching chapter enumeration on AO3!

Chapter End Notes

If you're interested in my books, a reminder that you can find my latest release, THE ATLAS SIX, on my website or tumblr. Outside of that, thank you for another year in the wasteland; once again, Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, and here's to 2020!
"Well," said Theo Nott, drumming his fingers on the table. "Gotta say, I thought you were gone for good, Parkinson."

"So did I." She walked slowly around the room, eyeing the frames on the walls. "So you're head honcho now, huh Nott? Didn't see that coming."

"It seems Draco has a taste for more conventional politics," Theo supplied in explanation, "but you know that was never my style. Too niche," he clarified facetiously, gesturing to where he sat in his black leather cut. He'd gotten a proper haircut at some point since high school; presumably more than just the one, though there was no way of confirming. Altogether he looked less like he'd stumbled in off the street than Pansy could remember from their anarchical teen years. "My appeal is somewhat less universal."

Pansy paused to arch a brow over her shoulder. "But every cult needs a leader, right?"

"Yep." He leaned back in his chair, head lolling against it with a languid smile. "That's the one."

Pansy continued her perusal of the photographs, falling still in front of a picture of her father.

"Left him on the wall?" she murmured.

"Of course. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater."

"Except for Riddle?"
"Traitors," Theo said, "are something different."

She nodded, still looking at the picture. Her father stood beside Theo's father, posing next to their bikes like club bouncers on Sunset. Irreverent thugs.

Her heart ached a little.

"Parkinson," Theo called from behind her. "Take your coat off and stay awhile."

"Nah, I won't be here long." Having run out of pictures to peruse, she turned to face him where he sat. "I just came to ask you something."

"Yeah? Ask." Theo beckoned her with his chin, which was split down the center with a scar. She wondered if she had been there to see him earn it and then dismissed the thought. Most likely not. She'd missed a lot in the decade or so she'd been away.

"You guys still kill people?" she ventured tangentially.

"Only on the second Thursday of every month," Theo drawled, lacing his hands behind his head. "But we'll Tonya Harding someone if they've really got it coming."

"Break a kneecap, you mean?"

"No, win the Nationals in figure skating," said Theo, before kicking his legs out and asking, "Who've you got it in for, Pans?"

"No one." She stepped towards him, distancing herself from the picture of her father. "Nothing. Just wondering what else might've changed around here, that's all."

"You certainly have," Theo commented blandly.

She smiled at him. Not a blinding one, well-rehearsed. A felt cute, might delete later one. She generally tried to mix it up on her Instagram feed, never wanting to appear too out of touch. People liked to see a little insecurity in their icons.

"Not as much as you'd think," she told him, and he smiled back, all teeth.

She couldn't remember what the salon had been before, but her instincts told her it had been a salon then, too. From the outside it was pristine, almost too perfect, like a Drybar in Beverly Hills, except it was flanked by the flagging brick of two Main Street staples—the used bookstore and the only other cafe in town besides the Leaky—instead of a minimalist boutique or whatever artisan baked goods were considered fashionable these days.

She pushed open the door and stepped inside, catching sight of Daphne from afar. She was chatting with someone in medical scrubs who looked up, pausing, which then prompted Daphne to look up, too.

Daphne looked the same. Sweeter without the low-lows, definitely, and considerably less likely to offer up a joint from her backpack, but generally the same.

"Pansy," Daphne registered without thinking, and then blinked. "Holy shit, Pans, is that you?"

The other woman, exceedingly small and with hair pulled uncomplicatedly back from her face, seemed to frown with confusion when Pansy stepped forward in greeting, accepting Daphne's warm embrace.
"Daph," said Pansy, before glancing at the bemused woman in scrubs. "And you are…?"

"Oh gosh, sorry, I'm Hermione," the woman supplied, shaking herself of her momentary daze, "I just—" A pause. "Aren't you…?"

"No, I just look like her." Pansy flashed the woman, Hermione, a paparazzi smile. "Get it all the time."

"Oh, right," said Hermione, offering up a faint, half-convinced laugh when Daphne mercilessly cut in.

"Oh Jesus, she's joking—Pansy," Daphne sighed, rolling her eyes, "this is Hermione, Draco's wife. Dr. Granger," she purred, applying an emphatic layer of formality obviously intended to make Hermione groan, "this is Pansy Parkinson. An old friend."

"Yeah, wow, it's so surreal to meet you," offered Hermione along with her hand, looking moderately recovered from her initial stumbling. "I mean with all the news coverage and stuff, I feel like I just saw your name this morning—"

"Wife," Pansy echoed with an arched brow at Daphne, as Hermione made a dismissive little gesture of yeah, sure, probably. "My goodness, it's every girl's dream to marry a doctor, isn't it? How impressive for Draco to have managed it."

"Oh, it's—" Again, Hermione waved her away with a flushed look of don't be silly. "Nothing."

"I think you and I both know it's not nothing," remarked Pansy, before turning back to Daphne. "And you, Little Miss Entrepreneur, I hear you have a baby now?"

"Well, it just seemed like less work than a medical career," Daphne replied.

Pansy smiled.

"I guess I never made the connection you were actually from here," Hermione commented, still evidently distracted by Pansy's appearance. "I mean, Draco mentioned it once when your song came on the radio, but I honestly thought he was joking—"

"He was a terrible prom date," said Pansy. "Got in a fight that night at the Leaky. Got blood on my dress, too," she added with a roll of her eyes.

"How do you know it wasn't your blood?" asked Daphne wickedly. "I seem to recall you putting Ginny Weasley's nose out of commission that night, Miss Parkinson."

Pansy smiled thinly as Hermione's eyes widened.

"Oh Daph, you know I don't bleed," she said. "I just sparkle."

"Miss Parkinson. Rumor has it you're in town? Much as I've adored our little year-long game of phone tag, I'm going to have to insist this time: You're it. Your father's estate papers need to be taken care of. The deed to the house is still in my possession. Your inheritance, paltry as it is compared to whatever else you may have in your 401k, is currently awaiting your attention. While I appreciate we're all being blessed with the rare presence of our own almighty pop star and former Prom Queen, I hope it's not too terribly much to ask that you arrange to come by my office and sign a few papers. Twenty minutes and you'll be on your merry way."

________________________________________
"You look well," said Pansy conclusively. "Very well."

Susan gave her a glowy, suburban sort of look.

" Turns out you really can sweat out a coke problem if you do enough pilates," she said.

Pansy chuckled, uncrossing her legs and rising to her feet.

"Thanks for this," she said, picking up the packet Susan's husband Cormac had left for her. "And for the lemonade, too. Tell McLaggen I'll put the house on the market as soon as I get everything taken care of with the lawyer."

"Sure," said Susan, walking her to the door. "Oh, but Pans," she said, cautiously clearing her throat, "what brings you back? I mean… I guess we all expected to see you at the, you know. The funeral."

"Right, yeah," Pansy said, willfully expressionless. "I know. But I was in Japan at the time and couldn't get back."

"Right, sure, of course," offered Susan hastily. "But then with your mom gone and everything—"

"Yeah, I know. I just couldn't get away."

"—Oh of course, and I mean the whole thing was like, so weird, right?" she sighed, evidently attempting to be sympathetic. "Like, all that and then your tour finishes, then you announce another album and boom, you're randomly in the news for jury duty—like, what the hell, right? I mean I guess even pop stars have a civic duty or whatever, but still—"

"Sooz, babe, I'm so sorry, I have to run," said Pansy, leaning forward to kiss her cheek. "Coffee soon? Bagels?"

"Yeah, sure, anytime!"

"Perfect," said Pansy, sliding her sunglasses on her face with the private assurance that neither of them would ever dream of following up. "See you soon."

"All in favor?"

"Aye," said Percy, along with the rest of the planning commission.

"Excellent. Meeting adjourned."

There was a snap from one of the Creevey brothers' cameras and then, blessedly, freedom. Percy grabbed a cup of takeaway coffee from the Leaky and hurried out the door, bypassing the store-bought cookies with the stale, cake-like consistency and thick pink frosting. He'd had enough of those to last a lifetime, though evidently the rest of the commission disagreed.

"Weasley, if we could just get—"

"Yeah, email me," said Percy over his shoulder. "I've got a meeting."

"What, now?"

"Yes, now," Percy confirmed, shoving open the City Hall doors and hurrying up the street to his office.
He did not have a meeting.

He did, however, have other places to be, with nearly any place containing far more pressing work than whatever awaited him over stale cookies in the council chambers. Small town politics were and forever would be the same, as far as Percy was concerned. Perhaps things were a bit more exciting at the city council meetings, but the planning commission… there were only so many discussions he could have about the dangerous effects of back pain caused by speed bumps.

(Bumps were the narrow ones. 'Humps' were broader, more expensive, and generally preferred. Roundabouts were much too European for Diagon. But think of the children! Drive like your kids live here, et cetera et cetera. Half the time it took four months of argument just to produce a flashing sign.)

He had wanted to be a prosecutor, attracted by the excitement of criminal law, until his father had gotten beaten up by the Death Eaters, which was too much excitement. Percy had been in college at the time, worryingly sitting by his phone and waiting for news from his mother so intently (she'd forgotten to call and report back post-surgery, having been occupied by one of his more pressing siblings) that he nearly slept through his finals. Then he'd wanted to be a defense attorney, until he realized his clients would be the same people who'd beaten his father half to death.

When Arthur Weasley told him to stick to contracts, Percy listened. He focused on transactional law, finding he had a talent for accountancy, real estate, and wills, all of which were complicated. So complicated, in fact, that friends of his mother began calling him the moment he passed the bar, asking if he wouldn't mind helping with this or that. So complicated that he'd set up a temporary office in his parents' house, thinking he'd help for a few months before finding employment at a firm somewhere in San Francisco or Los Angeles, but had instead been pushed to open an office on Main Street when the house became too cramped and the billable hours didn't stop. So complicated that he didn't need business cards, just word of mouth, because all the Diagon housewives would say to each other, "Give Molly's boy a call, he'll help you," and now here he was, right where he'd started, except he was in his second term as planning commissioner and scheduled to speak at his high school's career day next week.

Bill was somewhere in Egypt. Charlie was in Romania or something, though he was coming home for a day or so like he usually did every couple of years before jetting off again. Even Fred and George split their time between their shop downtown and New York City to negotiate the franchising of their products. (They'd had Percy look over the contracts.) Ron was still in Diagon for now, but who knew where Padma's cardiology career would ultimately take them. Ginny had gotten the hell out of Dodge after college and though her absence seemed to plague their mother most intently, Percy hadn't blamed her. There wasn't a lot left here to see.

Which wasn't to say he didn't like living in Diagon. It kept him busy, at least, and it had seen a lot of improvements since the Death Eaters' leadership had changed hands. Retail was doing well. Downtown, where he operated his legal business, was pleasantly gentrifying. He slid up the narrow stairwell between two Main Street storefronts and took the usual sharp right, pushing open the door to his second-story office. It was unlocked because he had only been gone for an hour, and Diagon generally wasn't the sort of place he had to worry about things being stolen unless he'd offended a Death Eater, which he hadn't.

But one was sitting on the couch that purported to be a waiting room anyway.

"Weasley," said Pansy Parkinson, rising to her feet. "You rang?"

She was wearing a pair of skintight leggings, a loose white tank top, a long blazer. Her hair was long and thick, glamorous and effortless at the same time.
"Closed," Percy said without a second glance, waltzing into his office and referencing the sign on the door. The coffee in his hand was cold, but he drank it anyway. "I asked you to schedule a meeting with me, not surprise me after hours."

"Well, I was in the neighborhood," said Pansy, evidently unfazed by his tone. "I'm hoping to have this taken care of tonight."

"Hope is a dangerous thing for anyone to have, Miss Parkinson," Percy called over his shoulder, loosening his tie and tossing it aside.

It was typical of her not to think much of his time; not only because she was some sort of famous pop singer now—someone who made the news just for walking into a courthouse, which Percy did several times a week—but because she was the daughter of a Death Eater. Limitless. Condescending. They thought they ran this town, and just because they were generally correct about that didn't make it more palatable. It was only with severe misgivings that Percy had backed Draco Malfoy in the most recent City Council election; he wouldn't have if not for finding Cormac McLaggen, Malfoy's opponent, to be an absolute imbecile.

Pansy appeared in the door frame, leaning against it.

"Dark," she commented.

He glanced up. "I need time to look over your file to make sure I have everything pulled for you to sign. I'd like to have this over with in one sitting."

"Jesus," remarked Pansy. "You haven't changed a bit, have you?"

Percy, irritated, woke his computer with a tap on the return key. "No, Miss Parkinson, I have not."

"Yikes." She was still standing there, testing him.

"Come back in the morning," he suggested. "I open at nine a.m."

"Can you do earlier? I'm a morning person," she said.

"Great," he replied. "Then you won't be late."

She made a sound like a snort of disbelief, and he looked up.

"I have things to attend to," he informed her. "The world does not simply stop because you've asked it to."

Her expression hardened, going cold.

"I know that," she said.

Then she turned on her heel, and Percy remembered that she was here to sort through the papers of her father's death, and if he had not felt that a year was ample time for her to deal with it, he might have felt sorry for how he'd acted, a little bit, maybe—but he did feel she'd dragged her feet more than strictly necessary, so instead he pulled up the bankruptcy papers for one of his other clients and got to work with another sip of cold coffee, hoping to make it home before ten.

Pansy didn't make her nine o'clock appointment.

Instead she sat in her father's living room and watched his television, flipping through channels.
She'd made sure her assistant continued to pay the cable bills, electric, water, gas. Did she want to find a tenant for the house? No, she didn't. Did she want to sell it? Yeah, sure, eventually, but who knew what sort of state it was in. Did she want someone to go look at it? No of course not, there were personal possessions in there, she would do it herself eventually. Did she want someone to buy plane tickets? Please stop pestering her, she had a tour to prepare for. An album to record. Her first Vogue shoot. It was tax season. Holiday season. Boyfriend season. Breakup season. Allergy season.

She flipped through channels, pausing only briefly.

"—make fetch happen, it's not going to happen—"

"—DOW at an all-time high—"

"—WE WERE ON A BREAK—"

"—expected to begin this morning here in Los Angeles. The case against Hollywood producer Ludo Bagman has garnered unprecedented media attention in recent weeks, owing in large part to the testimony of singer Pansy Parkinson during jury selection proceedings."

Pansy paused her finger expectantly on the channel-up button.

"Miss Parkinson, seen here exiting the Los Angeles County Courthouse, was ultimately dismissed from jury selection despite her professed willingness to serve and be impartial. After Bagman's team of lawyers questioned her relationship with one of the witnesses, an alleged victim in what may very well be the most controversial sexual assault investigation of the dec—"

"—will be a blustery fifty-two degrees this morning with temperatures reaching an average high of sixty-five mid-afternoon—"

Pansy shut the television off and rose to her feet, contemplating how to spend the rest of her morning. Possibly she could pack up the rest of her father's things, though most of it seemed to have already been picked apart, presumably by her AWOL mother or one of the other Death Eaters. Theo had promised (via her assistant) to have someone pick up the majority of the things Pansy had wanted removed, like the mattress her father had died on, and anything of value, like the grandfather clock that was now being sold in one of the thrift shops on Main Street. Theo was at least very reliable, which Pansy supposed he always had been. She just hadn't stayed long enough in Diagon to find out for herself what he'd grown up to be.

She slid a glance listlessly outside, to the garage where her father kept his bikes. She'd told Theo to get rid of anything that wasn't working, but he'd sent back (again, via her assistant) that all of her father's bikes were, in fact, in near-perfect order. Granted, that was just shy of a year ago. Probably most of them could use some tuning up.

Pansy stretched to her feet, swapping her yoga pants for a pair of jeans.

Time to go fix some bikes.

Of course she hadn't shown up. He wasn't even surprised when she wasn't there at nine, and certainly not when the clock struck ten without her present. He had a feeling she'd wanted him to suffer for letting her proffered window of amiability lapse, and while he probably should have seen that coming, it also intensely annoyed him.

At noon, having glanced at the Parkinson file too many times to count, Percy finally rose to his
feet, scribbling a note that he'd be out of the office for lunch before climbing into his Prius, heading first to the nicest inn on Main Street. No, no check-ins the previous day, the front desk said. He drove to the Manor, stepping inside just far enough to ask if Theo Nott had any idea where Pansy Parkinson was. The response—Nott wasn't there, leaving him to speak with Mulciber, the garage manager—was a menacing, Why, who was lookin' for her? Never mind. He tried Daphne Greengrass' salon, knowing they'd been friends half a lifetime ago. No, she hadn't seen her, not since yesterday. Okay, great. Wonderful. Perfect.

The Parkinson house was his seventh stop. He hadn't sincerely thought that after a year of zealously avoiding anything to do with her father's death, Pansy might have chosen to return there, of all places—to the house she refused to sell or do anything with aside from paying the property taxes, which she'd done only after Percy had spoken impatiently with both her voicemail and her assistant thirty separate times—but he paused when he heard the sound of an engine roaring to life from the garage. He slid his messenger bag from the passenger seat and stepped out of his car, heading up the driveway.

"Miss Parkinson," he called over the sound of a Harley, or what he assumed was a Harley. He was never much into motorsports. All very ecologically unsound, in his view, not to mention inescapable deathtraps.

She glanced up at him, distracted, and returned her attention immediately to the bike, as if he'd interrupted her mid-thought. She was wearing a pair of jeans, hair tied back in a loose braid down her back. No makeup, but she had the sort of skin millions of dollars in album sales could probably buy, and therefore didn't need it. She could probably also afford the trainer that got her that body, those legs. She had two black-and-white swallows circling each other tattooed on the outside of her wrist. They had focused on it for her Vogue cover, leaving only her dark eyes visible, both of them swiped with thick eyeliner. She had looked like a goth and haunted poet instead of what she actually was: the daughter of a thug and an arms dealer who'd grown up in a small town, exactly the same way he had.

"Miss Parkinson," he said again, lifting the file for her to see. "We have an appointment."

"So you won't meet before or after hours, but you'll do house calls," she replied without looking up, revving the engine again. He doubted there was any use for it except to drown out his response, though he didn't make one. She glanced up, adding snidely, "You should put that on your business card."

Percy famously did not lose his temper. It unnerved people, especially other lawyers, though it wasn't any sort of skill. He simply had an unflappable quality that was the result of him being the middle of seven siblings. There was no point getting angry. Someone older would only shove him, someone younger would inevitably prank him, and his sister would flip him off and roll her eyes before walking away, indifferent. Getting angry had never served him well.

"Miss Parkinson," he said again. "If you would please just—"

But he was forced to cut himself off when she suddenly tossed him a helmet, retreating to the garage.

"Put it on," she called over her shoulder.

He sighed heavily, glancing down at it. "Miss Parkinson, I really do not have time t-"

"Mm, yeah, I know," she replied, tugging on an oversized leather jacket marked with the Death Eater symbol that must have belonged to her father. She put on her own helmet, beckoning to him.
"Get on," she said, patting the seat of the motorcycle.

Percy inhaled once, then exhaled.

"Miss Parkinson, I really must insist—"

"I need groceries," she said. "Forgot to have my assistant stock the fridge before I got here. I mean, granted, I'm not going to be here long, but I prefer my meals home-cooked. Easier to get lean proteins that way. Fresh produce."

She beckoned him again. He understood that he was being toyed with.

"You only have to sign the papers," he reminded her. "We just have to talk for a few minutes, and then—"

She slid on a pair of aviators. "We can do it after I get groceries."

No point fighting her, he thought, grudgingly resigned. She clearly wanted him to resist.

"Very well," Percy said tightly, "but if you insist, I imagine a vehicle would be easier. My car is right there," he pointed out, gesturing over his shoulder, "and I'd be happy t-"

"Yeah, I'm not getting in your car," she told him, throwing one leg over the bike. "How do I know you're not a serial killer?"

"I suppose it's a risk you'll have to take," he said, "though again, I'm happy to talk right here, if you'd like. There's no need t-"

She revved the engine again, drowning him out.

"Get on the bike, Mr Weasley," she said mockingly, "or we can reschedule. Say March thirty-second, 2049?"

Inhale. Exhale.

Percy slid the file back into his bag, walking over to the bike. He tucked the helmet under one arm and paused to roll up the sleeves on his dress shirt, starting with the left.

"You know, it's ironic," he said, finishing his right sleeve and then securing the helmet on his head with pointed deliberation, "I don't actually have a will. If I die on this bike, someone's going to have to handle quite a lot of inconvenient paperwork."

She fixed him with a steady glance. "You think I don't know how to ride a bike?"

He was unfortunately quite certain that she did, in fact, know how. All evidence pointed to it. She had anarchy in her blood, chaos in her genes. She was an agent of disaster, the inheritress to generations of lawlessness, who had somehow channeled it all into saccharine sweetness; wistful songs about broken hearts.

He climbed on behind her, pausing to adjust his bag before setting both hands on her hips. The hourglass of her waist seemed fragile, even if he knew perfectly well she was anything but.

The moment he touched her he saw the blades of her shoulders tensing and he realized that perhaps she had miscalculated, not him; she hadn't really expected him to do it. Inwardly he smiled to himself, securing his thighs around hers, wrapping his arms firmly around her. The inhale when he brushed her ribs was sharp.
"Don't fall off," she said.

Then she took off with a jolt down the driveway, taking the first hard right.

She leaned into every corner just because. Just fucking because. Because he clearly thought he had some idea who she was, what she was like, what she'd say no to. Because he was calling her bluff, but she wasn't fucking bluffing.

His arms went perilously tight around her and savagely, she fought a laugh.

He hadn't looked as ridiculous as she'd expected him to when he put on that helmet. She'd suffered the abject curse of knowing a man always looked better when he rolled up his sleeves, the little flex of forearm serving to remind her inconveniently of masculinity and primordial things. Primal things.

God, she wished she could give up on men. It wasn't even entirely out of the question. She wasn't hopelessly heterosexual, like some women; the option to ignore her attraction to dick was often easy to indulge. She'd had a little fling with a Victoria's Secret model last year (secret, of course, though they'd looked good together on their little Melrose jaunts) and Pansy had thought she could do it, potentially. Quit men altogether and focus her emotional efforts on dating women.

But Percy was right about hope, unfortunately. It was a dangerous thing for anyone to have.

Luckily nothing in Diagon was very far away, and Pansy pulled up to the parking lot of the grocery store within a matter of five or so minutes. He was obviously eager to get off the bike, pulling away instantly, and she grudgingly lamented the loss of him against her back. His shoulders and chest were broad, and he smelled fucking fantastic. Freshly laundered, freshly showered. Pheromones were such a curse, and worse was the rise of hipsterism in Hollywood. Now it was unexceptional for men to look like nerds; even considered attractive. Percy Weasley was built like a Tom Ford model, all skinny ties and dress shirts and cheekbones holding up glasses that framed his blue eyes. If she took him to a party in Hollywood, people would probably ask which Ian McEwan adaptation they knew him from.

Pansy's tastes, fortunately, were more Tarantino. The Timothée Chalamets of the world could have their moment if they wanted. She liked boys with big guns.

"Where are you planning to put the groceries?"

She blinked, having forgotten he was capable of speech. "What?"

"The groceries," said Percy, removing the helmet. His hair was a mess. He rifled a hand through it carelessly and she thought, Don't. Please, don't. "Did you bring a bag?"

She ignored him, sitting her helmet on the bike and walking into the grocery store.

He followed, undeterred.

"What brought you back?" he asked her. "You never said why you were here."

She plucked a cantaloupe from a crate near the door, sniffing it for ripeness. "My father died, Weasley. Pretty sure you're aware of that."

"A year is a long time to put off this sort of thing."
"Well I'm here now, aren't I?" She set the melon down, shifting over to the apples. A pity avocados weren't currently in season. "Better late than never."

"I just find it odd," remarked Percy.

"I'm busy. The tour, my album—"

"The trial," he said.

She picked up a peach, staring at it.

"You know, most people will do absolutely anything to get out of jury duty," he commented. "Especially someone like you, who doesn't even have the time to attend her father's funeral."

She set the peach down too hard to look at him, surely bruising it on impact. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She only realized he was baiting her into acknowledging him until after a little smirk of satisfaction flitted across his lips.

"Nothing," he said.

He reached for his bag and she gritted her teeth.

"I told you, I'm buying groceries right now—"

"Yes, and we can talk about your father's debts and assets while you test every peach in the store, Miss Parkinson. Take your time."

He was infuriating.

"I came to your office," she reminded him. "I was ready to go through this then."

"I'm aware, but—"

"Have you ever had to deal with a parent dying?" she asked him blisteringly.

"No."

"His tone was clipped, formal. "However, I did once sit beside my father's hospital bed for several days waiting to see if he would live. I believe you may recall that event? Your father was there, in fact," he informed her, leaving the sentence flatly between them. "I'm sure you were very concerned he might be arrested but, of course, he was not."

"So that's what this is." Pansy curled a fist, wanting to punch him, only she noticed that other people had started to do the double-takes; the little is that really her? look that Dr Draco's Wife had given her the previous day. "You want to antagonize me over an old blood feud or something? I have no control over what my father did to yours."

"I am simply not in the mood to be antagonized, Miss Parkinson," said Percy blandly. "Sign the papers. Sell the house if you want, I don't care. Just put this behind you and move on."

He had the file in his hand.

She looked at it, looked at his face, at those blue eyes, and shut down.

Then she walked out of the store and got back on the bike, peeling out of the parking lot before checking to see if he had followed.
"You really shouldn't be haranguing her like that," said one of his mother's friends, who—just his luck—happened to be in the store in time to see Pansy walk out. "It's tragic what happened. Not everyone handles death well."

"Evidently some people do not handle it at all," remarked Percy, tucking the file back into his bag for the second time that day. "How wonderful that she can be so privileged."

He didn't bother waiting for a response, instead deciding to walk back to his office. He had already spent two hours on this; he wouldn't allow any further time to be wasted. He had other clients, countless responsibilities. At least twelve emails from the planning commission were currently waiting to be answered. His stomach growled, and at the last second he bought a packaged salad and a cup of coffee, making his way up the stairs to his office.

He would have to pick up his car eventually. Unfortunate. He pinched the bridge of his nose, resigning himself to calling his brother.

"Ron. Sorry to bother you. Can I get a lift from my office, please?"

"A lift? Why? Where?"

"I left my car somewhere. At a client's house."

"What?"

"Ronald, please," Percy exhaled at a mutter. "I do not enjoy asking you for favors."

"Alright, Jesus, no need to shit your pants, Perce. I'm off tonight anyway. Be there in five."

More like ten minutes, as Ron never got anywhere in five. Percy stood outside anyway, waiting a mostly-inoffensive fifteen, and then stepped into Ron's car without a word.

"Where to?" said Ron.

Percy gave him the address.

"Hang on, isn't that—"

"Just drive, please," said Percy, leaning his head back against the seat and closing his eyes, exhaling.

"Well, you're in a lovely mood," Ron remarked, pulling back into the street with a hasty glance over his shoulder.

"Signal, Ron, aren't you a policeman?"

"Perce, can you kindly shut up? Thanks."

They drove in silence the rest of the way, Ron pulling up beside Percy's Prius.

"Hey," he said, "everything okay? Like, really."

Ron was obviously trying to be friendly, which was a rarity. They tended to avoid each other, not out of active dislike, but as a result of having nothing to discuss. They had once attended some sort of football match together when no one else was available at Ron's disposal; both had sorely regretted it, refusing to speak of it afterwards.
"I'm fine," said Percy, opening the passenger door and stepping out of it. "It's been a long day."


The garage was closed. Percy contemplated simply getting into his car and driving off, but the light in the living room was on.

He sighed, heading for the front door, and knocked twice.

He waited thirty seconds, meticulously counting, and was about to turn away when the door finally opened, revealing Pansy in the frame. She was no longer in the blazer or the jeans. She had showered, her hair was wet, her skin was dewy and smelling like jasmine. She wore a cropped t-shirt, braless. Her torso was long, her navel winking up at him above the line of her leggings. The house smelled like garlic and jalapenos, so presumably she had managed to get groceries after all.

"The office is closed," she said, an obvious mockery of him. "I don't work after hours."

"I didn't mean to upset you," he told her. "You were testing my patience. I reacted badly."

She frowned at him, eyes narrowing for a moment.

"Understood," she said. "And you're right. I was being difficult."

He waited for an apology, given that she had abandoned him in a grocery store and therefore derailed the majority of his afternoon, but when it appeared he wouldn't get one, he nodded his head and turned away.

"Hey," she called after him. "Hungry?"

Inconveniently, his stomach rumbled. He had worked late to make up for missing two hours and had eaten nothing but the packaged salad.

He turned towards her.

"I made too much," she offered in apparent explanation.

He nodded. "Cooking for one can be difficult."

"Right." She stepped to the side, gesturing him inside. "Oh," she added as an afterthought, pausing him just before he stepped over the threshold, "but I'm not signing anything. And if you mention my father, you're gone."

He turned his head, glancing down at her. The hand she'd used to stop him rested on his stomach, safely above his belt and below his chest.

"Fine," he said.

She released him and he walked inside.

They had been eating in silence for nearly fifteen entire minutes when he wiped his mouth with a napkin, asking impassively, "Why did you want to be on that jury?"

She paused, setting her fork beside her plate in irritation.
"I'm not asking about your father," he pointed out.

"I obviously should have been more specific," she muttered.

"Yes, but you weren't, and legally speaking you should clarify the terms of a contract before offer and acceptance."

He seemed to be teasing her. Not cruelly. Just... conversationally.

"L.A. is a zoo right now," she said. "Everyone made a big deal of the trial."

"Partially due to you," he commented.

She glanced up sharply, but again, he didn't seem to be speaking maliciously.

"Yes," she confirmed, her reply carefully crisp and expressionless. "I guess people made a big deal of my involvement."

She thought that would be the end of it, but of course it wasn't.

"For what it's worth, I'd have liked to see you on that jury," Percy remarked. "But I knew the defense would never allow it. A young woman in the music industry? You must have seen versions of Bagman a thousand times over. What is he, a producer?"

She picked up her fork. "Yes."

"Amazing how some people think they're untouchable." He gently stabbed a piece of broccolini and raised it to his mouth.

Pansy, meanwhile, simply stared at her dinner, suddenly losing her appetite.

"I've seen lots of versions of him," she said. "But not because I'm famous. Not because I'm a singer."

Percy paused his chewing. After a moment, he swallowed carefully.

"My father wasn't a good guy," Pansy said. "I know that. I can see why you don't have a lot of sympathy for me. I can see why you don't miss him, why you think it doesn't matter to me that he's gone. But when I was—"

She broke off.

Percy set his fork down, saying nothing.

"You probably don't know this about me but I was in the high school wind ensemble," Pansy said, the words suddenly pouring out of her uninvited. "I was first chair, actually. Flute and piccolo. Tried it out in fifth grade and fell in love with music. Happened to be good at it, too."

"You're right," Percy said, "I didn't know that."

He was looking at her attentively, but not forcefully. He was listening, but he wasn't pressuring her to go on.

"The band teacher in high school, I don't know if you remember him—"

"Karkaroff."
"Yeah, him." She cleared her throat. "He... Well, it doesn't matter. Nothing happened," she said quickly. "I mean, nothing like... nothing like the trial. Nothing like Bagman. But I tried to tell another teacher and they didn't do anything. I tried to tell them but they didn't listen, said it was in my head or told me to stop wearing... I don't know. The point is I quit," she said flatly. "I just came home one day and told my dad I quit. He yelled at me, said he'd wasted money buying all the stuff I needed, my flute and all that. I just took it. He wouldn't stop pestering me about it, said if I didn't like hard work then I wouldn't like life. But I guess eventually he remembered that I didn't mind practicing; I used to do it every day. He used to yell at me to stop, actually. 'That's enough, it's been an hour, shut up,' that kind of thing. He and my mom were always either yelling at each other or at me."

She swallowed thickly, pushing the stir-fry around on her plate.

"But then I quit band and stopped practicing and I stopped talking and started sleeping all the time and my dad finally pieced together that something was wrong. So one day he comes home, throws my flute at me, says he took care of it and that I better not forget whose daughter I was ever again. Scared me shitless." Pause. "The next day I went to school and found out Karkaroff was in the hospital. Punctured lung. Broken ribs. Broken leg. Someone," she said, "had put the fear of God in him, and he never taught again."

She rose to her feet, suddenly desperate for motion. "Wine?"

Percy nodded. "Sure."

"Red or white?"

"Whatever you'd like."

She slid into the kitchen, poured them both a glass, and returned, setting his beside his plate.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She resumed occupancy of her chair, taking a seat.

"Ludo Bagman," she said eventually, "did far worse to those women than anyone's ever done to me. But if he doesn't get a guilty verdict—"

She stopped.

Told another sip of wine.

"After I got dismissed from the Bagman trial I had this shitty, paralyzing thought: I want my dad." She cleared her throat, fiddling with the stem of her wine glass. "I just wanted my dad to fix it, but then I realized he can't. He'll never fix anything for me ever again. Which I've known for an entire year," she admitted, "and presumably you think I don't care about him, and that that's why I haven't come home or something. And yeah, you're half-right, sometimes I hate him, I'll admit that. But then I miss him. And the truth is I couldn't do it, couldn't face all those things. Not all at once," she said.

She took another sip. Percy raised his glass, taking one as well.

"For what it's worth, the evidence against Bagman is astounding," he commented, pointedly not mentioning her father. She had a feeling that because he had already promised not to, he wouldn't,
even if Pansy had broken her own rule. "I heard there were over a hundred witnesses."

"Yeah, I know."

"Evidence of harrowing complicity in the industry, certainly, but at least it's evidence."

"I know."

"And I know I can't promise anything about the trial. I wouldn't," Percy corrected himself. "I know the justice system has failed before. Will fail again, inevitably." He took another sip, and Pansy stared at her glass. "But I will say that the damage to Bagman's reputation has been considerable. That won't be easily undone."

"Yes," Pansy said restlessly, "but doesn't it seem unfair that men like him can take our passion, the things we love—they can take our lives and our bodies and our self-respect like it's something they're owed—and all we can take in return are their reputations?"

Silence.

"Forget the trial," Pansy muttered bitterly. "I wish I could break his ribs."

When she looked up, Percy was… smiling.

"Your sense of reprisal is sensational," he said. "Compelling."

She rolled her eyes, lifting her glass to her lips.

"And to think you tried to swear that you could be impartial," Percy murmured, amused.

"I could be impartial," Pansy insisted. "But if the facts are there, what am I supposed to do? Seems pretty straightforward to me."

She shrugged, and Percy's smile broadened.

She had the distinct feeling he was laughing, albeit quietly. Soundlessly.

"I'm assuming you never mentioned anything about Karkaroff in your Vogue interview," he said, and Pansy shook her head. No, admitting her father had nearly killed a man wasn't exactly something she wanted people to know about. She certainly didn't need to incite public speculation as to anyone her father had actually killed.

"Did you continue in band after the, ah," Percy began, and determined, "Warning shots from your father?"

"Yes." She nodded. "And then I moved to L.A. as soon as I graduated. I worked as a waitress, then a bartender, til I got my shot. I recorded demos, YouTube videos, you name it. Performed on the Santa Monica Promenade for a bit. I did everything I could to get close to people in the industry," she added drily, "which was… not always innocent."

"But you've never told anyone about Karkaroff?"

She shook her head. "He didn't shape me. I could have died in this town, I could have been nothing, but I wasn't, and he doesn't deserve credit for what I turned out to be." She took another sip of wine, adding, "I refuse to let him be part of my origin story."

"I see." He picked up his fork, puncturing a mushroom. "I think you're right," he commented after
a moment's contemplation. "Your story is much more interesting without him."

They didn't speak further, opting to continue eating in silence. Privately, though she knew she would never admit it, she felt she owed him something; for unsettling the knot in her chest, which had been enough to prevent her from eating only moments ago. It felt like a weight had been lifted.

Eventually Percy rose to his feet, attempting to clear the table, but Pansy stopped him. "I've got it, don't worry about it."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

He walked over to his bag, picking it up, and then paused. He looked down for a moment like he might open it.

Pansy, meanwhile, sidled purposefully up to him, pausing him with a cautionary glance. "Don't even think about it," she warned.

She thought she saw half a smile, or possibly something even smaller. He leaned towards her, a little sway as if he might whisper a joke in her ear, or brush his lips against her cheek.

"You'll have to sign them eventually, Miss Parkinson."

She forced herself not to shudder at the proximity of his voice. He'd said it so quietly that if there had been anyone else in the room, they wouldn't have heard it. Only she could, suffering it like a vibration in her chest.

"Make me," she said, letting out a breath.

His eyes slid over her face, down to her lips and back up.

"Have a nice evening," he said, and then turned away, opening the door and disappearing through it.

She spent the next day bracing for something. She watched the clock hit nine, ten, eleven. She looked at her phone constantly but opened none of the messages, ignored the calls. She itched with unknown agitation, like a muscle cramp. Her eyes had opened with a flutter, her chest tight, like she'd been dreaming something wonderful and had reason to believe it would continue upon waking. When she woke up, though, she couldn't remember what it was.

She got on her father's motorcycle and rode to Daphne's salon.

"Oh, wow," said Daphne, looking up at Pansy's entry. "I really didn't think you'd still be here."

"Yeah, neither did I," Pansy sighed, falling into the salon chair. "Got time for a walk-in?"

"Sure," Daphne said, stepping behind the chair and toying with Pansy's long hair. "I had a cancellation anyway."

"Rude," said Pansy.

"Nah," countered Daphne, shrugging. "I'll just charge you extra."

Pansy made a face at her in the mirror. Daphne smiled broadly.
"So," Daphne said. "Are we going to talk about how you skipped your dad's funeral? Or are we just going to catch up on a decade of gossip," she amended on second thought, teasing. "Any new crushes to speak of?"

Oof. The irony.

"Very funny," said Pansy.

Fortunately Daphne was already distracted. "Are we doing a trim, or are we just chopping the whole thing off?"

"Chop it," said Pansy, and Daphne's hands stilled.

"What? Pans, I was kidding—"

"Cut it," Pansy said, meeting her eye in the mirror. "Lobs are in now, right?"

"But—"

"Daph," said Pansy firmly. "If anyone's going to cut my hair off, it should be you. You used to hold it back for me all the time in high school." She settled herself in the chair, reaching for a magazine. "You can sell it on Ebay, I won't be mad."

"Pans, honestly." Daphne smiled faintly. "I mean, you know I've always said you'd look great with short hair—"

"Yes, I know."

"—but that's a big change, and your hair's so healthy—"

"I'm not getting bangs, woman, just cut it," said Pansy. "If I miss my long hair, I'll get extensions. Or a wig."

Daphne rolled her eyes. "Alright, fine. Sure you don't want to dye it purple while you're here?"

"Why, do you think that'd look good?"

"Okay, seriously. What's going on with you?" sighed Daphne.

"Nothing." Pansy shrugged while Daphne reached for an elastic band, gathering Pansy's hair into a ponytail. "Though, just curious," she ventured, watching as Daphne engaged some sort of hair wizardry via eye-balling, "do you know anything about Percy Weasley?"

"Mm, no, not really," Daphne absently replied, wrapping a hand around Pansy's ponytail. "He's on the planning commission, if you're interested in having something rezoned."

"Ah," said Pansy with an inward roll of her eyes, "Thanks. Helpful."

"No problem." Daphne rumbled around for scissors, pulling a clean pair out of a drawer. "Has he been giving you shit or something?"

"Yeah, he's my dad's estate lawyer."

"Oh, yeah, makes sense." Daphne paused, smoothing her hands over Pansy's ponytail, and said, "Hey, I know we don't really talk anymore, and I get it if you don't want to. But are you, like… okay?"
They locked eyes in the mirror, and it occurred to Pansy that she'd really done herself a disservice not staying in touch with Daphne after she left. She supposed Daphne had run away, too, and she'd never thought to ask what happened after that.

"Yeah, I'm good," said Pansy. "Thanks for asking."

In answer, Daphne cut off part of Pansy’s ponytail and let it fall to the floor.

"Don't panic," she said, but Pansy didn't plan on it.

There was something reassuring about letting it all go.

Percy had no intention to contact her. There would have been something inhumane about it, in his view. He was primarily her father's attorney, and even in death there was a sense of responsibility to his client. That he may have felt something by virtue of standing so close to her rendered it an inopportune time to demand that she sign, read, or waive anything, and given everything she'd said to him at dinner, he doubted she would want to be around him unless his interest in her was purely clinical, fiduciary. In order for that to be the case, he would need a day or so to catch his breath.

That being said, he braced himself nearly every hour at the sound of a motorcycle revving on the street outside. He was forced to pause mid-thought each time, reminding himself silently that this was Death Eater country—not every motorcycle had an attractive brunette on it; realistically, 99% of them did not—and continuing to work. At around three in the afternoon, though, the blistering sound of an engine was followed by the echo of footsteps from the stairwell, then the door opening, then the door closing, and then the blur from his periphery that meant someone was standing expectantly in the threshold, paused between his waiting room and his office.

"Busy?" she asked, and he looked up.

She'd cut her hair short. It skated her clavicle now, making her look both tough and sleek. She was wearing black skinny jeans, heeled black ankle boots, that same oversized leather jacket, wine-colored lipstick. Terrifying and traumatically, upsettingly beautiful. Like she'd scare his mother half to death.

He glanced askance at the file with her name on it, then flicked his gaze back to her.

"No," she said.

"No?"

"No," she confirmed. "Not now."

"You came to my office to tell me that? An interesting method of refusal."

She walked inside, shutting the office door behind her.

"It occurred to me that a decent person might have said something to me after last night," she said. "But then," she reconciled offhandedly, tongue slipping out between her lips, "I remembered you're a lawyer."

He closed out of the contract he had on the screen and pulled up the mediation he was currently drafting between two downtown business owners. "Very original," he said. Not caustically, though he could have. Jokes at the expense of lawyers and thieves were a dime a dozen without him wasting any hostility on the subject.
"I told you some really personal things," Pansy reminded him flatly. "I think it would be to my
detriment if I didn't ask you to sign a non-disclosure agreement."

He looked up, arching a brow. "You think I'll go running off to the tabloids to tell them about your
perjurious attempt at jury infiltration?"

She pulled out the chair across from his desk, lowering herself into it.

"I'd like to prevent it," she said. "If at all possible."

She seemed completely serious. He wondered if it was haunting her now that she had been so
honest with him the night before. For a woman who'd made her career trafficking as a poet with an
ear for hooks, she seemed to dislike sensitivity. He had a feeling it was unwelcome in her past life.
No Death Eater would ever stand for knowing someone had something to hold over them—least of
all someone like him having something like that on someone like her.

As if she could read his thoughts, Pansy shrugged her father's leather cut from her shoulders,
letting it fall around her waist where she sat in the chair.

"Tell you what," Percy said, leaning back to steeple his fingers against his mouth. "I'll sign an
NDA if you go through your father's estate paperwork with me."

"No," she said. "I won't sign them at all without an NDA."

"And who's going to draft it? Me?"

"No. I have a standard copy."

"For record producers? People in the industry?"

"Them," she confirmed. "But also people I hire. People I give interviews to." She didn't blink
before adding, "People I sleep with."

"And I fall into…?"

"You're your own category."

"How special for me," Percy murmured.

She gave him a thin, derisive smile.

"I came back here due to extenuating circumstances," she reminded him. "I could argue that you
took advantage of that. My emotional distress."

"You could have had a career as a lawyer yourself, Miss Parkinson." She was a natural shark, and
he'd seen a lot of them in law school. They were mostly litigators and defense attorneys now,
though if he'd moved somewhere more prominent he might have come up against some of them in
notable contract negotiations.

"One lawyer in the room is more than enough," she said.

Percy tapped his fingers on the desk, considering it.

"Do you have the NDA on hand?"

"I have an electronic copy. I can AirDrop it to you now."
"Do that," he advised.

She pulled out her phone and, as promised, the little bubbling sound of impending acceptance emanated from his computer speakers. He hit download, then print.

"One moment," he said.

He rose to his feet, stepping out of his office to the industrial printer that had been his one real investment aside from the office and the law degree itself. The contract was obviously standard; drawn up by a large Los Angeles-based firm. Everything, Percy judged with a glance, was on the up and up. Clearly she had gone through this song and dance before.

When he returned to his office she was standing beside the file cabinets that sat in an orderly line behind his desk, eyeing the nothing that occupied his walls.

"You don't have any personal items in here," she observed without turning around. Beneath the leather jacket was a thin, loose tank top. He could see the motion of her shoulders underneath it as she tested one of the drawers, attempting to pull it open. It was locked.

"Not even a stress ball," she said.

Percy approached his desk, setting the contract atop his keyboard. "What were you expecting? Wedding photos? Baby pictures? Sentimental tchotchkes?"

"Maybe." She turned to give him a hawkish, accusing glance. "Do you not have any of those?"

"No," he said. "I find sentiment largely wasteful."

"Charming," she said bitingly.

Her eyes flicked to the contract, then back to him.

Then she reached for a pen, bending over his desk to reach her portion of the agreement. She shuffled to the last page and wrote her name in print, then signed it. She scribbled in the date without asking him what day it was, which was… an oddly respectable thing.

"So she does know how to sign a contract," Percy mused aloud.

She held the pen out to him, wordless.

"This," he commented, "seems a very strange punishment. Perhaps I was giving you space?"

"This isn't punishment."

"Isn't it?" he countered, accepting the pen from her.

His fingers brushed hers; briefly, pointedly. She didn't shy away from the contact, nor even blink. She merely looked up at him, expectant.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think it suits you."

"What does?"

"All of it. The hair," he said. "The litigiousness. The vengeance. The 'fuck-yous' and the 'motherfuckers' you're constantly saying or implying. The bike." He gestured out the window to where she must have parked it outside his office. "The explicit terror of being seen."
"You don't know me," she said accusingly.

"No, I don't. But you want me to," he said, and for once, she faltered. "That's why you told me all of that last night, and why you're punishing me now. Because I fucked up. Is that it?"

"I'm not punishing you."

"Right, yes, of course." He set the pen on the desk and took a step towards her, watching her breath catch in her chest. She didn't retreat, which he thought was vastly to her credit. He paused there, too-close, glancing down at her. "What do you really want from me?"

"Sign it." She pointed to the desk behind him without dropping her gaze from his. "The contract. Sign it."

"Ah, but getting people to sign things is so difficult these days," he lamented, pointedly referencing the file marked with her father's name. "The price for acquiescence is steep. The market value on legally binding signatures seems to only be increasing."

"You want me to acquiesce," she said with a scoff, "really?"

"Would you rather I ask you to beg?"

She blinked.

He, admittedly, wasn't entirely sure he meant it.

"If you're calling my bluff, Weasley, then call it," she said. "See if I back down."

Unless he was very much mistaken, her pulse had raced exquisitely.

He took another step and she matched it, retreating. Another. Another.

He secured her back against his file cabinets and paused, loosening his tie.

"Perhaps it's me you underestimate," he said.

He slid the tie from his collar, pulling it free. She watched his mouth, his throat. She made no secret of it, which was profound and inspiring and nearly enough to make him stop, because there was no way he was going to be able to do all the things he'd like to. There would be something troubling about it, problematic. Yesterday she had exposed her inner fractures to him, and there was something wrong about the fact that it was him—the man who was forcing her to confront one more, to peel back another glimpse of malformation each time they saw each other. She was showing him all her ugly pieces and it was only making her more beautiful to him, more desirable, drawing his attention to the subtle pebbling of her skin. She had walked into his office blemishless, synthetic perfection. The irony of his attraction now made him deferential and idly sick.

He reached behind her, finding one wrist, and slid his tie around it. When she said nothing, he reached for the other, looping it around the handle of the drawer behind her. She didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't protest. He slid it around a few more times, leaning forward to reach behind her back, tying a blindly constructed sailor's knot. Her lips brushed his throat, evidence of their parting left behind in spectral traces of warmth against his neck.
When he was finished he stayed there, still leaned against her, her hands bound behind the small of her back and her teeth gently scraping his jaw. She bit lightly at his chin, tilting her head up for his, and he closed his eyes a moment before looking down.

She knew what she was capable of when he met her eye. She knew what she could do from this position, hands or no hands. He took one look at her and thought, Fuck.

"Well?" she said. Taunting him.

His mouth twitched, accommodating the briefest flicker of a smile.

Then he drew his attention downward and flicked open the button of her jeans.

Her breath caught and he slid the zipper down, slowly. He stroked the black lace of her underwear and glanced up at her. "For me?"

"For me," she corrected him, her voice dry. "But you can see them."

He gave a curt, deferential nod. "If you'd like."

He eased his hands under the waistband of her jeans, marveling at the way they fit her while he peeled them away from her hips. He slid the material carefully over her backside, stroking his thumbs along bare skin, and then tugged them down to the midpoint of her thighs.

"Lovely," he said, stroking the lace of her thong. His thumb dragged down her clitoris, experimental. He fit his palm between her legs, incautiously doting. "Expensive?"

"Very." He could feel her keening against him, the slightest roll of her hips to encourage him. "Planning to stop there?"

"Not quite."

He dropped to one knee, gesturing with a hand, and she blinked with confusion before gingerly adjusting her footing, setting one boot in his waiting palm. He balanced her foot on his thigh and unzipped the side of one shoe to remove it, tossing it away, before beckoning for the other. She switched feet, struggling a little without her hands for balance, and he slid away the left boot, pausing to pair them meticulously beside each other, returning his attention to her jeans.

He tugged them gently from the cuffs, fastidiously unrolling each leg from her calf. By the time they pooled at her ankles he tapped the side of her right knee, inviting her again to lift her foot. She did, and he slid them away, followed by a tap to her left knee. Then he folded them neatly and draped them over the side of his chair, returning to stand at a distance of a foot from her, perhaps less.

She didn't drop her eyes from his when he nudged her heels apart, gently widening her stance. His hand found her clit again lazily, stroking without purpose.

"What exactly is your plan?" she asked him, only slightly panting.

"If I'm going to sign an NDA, I'm going to earn it."

"That's not how this works."

He paused his hand, tilting his head to watch her stifle a whimper in frustration.

"Tell me how this works, then," he said.
She glared at him. He opted to reach forward, smoothing the neckline of her gratuitously revealing tank top to observe the matching black bra, peeling back the lace. The stroke of a nipple left it hardened in the wake of his touch, a little bud of expectancy. He lowered his head and sucked it lightly, brushing it with his thumb when he pulled away.

Unless he was very much mistaken, she shivered viscerally. "Fuck me."

"Is that a request or a command?" he asked.

"This is not a negotiation."

"I wouldn't know," he said. "You don't technically negotiate with me."

"Come here." Her hips canted forward, brushing his. "Touch me."

"Please," he mouthed.

She scowled.

He smiled.

"Fine." She swallowed, then gritted out, "Please," sharpening the single word into a violent, insidious barb.

"Well, since you asked so nicely," he said.

He lowered to his knees again, smoothing his hands along her waist until they paused at her hips, framing them between his palms. He leaned forward and slid his lips along the outside of her underwear, breath intermingling with the lace. She exhaled, stepping towards him, and he eased her legs apart, sliding the material away.

"Pretty," he said.

"What is?"

"Your pussy," he said, and glanced up. "Or do you prefer cunt?"

He could see she'd had to stifle a moan.

"I'd prefer you stop talking," she panted.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

In fairness she glistened, jewel-toned and lush, and he was not remotely opposed to being a bit more expeditious with his progress. He slid his tongue against the slit of her cunt and listened to her ragged exhale, absorbing it like Beethoven, straddling the line of genius and madness and whatever lay between. He parted her thighs more gruffly, fitting his jaw between the curves of them, and she ground her hips against his mouth, gasping.

His office phone rang and he stopped, pulling away.

"Don't you dare," she snarled, tugging at the drawer handle in frustration.

He smiled politely, rose to his feet, and walked to his desk.

"Percy Weasley's office," he said into the phone.

"Percy Weasley's office," he said into the phone.
Pansy gave him a look like she would strangle him with her bare hands.

"Percy, it's Mom," said Molly's voice. "Have you talked to Ronald? He's not answering his phone and I don't know if he and Padma are both coming or not because if that's the case I'm going to have to make more bean dip—"

"Mmhmm," said Percy, still eyeing the pop star who was currently tied to his file cabinet.

"—and anyway you know this is important, Charlie's hardly ever home and I've had enough on my plate trying to wrangle Fred and George as it is. They've swapped phones again I think, which I keep telling them is totally unprofessional but of course your father thinks it's positively hysterical —"

"Of course," said Percy, holding up a finger to Pansy for pause. She gave him an exquisite look of impending homicide.

"—speaking of your father, his back's acting up again, would you mind doing a few things around the house? If you could bring the bins in that would be wonderful, I'm just so busy in the kitchen I don't know if I'll get around to it and the neighbors actually complain, if you can believe that—"

"Not a problem," said Percy. He stretched the cord on his phone and stepped towards Pansy, reaching between her legs to slide a finger inside her, then another. She made a little sound of desperation, eagerly accommodating him while he fit his hand to the shape of her, thumb idly stroking her clit. "Anything else?"

"You're not bringing anyone, are you? I mean of course you aren't, but I just thought I'd ask, I didn't know Charlie was dating someone and I feel so uninformed, I mean is it really so much to ask that I be told who's coming around to the house? Not that I mind of course, the more the merrier and who knows if Ginny will come or not, she seems to have totally lost the ability to communicate—"

Pansy's lips parted, close to release, and he stopped, not wanting to be distracted when it happened.

"So sorry, I'm actually with a client right now," said Percy. "I'll talk to you soon."

"Oh right, yes of course, though did you hear from—"

He slammed the phone down and dropped to his knees again, maneuvering Pansy's leg hastily over his shoulder. She gasped, delirious with relief, while he dove his fingers into her, his mouth circling, darting, sucking, all restraint gone from the room with the exception of her wrists. When her legs shook, the cabinet behind her jerking slightly from her effort to stay upright, Percy looked up and watched her face wrench in perfect torment; agonizing, excruciating closeness.

He felt her clench around his fingers and watched her come, shoulders exhaustedly going limp after the tremors had left her body in waves.

"You asshole," she gritted through her teeth, breathing hard.

Percy rose to his feet without a word, reaching for her jeans. He repeated the same process of undressing her in reverse, gesturing for one foot, then the other, carefully drawing them up her legs and then fastening them around her waist. Then her shoes.

Then he paused, and she glared at him. "Untie me."

"Sign your father's papers," he said.
"Am I supposed to do that with my hands tied?"

"No. You're supposed to do it this evening, at—" He paused, turning to his desk, and scribbled on a post-it, folding it up and slipping it into her front pocket. "This address. Seven o'clock, and don't be late."

She glared at him. "You can't be serious."

"Deadly, I'm afraid. As for this," he said, reaching over to pluck the non-disclosure agreement from his desk, "I'm going to need a few hours to look over it. Standard procedure, you understand."

"You're serious." She was gaping at him now. "Are you going to leave me here?"

"Well, yes and no," he said. He leaned closer, skating his lips beside her cheek as he loosened the knot of his tie from her wrists. "This will only take a few more seconds to get out of, I think. Do you need me to tell you how to lock the office up behind you?"

He turned his head to glance at her furious face, his nose brushing the lobe of her ear.

"No," he murmured, "you're a smart girl. You'll be fine."

He gave her hips a light smack and gathered the rest of the papers from his desk, shoving them into his bag and striding out of his office without another glance. Either she'd make him pay for that, or…

Or nothing, he thought, satisfied, as he followed the familiar path to the stairwell, out to the sidewalk, her bike gleaming in the fading sun outside.

There was no chance she'd let him off the hook.

________________________

She wasn't exactly proud of the fact that the first thing she'd done when she'd freed her hands from his filing cabinet was to immediately dive her hands into her pants and relieve the renewed tension there herself, viciously shoving her fingers against the pulsing ache remaining. She came again, unprettily, holding her breath and sputtering out a gasp, and then contemplated whether or not it was worth it to murder him.

Or, as Theo had once suggested, to simply break his kneecaps.

Jesus, but his face. His hands. His mouth. The utter fucking carnality of him. The shamelessness of it all, of leaving her there, waltzing out without even expecting a hand on him in return. He hadn't even kissed her.

She shuddered at the thought of it, his mouth pressed to hers.

Jesus.

She went home and showered. She went for a run, then showered again. She came in the shower, then air-dried and went to lie on fresh sheets in her teenage bedroom, still naked. She'd lusted after supermodels before, musicians, actors, CEOs and industry professionals, and now she was contemplating trying to Prime Now a vibrator all because of a stuffy, unsettling small-town lawyer. He wasn't even the kind with money.

He was on the goddamn planning commission, for fuck's sake.

Her mind was filled with malevolence and barbarism. She was overcome with something; not the
bile that had initially brought her here to seek out her father, her former life, her sense of control, but... something else.

Vulgarity. While he was going down on her she'd wanted to tug at the roots of his hair, to destroy him a little. Instead he'd taken a sip of her and walked away, perfectly sated.

She sat upright and shook herself.

This was unacceptable. She had come here to get away from the circus in L.A., to remember her roots, whose daughter she was—to recall that she was Pansy goddamn Parkinson, who did not and would not take no for an answer, ever. She had told her assistant a day or two, three tops. There was no purpose to this—to this agonizing over him, or whatever she was doing. Yes, she'd made a mistake telling him the truth about what brought her here, but that could be remedied. She could get the NDA signed, close the book on her father's death, and then be done with Diagon forever. It was what she'd wanted all those years ago, staring at this exact ceiling and wishing something miraculous would take her away.

All she had to do was leave. She'd done it once. She could do it again, and with finality this time. She and Daphne could email or FaceTime and everything else could stay buried; stay in her veins—in her blood and in her past—and that's it.

Fine. Fuck it. Fine.

She plucked out a pair of jeans, a white oversized button down. Business, or something like it. The tips of her newly cropped hair sliced at her collarbone and she reveled in it.

Time to go, Pans, her reflection said. You're too much for this place to hold.

Then she rifled the little scribble of an address out of her jeans and got on her father's bike, heading for wherever Percy Weasley was waiting.

By the time it was 7:38 he was fairly sure she wasn't coming, and secretly, he thought that was best. It was a risky game, whatever this was, and it was probably to his benefit if she refused to play it. He could always fax the papers to her. If she disappeared and never spoke to him again, so be it.

Then the doorbell rang.

"PERCE, CAN YOU GET THAT?" shouted his mother over the raucous sound of his twin brothers telling some story about a poltergeist. He hadn't been listening; his involvement in the conversation typically invited mockery of some kind, so it was easiest to simply stay silent. He might have taken any interruption whether it was her or not.

So he rose to his feet without protest, pulling open the front door.

She seemed to know immediately by the sounds emanating from the dining room that she'd been tricked, though to her credit she didn't immediately make a scene.

"What is this?"

The question was tight-lipped and exacting; the manifestation of don't waste my time.

"It's game night," Percy said, and she shuddered.
"Game night?"

"Yes."

"What, like Monopoly?"

"Yes, and life-sized Jenga."

"I hate games." She looked repulsed.

"PERCE, WHO IS IT?" yelled Molly.

"I also hate games," said Percy, pointedly not answering his mother.

"I thought we were signing papers."

"We are. Eventually."

She scowled at him.

"This is my nightmare," she said vitriolically.

"Mine too."

"Is your whole family here?"

"Most of them."

"Jesus." She looked like she was going to be sick. "No. Absolutely not."

"Okay," he agreed, "then get on your bike. Go home."

"I want this taken care of tonight."

"Okay, then stay."

She seemed to know she'd been outmaneuvered.

"You. Fucking. Asshole," she ground through her teeth.

"PERCY! IS IT THE MAIL? YOUR FATHER'S BEEN WAITING ALL DAY FOR A PACKAGE!"

"Shall I tell her you're here?" he prompted.

He hadn't really expected her to stay. He'd mostly thought she'd show up and be pissed and leave and he'd have the upper hand still, which was the only thing that felt safe at the moment. His proximity to her was beginning to unnerve him. He was starting to want things from her, and pushing her to her limits seemed to be the only plausible cure. Hate me more, push me away so there's distance, something like that. That seemed to be the gist of it.

But before either of them could say anything, Ron had materialized in the entryway, sidling up to Percy from the hall.

"Oi, Mom's asking—"

He broke off, staring. "Parkinson?"
Pansy rolled her eyes and shoved her helmet into Percy's chest. "Put that somewhere," she said, dismissive.

Percy shrugged, waving her inside, and moved to set the helmet on the entry table when Ron gave his arm a tug, keeping him back.

"Excuse me, an explanation, please?" Ron demanded in an ineffectual whisper. "When you left your car at that house I thought you said it was a—"

"Client," Percy confirmed. "A client. She is. I need her to sign something and she's being difficult."

"Oh, well, color me fuckin' shocked about that," grumbled Ron, but gratifyingly, he didn't push the issue. "Mom's going to completely lose her mind."

Secretly, Percy was counting on it. He hadn't noticed how little choice he'd had in the matter of his life until after Pansy Parkinson had walked into it. A seismic shock to Molly Weasley's system felt like exactly the thing he needed, or possibly just wanted. Maybe that was a little unnecessarily vengeful, which Pansy unquestionably was, and which Percy had never been.

Then again, maybe it wasn't worth continuing to be anything that Percy had ever been. Not if whatever came next would be better.

Everyone had folded. A pile of quarters sat in the middle of the table for the taking.

"So? What do you have?" grumbled one of the twins Pansy vaguely remembered from high school. Unsurprisingly, their paths hadn't crossed much. She doubted they would cross again after he (they) had taken such catastrophic losses tonight.

"I don't have shit," said Pansy, laying down her handful of worthless cards and picking up her can of White Claw for emphasis. "Suck it."

There was a groan around the table as Pansy collected her prize, having successfully bluffed her way into the entire table's contents.

"You're banned," said Ron immediately, who seemed to suck slightly less than he had in high school. Whether that had to do with Pansy being famous now or him having forgotten most of what they'd been through after a decade of time away was irrelevant. "You can't come back here. We're putting your picture on the wall at the precinct. You're a thief."

"Thank you," said Pansy coolly, glancing at Percy. He was sitting beside her without much comment, a faintly amused expression on his face. He was one of the first to fold, purely out of disinterest. Unlike the others, he had no stake in the game.

He hadn't been very good at Pictionary. He was a disaster at the celebrity game. The only game he was good at, allegedly, was Trivial Pursuit—which is why, according to his siblings, they now refused to play it. He had also been too good at Scrabble, they said, which was why they had thrown it out ages ago.

They mocked his scribbled drawings and his inefficient charades and in response he hardly batted an eye. They shouted over him frequently. His mother fussed over his brothers—his sister, thankfully, wasn't there—and seemed to keep forgetting where he was, tripping over him like the errant corner of a bed frame. She had fawned over Pansy, of course, going so far as to blindly ignore the Death Eater logo on her father's cut, and Pansy saw the copies of *People* and *US*
*Weekly* that meant Molly Weasley had some form of celebphilia, which probably explained why Percy had known what had or hadn't been mentioned in Pansy's Vogue interview. There were pictures of the Weasley children all over the house, dominated by the oldest and the youngest. Wedding photos, baby pictures, vacation photos, all filled to the brim with freckles and red hair. Sentimental tchotchkes.

The only picture of Percy that Pansy could find was the one from his law school graduation. Percy was only half-smiling, caught off guard, while Arthur smiled broadly at the camera, beaming.

She didn't know why she was still there, truthfully. She'd already texted her assistant to book her a flight back to Los Angeles tomorrow afternoon and it was arranged, handled, done. This, game night or whatever, was a waste of time—particularly if it wasn't going to end with her getting her contract signed—but every time she thought about leaving, she knew that Percy wouldn't stop her, and it hurt a little. Stung.

Right about now, though, she finally realized something.

"You really do hate this," she murmured, and he looked up.

"Hm?"

He probably wasn't used to people observing him in this atmosphere, much less noticing him. She sighed, rising to her feet. "Alright gang, I gotta go," she announced, as the others offered muted groans of not particularly caring whether she stayed or went. "Percy, you needed me to look over something, right?"

He blinked up at her, but thankfully wasn't a complete idiot. "Yes. Right."

"Okay, great. Sorry to steal him away," she offered facetiously, half-dragging him out of his chair by his collar, "just want to get this taken care of—"

"Your winnings," said Padma, Ron's whatever-she-was, and Pansy glanced over her shoulder at the pile of quarters, fighting the urge to laugh. She'd made that much off of album sales in the last five minutes, probably.

"Keep it," she said. "I've got everything I need."

She turned and walked out, Percy following in her wake.

"You're in a hurry," he observed neutrally.

"Yeah, well, you looked miserable," she muttered, picking up her helmet from the entry table and pulling open the door. "You coming?"

He arched a brow, pausing. "Where?"

"Wherever the fuck isn't here," she said, waving a hand outside.

He shrugged.

"Alright," he said.

He only faltered one more time, turning in the direction of his car before stopping again, noticing that Pansy had walked to her bike. "Are we…?"

"Get on, Weasley." She handed her helmet to him, and he shook his head.
"You have it. You're worth more," he slid onto the seat behind her, securing his arms around her waist. "Just don't kill me," he said in her ear.

She put the helmet on, giving him a glance like *I don't know, we'll see how I feel.*

"Fair enough," he said.

She didn't take the corners so tightly this time. She kept to the speed limit. Percy's arms around her waist tightened at times, evidence of apprehension he obviously didn't want to confess aloud.

"Hold on," she shouted over her shoulder, not because she was going to do anything dangerous, but because she suspected he needed to hear that it was okay to do it if he wanted to. If he was scared, she wouldn't judge him.

He circled his arms around her ribs and curved his entire chest around her back, snugly.

She wasn't totally aware where she was going until after she pulled into the Leaky Cauldron.

"No offense," she said over her shoulder, "but your mom's food isn't exactly edible."

"None taken," he said, dismounting first and holding out a hand for her.

It was a quiet night, even by Diagon standards. She slid into a booth on the left and he lowered himself into the opposite side. The menu hadn't changed.

"Umm, Greek salad, please? And a glass of wine. Any white will be fine."

She glanced up at Percy, who nodded. "I'll have a glass of whatever she's having, thanks."

The waitress, whom Pansy distantly remembered from high school but dismissed after a second's consideration, turned away, and Pansy directed her attention back to Percy.

"Got the NDA with you?"

"Yes." He reached for his bag and her hand shot out, pausing him.

"Look, it's fine," she said. "Just… don't tell anyone what I told you, okay?"

He looked up, locking eyes with her, and nodded.

"Okay," he said.

Their glasses of wine arrived. Nothing special.

"So listen," Percy said eventually, after they had each taken sips. "About your father—"

"Just tell me what to sign and I'll sign it," Pansy said, suddenly resigned. "I've got McLaggen putting the house on the market. Anything that comes from that can be used to settle his debts, and I can handle most of that remotely."

"Ah, excellent. Very practical." Percy dug the file out of his bag, sliding it across the table to her.

"Ready?"

She glanced at it.

"You get it," she said uncertainly, "right? Why I couldn't…"
She trailed off.

"Yes," he said. "Finality can be excruciating."

She wondered what made him sound so assured of that.

He opened the file and slid a pen towards her. "Do you want to discuss anything?"

"Honestly, you've made it clear plenty of times. I read all your emails, I just—"

She stopped.

He folded his hands in his lap.

"If there's anything I can do to help," he said. He left the remainder of the sentence to linger between them, and she shook her head.

"No, I'll just… get it over with."

She plucked the pen from the table where he'd placed it, signing everywhere he'd indicated. He had been meticulous about it, and each time she found a new place to sign, he paused her, explaining what the form was. He had broken down her father's financials, the taxes and bills to be paid, everything that needed to be taken care of. He had taken care of her, generally, and it wasn't like she wasn't accustomed to being taken care of—she was a commodity, after all, with someone hired to handle every song she wrote and every outfit she wore—but there was something different about the way he did it. The way he listened when she spoke. His exorbitant patience.

She signed the final papers and listened to his final explanations and sat back numbly, realizing it was over. That her father was dead and buried and she had no reason to come back here now; no house she'd grown up in to hide when L.A. got too overwhelming. The weight was lifted, but freedom was its own strange sensation. A discomfiting tingling in her veins.

Her salad arrived.

"Wow," she said, pushing the papers back to him. So it had only taken five minutes, maybe ten at most. "That was some brutal procrastination on my part."

"Yes," he agreed, sliding the file back into his bag. "I'll get you copies of these in the morning."

"You can just shoot them over to my assistant," she said, before wincing. "I mean, not that… I just, you know, he handles all the logistics and paperwork and—"

"I understand."

Percy looked away, raising his glass to his lips and contemplating something out the window.

"What will you do next?" he asked her.

"Well, I'm going home tomorrow." She cleared her throat, waiting to see if he would react. He didn't. "Evidently," she continued, "I can't hire the Death Eaters as contract killers anymore, so I guess I'll just watch the Bagman trial from afar like everyone else."

"You're friends with one of the victims, aren't you?" he said. She'd been joking, but he wasn't. "The reason you were removed the jury?"

"Yes." She sipped her wine.
"I'm happy to offer legal counsel," said Percy. "I assume anyone involved has their own team of lawyers, but if you or anyone you know is ever in a bind—"

"Do you like it?" She looked up at him.

He turned to look at her. "Like what?"

"This. Your job."

"It has advantages and disadvantages, like any profession," he said.

"Oh wow, you hate it," she observed drily, plucking an olive with her fork.

"The work, no. The job, sometimes." He absently stroked the stem of his glass with the pad of a finger. "I confess to having bigger dreams. Or to having had them, at one point."

Finality, she realized in retrospect. So he had resigned himself to this.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she said again, and he nodded. "What happened today in your office…" She trailed off, clearing her throat. "It could happen again, if you wanted. One more time."

"Are you propositioning me? I don't have a lawyer present." His smile quirked when he raised his glass to his lips, and she sighed.

"Look, I'm just saying we can fuck if you want," she said. "No strings. No contracts. No talk of dead fathers or shitty Hollywood producers. We can just have a night together and walk away."

"Tempting," he said.

He didn't elaborate, and she wondered if maybe she had insulted him. She pushed the salad around on her plate, suddenly no longer hungry.

"I hope you get it," she said, abandoning the effort and turning her attention to her wine instead. "That I wouldn't stay here. Even if..." Another pause. "Even if I had a reason. There's nothing in the world that could keep me here."

He fixed her with a purposeful glance. "No. Nor should there be."

"I built this life. I wanted a few days away and I got them, but I love what I built. And not just because I built it. I really do love it. Even the bad stuff."

He nodded. "As you should."

"This place is where I came from. It's not who I am. This," she added, with a lingering glance at her father's leather jacket. "It's not what I am."

She expected another nod, a brittle of course not. He was not very reactionary, and she could see why. His siblings must have poked and prodded for reactions all his life and he had learned to give them nothing.

But instead he rose to his feet, removing a few crisp bills from his wallet and tossing them on the table.

"Let's go," he said.

"What?" She stared at him, bemused. "But—"
"If you're hungry again later I'll cook for you. Let's go."

"Weasley, I'm—"

He palmed her helmet from where it sat in the booth, offering it to her, and then held out his hand expectantly for hers.

"Come on."

She had the sudden, gripping terror that she would follow him anywhere and hoped to god he didn't ask that from her, because she wasn't totally sure she could prevent herself from saying yes.

"Yeah, alright," she said, shoving aside the salad and snatching the helmet from him. "Give me that," she said, "I'm driving."

They didn't make it very far beyond her front door. Almost immediately he was pressing her against the wall and stripping her of her father's jacket simultaneously, pushing and pulling all at once. She tugged at his practical navy chinos, stroking her palm over his cock, and dug her thumbs into the bones of his hips. He tossed her aloft and carried her into the near-empty living room, setting her down at the edge of the couch.

She slid her hands under his sweater and he obliged her, pulling it one-handed over his head and tossing it aside. She looked at him and fucking ached, still not fully recovered from her afternoon spent at his mercy.

"Is that honestly what you look like?" left her mouth in a groan.

"I exercise," he muttered in reply, leaning over to kiss her neck. She pushed him away to pull her shirt over her head and he shifted to sit on the couch, beckoning her towards him. He sat her on his lap, his thighs straddling hers, the same way they'd been on her father's motorcycle.

Hers, she corrected herself internally. It was hers now.

Percy slid her arms up, reaching them behind his head and running his palms reverently over her body, molding his hands to the shape of her. One of them slid under her jeans and the other curled under her jaw, cupping it with one hand to lift her chin while he kissed her. She sighed quietly, girlishly, and he stroked her below her jeans.

"What am I allowed to say?" he asked in her ear.

She turned in his arms, straddling him on the couch.

"Say you want me," she said, lowering herself onto his lap.

"I want you."

She rewarded him with a long kiss, greedy and taxing. The shorn edges of her hair slid around them, her hands possessive around his jaw.

"Say you like the way I taste."

"I do."

"Say it."
He turned her face with one hand, sliding his tongue along her throat. "I like the way you taste," he said quietly, and she shuddered, her hips shifting rhythmically above his.

She got reckless, carried away. "Say if things were different you'd want me for yourself," she whispered.

He tugged at the roots of her hair with one hand, gruffly, and shifted to flip her onto her back. He slid one of her legs over his hip, positioning himself between her thighs.

"I want you for myself," he said.

She froze, staring at him, and he stared back.

"That's not what I told you to say."

"It's not what you wanted."

"Don't tell me what I want," she snapped. She wanted to push him away but couldn't quite manage it, instead resting one hand on his sternum.

He shook his head.

"You said if things were different," he said. "But they don't have to be different for that to be true."

"I told you, I'm not staying—"

"I'm not asking you to stay."

She was breathing hard, her hands still braced on his chest. "Then what are you saying?"

"I'm saying I've seen what my life looks like without you in it and there's not a lot there."

She held her breath, waiting.

"And listen, this isn't me saying you've got to be saddled with me if that's not what you want. If you want one night and that's it, then that's what you're getting. I've got no problem with that. But if even a piece of you wants more," he said, and then stopped.

He rested his forehead against hers, raggedly exhaling.

She bit her lip, closing her eyes. Silence pulsed between them, delicate.

"Fuck, I want you," he growled, suddenly coming to life again in her arms. "Pansy, just tell me—"

"Fuck me. Please."

It was a manic shuffle of clothes, limbs, the parting of her legs and the feeling of him filling her, and the sound of his groan in her ear, repression finally unleashed. The ache she had for him was almost vestigial, atavistic, like something she'd been missing for generations, for hundreds of thousands of years. Just sex, she told herself, just great fucking sex, but she clung to him and he made a legless, mindless mess of her, the two of them actively desecrating the living room she'd grown up in. She'd fucked boys in this house only to dismiss the memory of them like ghosts, fading to non-existence by comparison. Suddenly she wanted him in her bed in L.A., on holiday in Bali. She wanted to fuck him with his hand over her mouth while hiking somewhere in Muir Woods or in the bathroom of a club after performing. She wanted to fuck him on her birthday, on his birthday, whenever the hell that was. She wanted to take a call with her agent or her manager.
while slowly lowering herself onto his cock, both of them trying not to breathe too heavily into the phone.

*If even a piece of you wants more—*

"I want you," she said, her whole body wrung out and tense, muscles tight and sweat glistening on the skin between them. "I want you, I want you, I—"

Then, with a rupture of anguish, Pansy shattered and soared.

In the morning he woke alone in her twin bed, still naked. He sat up, glancing around slowly, and realized he had never asked what time her flight was. The clock beside the bed read 6:45 a.m., but she'd said she was a morning person. Who knew what that even meant in Los Angeles terms.

He slid his legs out from the sheets, resting both feet on the floor and preparing to rise when she suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Coffee?"

The amount of relief he felt at the sight of her was devastating. It meant the next time she was gone—really and truly gone—it would hurt twice over. The loss would worsen tenfold before it ever started to fade.

"Sure." He slid over on the bed and she perched beside him atop the covers, handing him a cup. She was wearing a pair of underwear, a bralette. He remembered the feel of her under his tongue and thought he would become a morning person if it meant he could make use of this hour, or however many hours remained between now and her flight.

"Come with me," she said, coffee untouched.

He hoped he'd imagined it. Not that he'd ever had much of an imagination, but the thing in his chest had to be hope if it was real, and he thought he'd safely gotten rid of that a long time ago.

"You don't have to like, move there," she said quickly. "But... you know. Come for a trip or something. Stay the weekend, and if you want to keep staying, then stay. We could keep things quiet for a bit, see if it works for us. Honestly, if I didn't have to go back today I wouldn't, but I've got a meeting with a really talented songwriter tomorrow and I—"

"A weekend sounds good." He sipped his coffee, letting its warmth radiate comfortably through his palm. "Want me to give you a few days? You can have your meeting without any distractions. I can always fly out to meet you next Friday."

She blinked, turning to look at him. "Really?"

Maybe she hadn't believed him when he said he wanted her. It wasn't that long a flight to try and tell her again.

"I haven't taken a vacation in about fifteen years," he said. "Plus I hear the tacos are good."

"They are," she said, turning to him with awe.

He wasn't sure what to say at that point, but then she suddenly removed the coffee from his hand and set it aside. She threw herself into him with such force that they were immediately tangled up again, wrapped up in each other's limbs like they'd been all night.
"I've got a feeling I want to see what you do next," Percy murmured in her ear, toying with the tips of her dark hair, and her resulting exhalation, the release of a lifetime's worth of apprehension, escaped into his shoulder. "Plus, given your sense of vengeance, I suspect it's inevitable that you'll need a lawyer at some point."

"Shut up." She kissed him brutally, ruthlessly. "It's in my blood."

He knew it was. He knew her type. She, like the father who raised her, was chaos unrelenting. She would need a ride or die, a never-blink kind of man. Someone unafraid and lawless.

Somehow he suspected he'd always been that brave without being given much of a chance to prove it. If this was his fate, he welcomed it.

"Guess I'll see you soon, then," he murmured to her cheek.

She rolled over him, securing him between her thighs like the motor of her Harley.

"My flight doesn't leave until three," she said, sliding pointedly out of her bralette.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for joining me here on my birthday! If you'd like to continue my personal celebration, THE ATLAS SIX will be available on my website and tumblr as of January 31. Thank you very much for reading, and to those of you who voted for the nottpott over this pairing, I think it likely you will see that quite soon. Perhaps Valentine's Day?
Intimacy Issues

Pairing: Dramione (Draco Malfoy x Hermione Granger)

Universe: post-war, EWE

Rating: M for sexual language

Summary: A little dramione fluff for Valentine's Day.

For whatever it was worth—and it was worth quite a lot, in his mind—this had not been his idea. First it had been something Theo said about needing to improve his communication and also something about his general intemperance. War's over, for fuck's sake Malfoy get your shit together, that sort of thing. "Your intimacy problems are a real drain on available resources," etc. etc., and from there, a languid half-intoxicated laugh as Blaise had suggested, "There are people you can call for that, you know."

Blaise had practically dialed the phone for Draco himself. Or, at least, that was how Draco would choose to recall the events from here forward.

His fingers shook only slightly as he placed the call, settling himself on the center of his bed. He hadn't been entirely sure how to go about any of this, but had decided to leave his clothes on. That way, if he were caught somehow—By whom? Unclear. Aurors?—he'd be able to protest that it was all a big misunderstanding. There was less guilt involved with his clothes on, and anyway, if it was terrible and he hung up the phone right away while still fully dressed, then it would be like it never happened.

He fidgeted for a moment, then drank the full glass of Ogden's beside the bed before pouring himself another. He glanced down at his trousers, sighing internally.

Right then. Off they went.

He pinned the phone between his right shoulder and right ear, plucking the whisky glass up from the nightstand with his left hand. He'd have to set one of these things down at some point, he realized with a frown, and drank another half of the glass's contents. It had been some time since he'd been in any position remotely close to this one, having been touched by a grand total of nobody, himself included. He doubted it would last particularly long, if it were to go anywhere at all.

One ring, two rings—

"Lady Revel's House of Fortune, Athena speaking," said a female voice. "What shall I call you, fair stranger?"

Draco swallowed tightly, clearing his throat. "Oh. Am I supposed to, uh…?"

"Choose a name? Yes, fair sir, it's your choice. It will be more pleasurable for you to have one, and
more convenient for me as well."

"Right. Okay. Ah." He cleared his throat, fumbling aloud, "Did you say you're Athena?"

"Yes, I'm Athena."

"Right, okay, then I'll be..." He racked his brain for whatever he could draw from his shallow well of mythology. "Apollo."

"Apollo." Her voice was silken and rich and faintly familiar. "Excellent. And what might you be looking for this evening, Apollo?"

"I was, um. I was hoping for... Well—"

He broke off, hesitant and thoroughly horrified with himself, and the female voice on the other end gave a low chuckle of amusement.

"Am I to understand that you would like me to make you come, Apollo?"

He winced, left hand clutching tighter around his glass. "Well—"

"Apollo, life allows for two essential choices. Pleasure or pain. Joy or sorrow, having or wanting. You've already shown up here, haven't you? So do what pleases you," she advised him, and again, Draco had the oddest feeling she reminded him of something, like a glimmer from his past. "I'm here to please you, Apollo," she murmured. "All you have to do is say yes."

"I... hang on." He inhaled, exhaled, and drained the remainder of his glass, setting it down on the nightstand. "Alright," he said. "Yes."

"Excellent. Do you have any particular fantasies, Apollo?"

"Oh, ah. Well." He closed his eyes, right hand foisting open his zipper. "I... is there something you, um. That most people—?"

"Every fantasy is unique. But if you need a place to start, I'm happy to make some suggestions. Some people prefer to imagine a dark corner somewhere, a beautiful stranger. Some people prefer an island setting, forbidden lust..." A pause. "Perhaps you might like to imagine we're in the restricted section of a library after hours," she suggested. "You've come to meet me, but nobody can know."

"Yes." He nearly sighed with relief, shifting lower on the bed and folding a hand experimentally around his half-hard cock. "Yes, that."

"The lights are burning low and the castle is quiet—you jump at every sound. You keep glancing over your shoulder, worried we'll get caught. Your friends won't approve—no one will. But there's something between us, something burning, and neither of us can stand it any longer. You want to see for yourself the way my nipples become little pearls of anticipation when you speak to me. You want to slide your hand under my skirt to see how wet I am after your eyes have met mine across the room."

Draco closed his eyes, relaxing into a slow stroking pattern. "Yes," he exhaled, and the voice on the other end made a sound of acquiescence.

"Now that we're here alone together, I can finally tell you all the secret thoughts I've had. The way I want to run my tongue along your thick, hard cock. How badly I want to sit across your thighs,
with your hands so tight around my waist they bruise me. Do you want me to beg for you?"

"Oh, um. Sorry, but I want, er… gentler?" Draco said, wincing a little with his eyes closed. "It's just —I'm not—"

"Ah, I see, okay." Athena's voice softened. "We're both nervous," she said, her voice nearly tender this time. "Your hands shake when you reach for me, but you can see on my face how badly we both want this. You draw my legs apart and I gasp, so loudly you think someone will hear me. So you place a hand across my lips and I kiss your palm, which is your first indication that I want this as badly as you do."

Draco made a low sound that he would have been heartily embarrassed by under any other circumstances, his grip tightening around his cock.

"Apollo, I didn't think you'd come." Her voice sounded young now, girlish, as if she were filling the role she'd described. "I've been waiting for hours, just sitting here thinking of you."

"What were you thinking about?" Draco asked raggedly.

"Being in your arms," she whispered. "Your hands running along my body. Your lips on my neck. I've been thinking about meeting you here alone for such a long time."

"How long?" Suddenly he wished he'd removed his trousers. The excess fabric was difficult to wrangle as his grip on himself grew more urgent.

"For weeks. Months. Every night before I go to bed, I lie in the moonlight and think of your tongue stroking over my breasts. I know it's wrong, Apollo, but I can't help it. When you're near me I can't breathe, waiting to see if you'll come closer. Even your smell drives me wild."

He groaned a little. "And now that we're alone?"

"Tell me what you want, Apollo."

"I—" He frowned. "Well, I'm—"

She seemed to take his hesitation for what it was—either confusion or lack of imagination, or a little of both—and helpfully, she decided for him. "Should I take off my skirt? My blouse?"

"Yes. Wait—no." He shook his head. "Um, take off your knickers. Leave the skirt on."

"I slip my knickers off from under my skirt and tuck them into your trouser pocket. For later."

Draco shuddered. An excellent detail. "Yes."

"Do you want to touch me?"

This he could manage without hesitating. "Yes."

"You're parting my legs now, stroking your fingers up my thighs, and I'm pulling your head to my breasts. You slide your tongue slowly around my nipple and I gasp, my knees buckling a little. You pressing me against the bookcase is the only thing keeping me upright—I can hardly breathe for having you so close to me."

"Mm," said Draco, quickening his pace again. "Now touch me. Please," he added hastily.

"No need to beg." He could hear her smiling, and briefly, a familiar image passed through his head.
of autumn leaves, chocolates and sweets, Hogsmeade visits. "I'm fumbling with your trousers, anxious and apprehensive but unable to stop myself. I want you so badly my fingers shake, and then I slide my palm below the band of your pants."

He frowned a little, suffering that faint brush of familiarity again. A niggling sensation, just out of reach.

"You and I both falter, realizing we're holding our breaths. I curl my hand around your cock and oh god, you're so hard." She gasped a little, theatrical and feminine, and Draco's breath grew rapidly unsteady, the pulse in his mind matching the throb of his erection.

"Your cock is so thick and long, Apollo, I want you inside me, but I can't have you like this. Is this wrong?"

"No, it's not wrong," he mumbled, only half-aware he was speaking.

"You push my legs apart and feel me, how wet I am for you. You press against me and I'm keening for you, pleading without words." Almost there, he thought. Things were mounting with embarrassing quickness. "I'm nervous and desperate. I want to be able to say no but I can't, I'll die if I can't have you. I'm panting in your arms—oh god, yes." He moaned into the phone, nearly bursting. "Your hands are driving me mad but still, we could get expelled for this—"

"Granger?" he blurted without thinking, before suddenly spilling into his own palm, choking.

There was silence on the other end.

"That'll be ten galleons," said Hermione Granger.

Needless to say, this had not been Hermione's first choice of post-war employment. Unfortunately, being a war hero was not as lucrative a position as it seemed, and politics in the wake of the wizarding war was a bit of a mess. The Ministry's starting pay wasn't enough to live on in London, which certainly gave her a new respect for Arthur Weasley's ability to keep his family fed—as far as Hermione could tell, wages had seen no increase since the first Voldemort war, much less the second. She no longer had any real assets, muggle or magical, having used most of what she'd saved on hers and Harry's little camping trip hunting horcruxes, and she needed something that could pay for her pricy Diagon flat—the first thing she'd found after moving out of Grimmauld Place. That, of course, was a thing also she hadn't been able to afford to do, necessarily, but much to her financial chagrin, breaking up with Ron had sort of necessitated it.

She'd been told a few times throughout her schooling that she had a nice voice. When she found an ad in the Daily Prophet calling for a part-time voiceover artist, she thought it seemed like something she could reasonably fit into her daily work schedule. When she discovered the hours were primarily used at night, she was relieved. When she discovered the pay, she was delighted. As for the work…

Well. It hadn't come naturally, but she was a quick study. She had always been highly clever for her age. One of her primary talents—and the reason she was one of Lady Revel's top earners—was that Hermione had a knack for discovering what each of her callers really wanted, and very rarely was it sex. More often it was some obscure loneliness or intimacy issues, or they just wanted a proper hug from their dads. Whatever it was that made men want to call into sex hotlines and pay money for someone to talk to, it served Hermione fantastically well, and though she never mentioned to anyone what it was she did every night while her colleagues and friends all went out for a pint, she didn't exactly regret doing it.
At least, not until, "Granger?"

She was silent for a moment, of course, because she hadn't recognized his voice until he said her name, but now, obviously, she did. How deeply regrettable.

"That'll be ten galleons," she managed eventually. "There's an enchantment enacted at the beginning of the call, so the deposit will be automatic. Thank you for your time this evening, and we at Lady Revel's House of Fortune wish you pleasant dreams."

"Wait, Granger, hang on—"

She hung up the phone, frowning to herself.

Well. That was interesting.

She supposed it made sense on second thought, or perhaps third. Draco Malfoy was still unfairly wealthy following the outcome of the war and furthermore, he was almost certainly the type to pay for sex. Phone sex was an odd choice. Though, before she had known who he was, she had read him (correctly, given his reaction) as the type of man whose fantasies were less about any sexual desire than they were about desire itself—being wanted rather than being touched.

She shook herself of the oddity, then returned her attention to the phone. There would be other callers tonight, and gradually she would forget about him.

Maybe.

Probably.

Surely if she tried hard enough, then yes.

The phone rang once, then twice, and she picked it up, raising it to her ear. "Lady Revel's House of Fortune, Athena speaking," Hermione said. "What shall I call you, fair stranger?"

He waited two nights before calling again.

"Lady Revel's House of Fortune, Delilah speaking," said a different voice, this one raspy and secretive. "What shall I call you, fair stranger?"

"Actually, um. Is Athena there?" he asked, toying with the ice in his glass before setting it down on the nightstand. He sat at the edge of his bed this time, jittery and confused as to what exactly he was doing. Even more confused than he had been the first time.

"Yes she is, fair sir. One moment."

There was a pause as a bit of music played, transferring from one line to another. Draco chewed the skin around his thumbnail for a moment before reaching for his glass, attempting to drain it. The ice took a dive towards his nose, scotch spilling out from the sides of his lips as he choked on the excess liquid.

"Lady Revel's House of Fortune, Athena speaking," said Hermione Granger's voice, followed by, "Sorry, are you alright?"

"Yes, yes I'm here, just—" Draco turned away from the phone receiver, coughing until his eyes watered, and then returned to the phone. "Wrong pipe," he managed, before remembering this wasn't about his own idiocy, but hers. "And what exactly are you doing, Granger?"
There was a pause.

"What shall I call you, fair stranger?"

"Are you saying you don't know who I am?" demanded Draco, before realizing that maybe she didn't. Surely if she had, she wouldn't have continued through the fantasy either.

"What shall I call you?" she asked again, militantly scripted.

"Right, sorry, um. It's Apollo," he said, not wanting to make matters worse. For whatever reason, he'd been positively dying of curiosity since he spoke to her two nights ago, and he was now fairly certain she wouldn't speak to him at all if he used his real name.

There was another beat of silence.

"Apollo," she echoed. "What might you be looking for this evening?"

"An answer, mostly," he said. "I thought that was clear."

"If you'd like an orgasm, Apollo, I'm happy to arrange it. Otherwise, thank you for your time this ev-" 

"No, no, wait," he said hastily, glancing down at the whisky he'd spilled on his shirt before forcing himself to say, "I'd like to come, please."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I…” He trailed off. "Yes."

"It would be my pleasure, Apollo." Whether she recognized him or not, her voice hadn't lost its buttery quality. "How would you like your ecstasy this evening?"

"Look, I'm not judging you, obviously," said Draco. "It's just a bit odd, isn't it?"

"Do you have an affinity for touch?"

"I—doesn't everyone? But look, Granger—"

"Athena," she corrected, "and I'm currently lying on a massage table, slathered in oil."

Draco froze, his hand tightening briefly around his glass. "What?"

"You're running your hands along my spine and watching the shape of my ribs expanding. You can't be sure, but you think I've keened a little at the presence of your fingers. You run your hands over my arse and arrive at my thighs, finding yourself curious what would happen if you stroked your finger along the lips of my pussy."

Draco, holding his breath, exhaled. "You don't have t-"

"You finally gather the courage and I inhale sharply, surprised, but I don't move. Feeling emboldened, you slide a finger inside me and I moan, shockingly eager. This leads you to realize you're so hard you're throbbing."

Draco glanced down at his cock, which was indeed much harder than he'd anticipated.

"You come around the table to stand beside my head and I gaze up at you, questioning. Slowly, and
without a word, you slide down the zipper of your trousers, and without speaking I sit upright, teasing the tips of my fingers along the edge of your shaft."

Fuck, Draco thought. Then, grudgingly, he unzipped his trousers, diving one hand into his pants.

"Oh god," Hermione breathed, "you're so hard, so smooth. I want you in my mouth."

Draco swore quietly under his breath. "Take me in your mouth, then."

"I want to, Apollo, but first I run my tongue below your shaft, curling around the tip." She paused as Draco exhaled raggedly. "I'm stroking you with my tongue repeatedly, until you're not sure you can continue to stand. After a few minutes of this, when you're about to groan with frustration, I take all of you into my mouth, sucking you hard from base to tip."

He wanted very badly not to picture her face specifically while imagining this, but it was inevitable that he would. Her overlarge eyes, that massive cloud of hair. Looking up at him with her lips on his cock.

"You're so hard," Hermione breathed over the phone.

It was all he could do not to come on the spot.

She wasn't especially proud of the fact that she'd brought Draco Malfoy to orgasm over the phone for the second time, but then again, he clearly knew it was her. He'd let her do it anyway, so maybe his shame was technically greater.

It wasn't even that he'd simply let her do it. He'd paid her to do it, twice now, and 'fool me twice' was one thing, but fool me three times—

"It's Apollo," he said after the third ring. "Don't hang up."

She considered doing it anyway.

Then, thinking better of it, she said, "I've raised my rates."

"Have you?"

"It'll be twenty galleons for your pleasure tonight, Apollo."

"And if I just want to talk to you?"

"Thank you for calling Lady Revel's House of Fortune," she said conclusively, forcing a spirited tone to her voice. "Have a delicious evening—"

"Fine, fine. Okay." He exhaled, and she heard the rustle of clothing, or bedsheets. "But this time I want to talk."

"You're paying twenty galleons just to talk to me?"

"No, I mean—" He stopped. "You talk, but I want to talk, too. I want to be part of it."

"Roleplay?"

"Uh, sure." He cleared his throat. "I don't actually know any of the, um. You know—"
"Kinks?"

"I mean… Salazar's balls," he muttered to himself, "yeah, fine. Sure." There was a little tinkle of ice in a glass, followed by, "I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

"I'm here to guide you," she told him carefully.

"Yeah, right, I get that, but seriously, I don't know," he said. "I just… don't."

She waited a moment before answering.

"It's my job to know for you," she assured him. "You are allowed to take pleasure in it, if that's what you want."

"I don't know what I want. That's why I'm here." Another sound of ice in a glass, followed by a swallow. "I'm not good at any of this, honestly, but I want to try."

"Okay. Well," Hermione said, "why don't you pick a scenario, then?"

"Oh. Um." He sounded agitated. "A picnic."

"A picnic?" Part of her wanted to laugh. "So we're outside," she said. "The sun is… high?"

"Yes, that sounds good."

"The sun is high," she confirmed. "It's hot. Sweltering. You watch me take a bite of a strawberry, the juices spilling over my lips."

"There's the smell of fresh grass," he suddenly cut in, and she blinked, unprepared for his contribution. Granted, he'd said he wanted to, but still. She hadn't entirely believed him. "Your eyes and mine catch for a little too long. Just a beat."

"The third time they do this, you can see the blush in my cheeks," she said. "The strap of my dress falls from my shoulder and I don't bother to fix it."

"The sweat on your skin is intoxicating," he said. "I fantasize about running my tongue along the side of your neck and before I can stop myself, I do it."

"I turn my head," Hermione said, hoping he wouldn't hear the way her skin had pebbled just slightly, "and you catch my lips in a breathless kiss. Both of us are taken by surprise and yet we're completely expectant, as if some part of us has always known this would happen."

"I part your lips with my tongue and you sigh into my mouth." Another muffled sound, as if he were lying back on his bed. "I peel back the bodice of your dress and cup your breast in my hand, stroking it."

"I gasp and pull you closer, pressing myself against you. Your hands are feverish on my bodice, fumbling with my skirt—"

"I slide my hand along your thigh—"

"—I groan and dig my hands into your hair—"

"—your knickers are soaked with desire and sweat," he said. "I tug at your hips, laying you down across the blanket, desperate to put my mouth on you—"
"When your tongue slides across the slit of my dripping cunt, I whisper your name," she said, and he stopped.

"Say it," he said, and she flinched. They had just been getting into the flow of things, and just when she'd stopped thinking...

"Apollo," she said, channeling the sound into a breathy moan.

"No. Say my real name. I know you know it," he said in a lower voice, almost pleading. "Say it."

Part of her knew that admitting it out loud would mean the end.

"You start slowly at first," she said instead, ignoring him. "Tentative. But I'm desperate for you, canting my hips. I can't bear another moment without you inside me."

He said nothing.

"I try to pull at your trousers, oblivious to whether we might get caught, but you stay out of reach. You slide a finger into me with your mouth sucking me, licking, watching my legs tremble around your head. Just when I'm crying out for you—"

"I stop," he said, and Hermione blinked. "I sit up, look you in the eye, and say I'm going to watch your face while you come, and then I keep stroking you with my fingers. I run my thumb along your clitoris, diving inside you, touching that spot that makes your back arch. You want to look away but I won't let you. I keep my eyes on yours."

She grimaced, unsure what to do next. "You make me come—"

"Twice," he corrected. "I make you come twice before I let you touch me."

"I take off your shirt—"

"—and I let you run your hands over my chest. Slowly."

Hermione swallowed, her throat suddenly quite dry. "Your skin is soft and smooth," she said. "The muscle underneath it is hard and firm, and your cock—"

"Is throbbing for you," he said. "Touch it."

She squirmed a little, glancing around.

"Oh," she exhaled into the phone.

He was quiet for a moment.

"I can't tell if it's more fucked up or less that we're doing this with each other," he said. "In some ways it's fitting. In other ways it's totally perverted."

Her mood soured. "Well, if that's all—"

"I just mean that it's not as if I haven't had these fantasies before," he said hastily. "And it's a bit strange to be doing this now, that's all."

"You're the one who called."

"Yes, I know."
"If you want to get your twenty galleons' worth, I should probably continue," she added.

"I already came," he said. "Before I called."

She blinked.

"Sorry, I clearly spoiled the mood," he said. "Is it alright if I call again tomorrow?"

She considered it. "It'll be another twenty."

"That's fine."

"Alright," she said. "Then thank you for your time this evening, Apollo, and we at Lady Revel's House of Fortune wish you pleasant dreams."

She hung up the phone and excused herself, then walked directly to the toilets. She shut the door behind her and slid one hand into her knickers, relieving herself of her sudden, inexhaustible ache.

Theo and Blaise had mild curiosities as to what he was up to every night recently, though not enough to really press the issue. Which was good, as Draco wasn't sure what he would have told them anyway. He was reserving each evening to get off on the phone with a girl he hadn't seen in close to three years, not to mention one he hated. Or had hated, once.

There was no logical explanation for why he continued calling. He supposed the only thing he could say was that it was a relief, somehow, to hear her voice. It bore some semblance of a foregone normality, even if the only topic they could conceivably discuss was sex.

"I have these nightmares," he said. "I wake up and I'm back in the past, like the end of the war was just a dream I had and reality is the nightmare."

"Your cock tastes so good," she said in reply. He took it as encouragement.

"Do you ever feel how alone you are? Like, really feel it. To the point where you're surprised other people can't see it. It's like you're wearing this horrifically tasteless cloak or something and everyone else is politely pretending not to notice."

She was quiet for a moment before saying, "Would you like to hear how wet I am?"

He considered it. "Yes."

"I'm so wet you could see it. My knickers are soaked through."

He inhaled sharply. At this point he no longer bothered touching himself. He got off to the thought of making the call and then simply spoke to her with his eyes closed.

"I'd like to see them," he said softly.

"Where are we?" she prompted.

"Uh," he began, and cleared his throat. "Your office?"

"Alright. I'm sitting at my desk and you come closer."

"Yeah," he said. "That sounds good."
"I ask you to shut the door. Then I part my legs just slightly, just enough so you can see my knickers below the desk."

"I crawl under it to look closer," he said, eyes still closed.

"I let you," she said.

For a moment it felt very real—that the two of them were together in one room and he was actually on his knees for her, begging for her permission. His cock ached in his trousers, but he ignored it.

"You're beautiful," he said.

She said nothing.

"Your pussy, I mean," he said quickly. "Like velvet."

"Use your mouth," she suggested.

He smiled with his eyes closed.

"You taste so sweet," he murmured, and wondered if he could have ever said that to her face.

Or if she'd even let him try.

She was starting to wonder if she were in dire need of some sort of counseling, as this was clearly not a normal thing to do. It seemed the purpose of their calls was less and less for sex, and she was starting to feel morally obligated to put it to a stop.

Unfortunately, it was also very enjoyable. Even without considering her sudden increase in earnings, he was the best client she had ever had. He was highly inventive, which suited her, so long as he wasn't trying to push her boundaries.

"Can you do me a favor?" he said. "Ask me why I call you."

This was one such example of pushing, though it wasn't a clear violation. She doubted knowing the answer would improve her feelings on the matter, but she did as he suggested.

"Why do you call me?"

"Because I want to feel something," he said. "I think initially I wanted to feel anything, literally anything, but now I think it's only you. I specifically want whatever feeling you give me."

She cleared her throat, prepared to drag them back to the subject at hand. "You undo the ties of my bathrobe—"

"—and set you on the edge of the sink." A pause. "Tell me how you want me to fuck you."

"Apollo," Hermione warned carefully, "this isn't about me."

"Well, tonight I want it to be about you," he said, suddenly restless. "I want to get off on whatever it is you want."

This was troubling, right? Hogwarts had no courses on psychology, but she was fairly certain this was unhealthy, or maybe it had always been unhealthy, from the moment they recognized each
other's voices on the phone and failed to hang up.

"I want the opposite of what you want. To feel nothing," she said.

This time, he was quiet.

"I can fuck you like that," he offered eventually. "Until you forget everything. I can fuck you slow and deep until you can't think of anything else but how badly you want to come."

She shivered a little, glancing around again.

"I think I could lose myself inside you," he said.

She forced herself to think of something from one of her scripts. Something that was sexual but not intimate. He was always forcing her off-book, which was as frustrating as it was enjoyable. Like a new, unsolved puzzle each time.

"Your cock is so hard," she whispered.

"Only for you," he said. "Just for you."

Yeah, she thought, this was definitely very fucked up.

He had an evening ritual now. He got in the shower, got off to the thought of her voice, and then air-dried before lying on his bed fully naked. Typically he'd pour himself a glass of Ogden's—without ice, ever since the previous debacle—or occasionally some sherry. He'd drink it while he spoke to her, staring down at himself and imagining her with him. Beneath him. Astride him.

"Tonight you're fucking me with a view of the sea," she said. "You've faced me towards the window while you thrust into me from behind, harder and harder."

"Oh god, Granger, yes," he exhaled, curling his hands into his duvet. Something about her fantasies always made him feel the need to hold on tight.

Unfortunately he hadn't meant to say her name aloud, and he registered at her pause that her silence meant she hadn't enjoyed it.

"Athena," she reminded him tightly.

His eyes fluttered open.

"I know who you are," he said. "You know I'm not calling for some nameless fantasy."

She was quiet for several moments.

"Then what are you paying for?" she asked blandly.

He hung up, furious. He stalked around the room for a second before remembering he was starkly nude and somewhat cold.

Then, instantly remorseful, he called again.

"Lady Revel's House of F-"

"Athena," he said. "It's Draco."
He felt nearly positive he could hear her moment of hesitation over the phone.
"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry."
"For what?"
"For… I don't know. Everything." He fell onto the bed, cradling his head in his hands. This, he thought, was almost certainly a new low, which he hadn't even known he could conceivably reach after having been through so many of them. "It just… it felt safe. It didn't feel wrong."
"What didn't?"
"This. With you. I don't want to ruin it, I just want—" He exhaled deeply. "Sorry. I guess I'm just realizing that maybe this means nothing to you."
"This is my job," she told him.
"I know. I… I get that, I do. I guess I just thought—"
"It's my job," she said again.
"So you want me to stop calling you?"
"Stop calling Athena," she said flatly, and hung up the phone.

She was at work when one of the other assistants stepped in from the corridor. "Hey Granger, there's someone here for you."
"Is it those event forms for Kingsley?" she called back without looking up. "Because it's been nearly three days now, and if I don't get them soon—"
She broke off when she saw who her visitor actually was. Her mouth clamped shut of its own accord upon his entry.
"Not event forms," said Draco Malfoy, hands outspread and empty. "Sorry."
Hermione gestured him into the chair across from her desk, pointedly choosing not to make a scene. He seated himself carefully, glancing around.
"So," he said, observing their surroundings. "You don't actually have an office."
She glared at him. "I'm an assistant. None of us have offices." And keep your voice down, she thought brusquely, suddenly enraged at the thought of him actually thinking he could climb under her desk to go down on her in real life. At first it was difficult to tell whether it was because she doubted the ten or so other people working in this office would appreciate that very much, or because he was still thinking of her sexually.
Her, and not her incorporeal alter ego.
"Look, I won't keep you long," Draco said, folding his hands in his lap. "I wanted to call you, but I wasn't sure how to reach you."
"You could have sent an owl," she said irritably, "rather than accosting me at work."

Another assistant walked by her desk and she forced a smile, nodding to him.
"Well, clearly I'm not great at this," Draco replied, equally snappish, though thankfully he was speaking in a deliberately hushed tone. "It just seemed like maybe I needed to say some things to you in person."

"Such as?"

"Such as I'm sorry I'm such an arse," he muttered. "I'm sorry I'm so generally disgusting, both as a person and as a man. I will quite literally beg your pardon for everything I am, if you'll let me."

Her hand stiffened over a pile of paperwork. "And what would be the intended outcome if I did?" she asked, pretending to glance over a page of budget calculations.

"Look, I'm—" He glanced around again before dropping his voice even lower, leaning towards her. "Fine, you're right," he exhaled, "I clearly shouldn't have come here. I don't know what I'm doing, I'm just—"

He shot to his feet, suddenly agitated.

"Forget it," he said. "I won't bother you again."

She read the same paragraph ten times after he left.

He got the first owl while he was reading alone in bed, three days later.

What you're doing is really messed up. You know that, right? You called me for sex. There's an inherent problem with you knowing it was me the whole time. Power balance and all that. Also, just because you paid me to carry your emotional burdens doesn't mean any of it was real intimacy.

He considered it for several minutes before replying, I know it wasn't, and then, at the last second, added: but wasn't it?

The response arrived within twenty minutes.

It was entirely one-sided. You confessing things to me just makes me a receptacle for your thoughts, which is patently unfair. Women are more than just vessels.

He rolled his eyes, replying, This isn't really an issue of gender roles, is it? This is about you and me.

This time, ten minutes: There is no you and me.

He picked up a quill to reply, then thought better of it. Which was all well and good, really, because another owl arrived ten minutes later.

And another thing, she'd written. What on earth gave you the idea that you should come to my place of work?

Then, five minutes later, You absolutely do owe me an apology. You should beg for my forgiveness. You called me names, you mocked me for years, you belittled and upset me—and now you think you deserve even one moment of my time?

Then his phone rang.

"You had no right," she said when he answered. "No. Right."
"How did you get this number?"

"All the numbers that call in are tracked," she snapped, before continuing, "Why on earth would you choose to confide in me, anyway? Did I seem safe to you or something?"

"No, actually you seemed distinctly unsafe," he said. "Which I suppose is why I kept doing it."

"That makes no sense."

"Well, even I will admit it's a fallacy on my part," he sighed, leaning back against his pillows. "I thought if you hadn't hung up on me, then maybe there was still hope I wasn't total rubbish as a human being after all."

"I didn't hang up because you were paying me not to hang up."

"Yes, I grasp that, but you could have refused my calls," he pointed out. "You almost did more than once, but then you took them anyway."

"I needed the money," she said, voice clipped.

"Right," he said. "Well, either we can move past that or we can't. Up to you."

"It's unethical," she said vitriolically.

"Are there actually vocational ethics involved in phone sex?" he asked, doubtful.

She hung up on him and he sighed, setting the phone down on the receiver and closing his eyes.

Then, a moment later, it rang.

"Hello?"

"What happens if we move past it?" she said. "In your mind. Which is obviously very troubled."

"Oh. Um." He settled against his pillows again. "I guess we would try just… talking? Without an exchange of currency, I mean."

"Talking about what? About sex?"

"Well, I guess if you wanted to."

"Do you not want to?"

"No, I… I do," he said uncertainly. "But there are other things, too."

"Like?"

"I don't know. Feelings," he said lamely.

"I'm not a counselor."

"I know."

"And if you're not paying me, I'm not… I'm not that, either."

"I know."
"I'd just be me."

"Yes."

"And that's not weird to you?"

"Not any weirder than the alternatives, no."

"Why not?"

"I like talking to you," he said. "About anything."

"Fine, so you like talking to me," she said restlessly, "but will you like listening to me?"

He made himself more comfortable on his bed, adjusting his position.

"Try me," he said.

She told him about her cat. She told him about her parents. She told him about how hard it was to find a job in this economy and how ridiculous it was to still be considered a child even after everything she'd fixed that adults couldn't solve. She told him about how disappointing sex was in real life. She told him how she didn't mind talking about it anymore, how it was the same as talking about anything: potions, history of magic, blow jobs. Actually it was worse because it was boring, because cocks were all basically the same. Oh, your cock is so hard, blah blah. Nothing really got her going anymore except for the fantasies, so really it was more like erotic storytelling and there was a little bit of creativity in that, which was soothing. She told him that she hadn't been on a date ever, basically, since she and Ron hadn't "dated" so much as flirted badly for seven years and then fooled around for two more. The sex part was fine, but the romance was lacking. And it wasn't that she was some sort of woman who needed rose petals and grand declarations—she wasn't, and she wasn't afraid of being alone, either—she wasn't one of those girls who didn't know who she was and therefore needed a man in order to divine it—but she had at least loved herself enough to walk away when something didn't fit.

"What's that like?" he asked.

"What, you've never been in a bad relationship?"

"No, the other bit," he said. "Loving yourself."

"Well, ironic that I would have to explain this to you, but it was close to impossible while we were at Hogwarts," she told him. "Largely thanks to you."

"Right," he said. "Understandable."

"But eventually it occurred to me that if I didn't love me, then I'd be waiting my whole life for someone else to do it properly, and I've learned a lot about waiting," she said. "I waited for nearly a year. For horcruxes, for death. Either or, from my perspective. And I realized I was done waiting to find reasons to like who I was. So I stopped waiting and decided to do it."

"And that worked?"

"Not immediately," she said. "And not all the time. But yeah, I think it did, for the most part."

She fidgeted in place, waiting to see what he would say next. He was quiet for a very long time, though she could still hear him breathing. She wondered for a moment if he'd fallen asleep.
"My cock is so hard," he said unexpectedly.

She bit back a laugh. "Seriously?"

"It's really hard, yeah. I don't know, maybe it's Pavlovian."

"Me talking about my emotional distress gets you off?"

"No, just you talking. And it's not distress," he said. "You're just talking about you, and I like it."

"Gross," she said.

He chuckled from the other end of the line. "Honestly, though. I do like it."

"Am I supposed to talk about your cock now?"

"Only if you want to."

She nudged a hand under the button of her jeans, sliding it below her knickers for curiosity's sake. "I'm a bit wet, actually."

"Are you?"

"Don't get too cocky," she said. "Just a bit."

"Could help with that," he offered. "If it doesn't interfere too much with your personal ethics."

She thought about it, weighing her options.

"Maybe it's about time you begged my forgiveness," she said thoughtfully.

"On my knees, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Dirty, Granger," he said in a low voice.

She bit her lip, imagining his mouth as she slid a finger inside her.

"Yeah," she exhaled, "I know. Keep going."

"What are you doing tomorrow?"

"You mean later today?"

"Is it that late? Shit. Yeah, I guess."

"Work. The usual."

"Can I call you later?"

"You're asking while you're still on the phone with me if you can call me later?"

"Seems like the polite thing to do. Worked for me yesterday."

"Yesterday I was off the phone by midnight. Now it's... bloody Christ, it's nearly three."
"Ah, my fault. You should get to bed then."

"Yes, I really should."

"But that's a yes for tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I mean... yeah, sorry, it's a yes. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"I don't know. What are we doing, I guess?"

"I don't know, Granger. Talking."

"Isn't it a bit weird?"

"Does it feel weird?"

"No. But it feels like it should feel weird. And anyway, aren't you sick of me yet?"

"No. Are you sick of me?"

"This version of you? No."

"Then that all seems reason enough to keep going, doesn't it?"

"I... suppose so."

"So that's a yes for tomorrow night?"

"Yes, fine, alright Malfoy. You win."

"Excellent. Talk to you tomorrow."

"You're not going to bed now, are you?"

"Hm? No, probably not. Might read a bit first."

"What are you reading?"

It seemed inevitable that they would run into each other in person. You can only exist in someone's distant orbit for so long before developing a casual paranoia that they're somewhere around the corner, taking their coffee to go from the same cafe as you. It's something magnetic, knowing they exist somewhere and it might as well be here.

In this case, the event was a matter of strolling through Diagon Alley, her with Harry and Ron and him with Theo and Blaise. Their eyes locked briefly as they passed and they nodded to each other in greeting, politely, before disappearing in opposite directions.

"What was that?" said Ron, bewildered by what was by all accounts agreed to be mild amicability.

"Oh, nothing," Hermione said. "Malfoy called into a sex hotline I was working and now we're the
best of friends."

"There's no need to be sarcastic," mumbled Ron sullenly, though they were on their way to eat ice cream, so he wasn't terribly injured for long.

Draco, on the other hand, was a bit strange that evening.

"Don't you think we ought to see each other?" he asked over the phone. "Like, in person."

"I don't know," said Hermione listlessly. "Don't you think it might be weird?"

"I don't think it's not weird if we confine our relationship to phones."

(This being a thing he said after they'd both gotten each other off for the first time that evening, so naturally she was inclined to agree with his point.)

"We could have dinner," he suggested.

"Is that a euphemism?"

"We could fuck too, but I'm specifically asking about dinner."

"I really don't think this is a relationship."

"That's not an answer."

"Fine." She chewed her lip, sighing out, "Okay, dinner. But it's going to be weird."

"It's never not been weird, Granger."

He chose a decently sized restaurant and arrived early, watching her take a seat at the table he'd specifically selected by the window. It had a balcony looking out over Diagon Alley, and he watched her observe her reflection for a moment, frowning at her hair, until the waiter brought her a phone. Her brows knitted in confusion, bewildered, and then she finally caught a glimpse of Draco where he was seated at the bar, her expression turning from puzzlement to half-mocking laughter as she picked up the phone from the tray and waved the waiter away.

"You're an idiot," she answered in a low voice, turning away from the crowd to take the call more privately.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Just thought it might be easier this way. Familiar. Less weird."

"It's still weird."

"Maybe a script will help," he offered. "What might you be looking for this evening, fair stranger?"

He watched her suck in a breath, fighting a smile.

"A little conversation," she said. "Maybe some sex."

He tilted his head. "Am I to understand that you would like me to make you come?"

She turned towards him, hesitating a moment before rolling her eyes. She crossed one leg over the other, drawing her skirt pointedly up on her thigh as she moved.

"Maybe later," she said.
"Dessert after dinner, I take it?"

"Precisely."

"Right, of course. So should I join you?"

She observed him for several moments from across the room, drumming her fingers on the table.

"Yes," she said eventually.

"Yes?"

"Yes. Have dinner with me, Draco," she said.

He made a show of hanging up the phone before stretching to his feet and sauntering over to her table, pulling out the chair across from hers.

"Hi," he said, sitting down.

Her eyes were bright and cynical and lovely. "Hi," she agreed.

"Some things you should know before we start," he said, smoothing his napkin across his lap. "I dislike olives," he said, glancing up at her, "and I'm told I have intimacy issues."

Her smile quirked. "Me too."

"Well, nothing wrong with that," he said. "Now that's out of the way, shall we split some tapas?"

She gave a little laugh, shaking her head as if she couldn't believe anything he'd just said, but she wanted to. She really, really wanted to.

"Why not?" she said, shrugging.

Like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Wrote this from my sickbed this morning so if it's not good don't tell me, I can only summon so much energy. Happy Valentine's Day lovers!
Brick

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Brick**

*Pairing:* Nottpott (Theo Nott x Harry Potter)

*Universe:* muggle AU

*Rating:* M

*Summary:* Everyone has a hobby. Theirs is… uniquely theirs.

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The carpet, which had come to the Malfoys by way of the House of Valois somewhere around the fourteenth century, was a priceless antique. It was also an atrocity, having been abandoned to age ungracefully in one of the lesser-used upstairs drawing rooms. But obviously that was neither here nor there, because none of it was currently visible beneath Theo's latest dive into mania.

While this room was typically quite sparse—paying homage, of course, to that priceless and abominable rug—it was currently covered in juvenile structures that, optically, were scattered across a spectrum of cartoonishly bright to offensively garish. The London skyline had been reconstructed beside something that appeared to be an operational space station, and beside that was a temple erected to a mini-figurine closely resembling Draco himself.

"What's this?" Draco asked aloud, falling to a halt. Not that anyone ever used this room, but its vacancy was its primary redeeming factor. There was also something disconcerting (and perhaps borderline dangerous?) about its current occupation.

"Found these," replied Theo, not looking up. He waved a hand around the room, ostensibly indicating that those two words should explain everything without further questioning.

Draco exchanged a skeptical glance with Hermione beside him. He'd warned her there would be some consequences to her moving in, though this particular one hadn't been on the list of aforementioned topics.

"There's no such thing as a casual hobby for him, is there?" she murmured tentatively.

"No," Draco confirmed. "There is not."

"And this is… normal? For him?"

"Well, he's never done this particular thing before," Draco acknowledged with a shrug. "But thematically it's very on brand."

Hermione was a problem-solver at heart, which was something Draco admired about her. He also found it very amusing how tirelessly she threw herself at unsolvable things, such as the very truth and nature of his lifelong friend and eternal plague, Theodore Nott.

"Um, Theo," Hermione called out to him, nearly tipping sideways as she attempted to reach the epicenter of the mess. She stepped over a miniature racetrack and crouched down beside him,
engaging a soft, pedantic tone. "I don't suppose you've given any thought to what you're going to do… next?"

"Well, I've been immensely overstimulated," said Theo, still focused on the obelisk he was presently constructing. "You've seen how much sugar I let into my diet. Some might call it irresponsible to the point of lethality."

"Oh," said Hermione, looking concerned. "Well, I'm sure if it's a matter of nutrit-"

"He's joking," Draco growled impatiently, stepping over the miniature petting zoo to urge Hermione back to her feet. "Nott, you've got to stop this," he said firmly to Theo, coaxing Hermione away from the monster at the center of the labyrinth. "You're turning the whole house into your personal palace of eccentricity and frankly, it's all very underfoot."

Theo ignored him, as he usually did, and Hermione turned to Draco with a sigh.

"He's healing," she attempted to reason sympathetically.

"He's a child," Draco corrected.

"Maybe there's a way to get him to channel all this into something positive?" Hermione suggested, tepidly chewing her lip. "I don't want to just be rid of him."

"Well, I do. It's very simple, Theodore," Draco said to Theo, though he may as well not have bothered. "Just stop building Legos in my house!"

When there was predictably no answer, Draco sighed. "Jesus Christ," he murmured to himself, or to Hermione, or to whoever might manifest to assist him in this time of need. "What sort of adult man still does this?"

Just then, something seemed to occur to Hermione with a delayed bolt of recognition.

"Oh," she said. "Hm."

"Potter," called the department head. "May I see you in my office for a moment?"

Harry looked up from his desk with a start, nearly toppling the dragon figurine that had taken him a full week's holiday to build. He'd taken the time off the moment he'd gotten his hands on the special edition Hungarian Horntail, not even hesitating to file the request despite the time he'd probably need later that year for Dudley's wedding. Now the dragon's tail curled comfortably down onto his computer screen, filling him with a rare and probably short-lived glimpse of happiness.

"Potter, as you know there's been some… cuts to the department," said Slughorn, looking deeply apologetic. "And as you are still only an associate member of our faculty, I'm afraid my hands are tied. I'm happy to provide references—"

Harry tuned out the remainder of whatever Slughorn had to say, knowing there had never been a purpose to getting comfortable. He listened to himself getting sacked for the second time in a year as if it were a foggy gramophone recording and then nodded numbly, rising to his feet to collect his figurines from his office.

That Harry had wound up in academia had always been something of a demented outcome. Mostly he'd wanted to stay in school as long as possible, keeping away from whatever his aunt and uncle
demanded of him at home. Presumably they expected him to care for Aunt Marge, who was not even related to him by blood, or to work for Uncle Vernon, who couldn't have cared less whether Harry had any interest in industrial drills. So long as universities kept paying him to research obscure historical documents, Harry had done it. But now, it seemed, his excuses might be at an end.

He placed his collection of figurines—an elf he called Dobby, a giant he called Hagrid, a wizard he called Dumbledore who was in constant battle with an evil sorcerer called Voldemort—into the box he hadn't even bothered to be rid of when he arrived, and recounted how little hope there had been to begin with. His research was so very niche and useless (purposefully, since it meant he wasn't exceptionally bothered by anyone while he worked) that funding would forever be in the process of getting cut for his particular expertise.

As Harry was glancing over his box of figurines and resigning himself to an unceremonious return to Privet Drive, his phone rang in his pocket. He shifted to reach for it, pulling it to his ear without a glance. No doubt it would be Dudley calling about his stag night—again.

"I told you the stripper was handled," Harry said perfunctorily. "And no, I didn't ask for a picture of her tits because that's reductive. I'm sure they're perfectly fine."

"Um, Harry?" said an unfamiliar voice as Harry blinked in surprise, adjusting his hold on the box of figurines. "It's Hermione. From Hogwarts?"

"Oh." Drat. "Sorry, that was—"

"Don't worry about it," she assured him, her voice self-consciously sunny. "I was just wondering… it's odd, I know, but… do you still have that, um. Hobby of yours?"

"My research, you mean?" Hermione, too, was an academic, though she'd specialized in ancient linguistics. The summer after they'd both finished their doctorate programs she'd supposedly gone off to some archaeological site and fallen in love with the son of the program's aristocratic patron. "Yes, I still work in fictional dialects and folklore, though lately I've had to pivot somewhat," he said, glancing down at his recently emptied desk.

"No, I meant—" She let out an uncomfortable laugh. "$\text{The... other thing.}$"

Harry frowned wordlessly down at his box of figurines.

"Do you still build things?" Hermione asked him gently. "$\text{The little, um. Toys?}$"

Toys. Speaking of reductive. Not that it was worth getting into.

"I do," Harry said. Over his shoulder he caught sight of Slughorn's secretary, who must have been sent after him to make sure he didn't steal any of the department's letterhead. "$\text{Sorry, not to rush you, Hermione, but is there a reason you're asking?}$"

"Well, I was just wondering," Hermione said. "$\text{Would you ever consider meeting up with someone who had... similar inclinations?}$"

Even from across the cafe, it was obvious that Harry Potter was primarily skinny, messy-haired, and bespectacled. He was also dressed horribly, wearing an overlarge rugby polo with a pair of worn jeans that was as upsetting as it was striped. His haircut was the worst thing Theo had ever set eyes on in his entire life and all in all the view was unsavory—but Harry Potter was useful, and Theo Nott was very utilitarian by nature. Usefulness was all that mattered.
"There's a reality show competition for Lego builders," Theo announced without preamble, nearly startling Harry into dropping his cup of tea. His glasses fogged up somehow, lending him a distinct air of madness as Theo slid the screen of his iPad across the table. "I need a partner."

"What… a what?" Harry repeated slowly. "Who? Sorry." He inhaled deeply. "Who are you?"

"I'm Theodore Nott the second. Do not google me, you won't like what you find." Theo flipped his chair around and perched across from Harry, staring at him. "What's that?" he asked, pointing to the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Nothing." Harry fussed with his hair, covering it up. "Are you Hermione's friend?"

"Not even remotely," said Theo. "But she and Draco needed me out of the house, so for all intents and purposes yes."

"You said this a… Lego competition?" asked Harry, and then glanced up. "You build Legos?"

Theo heard the unspoken implication. Harry was taking in Theo's immaculate suit, the military haircut and probably also the biceps, piecing together his indubitably false impression.

"I dabble," said Theo. "And you?"

"Well, I don't necessarily limit myself t-"

"You don't have a wife or anything, do you?" asked Theo, prompting Harry to balk at him, still vaguely foggy-eyed from clutching his mug of tea protectively to his chest. Theo sighed, impatiently removing the mug from Harry's hand. "What I mean is you don't have any pressing reason to remain here, do you? Because we'll be required to stay in Holborn for filming."

"Stay," Harry echoed vacantly. "Stay…?"

"In a hotel? You've heard of them, yes?"

"For a… Lego competition?"

Okay, so Harry was an idiot. Or slow. Whatever the politically correct term for that was these days. Not that it mattered. He could be anything but comatose and it would be sufficient. It would give Theo something to do, which he sorely needed.

"Listen. Do you have literally anything better to do with yourself?" Theo asked Harry flatly.

For a singular flash of a moment, he thought he recognized something in Harry's glance.

"No," Harry said. His first coherent answer all afternoon.

"Good." Theo rose to his feet. "Then pack your bags. We start filming on Monday."

If Harry could credit Dudley with anything it would be naming Harry his best man, as it was an exceptionally creative form of indentured servitude. Harry fumbled for his mobile phone nearly twenty times a day attending to Dudley's various demands, which had already been Harry's arena of concern for essentially their entire lives.

"Hello?" Harry said, answering the phone as he and Theo pulled up to the hotel. Theo slid out from the driver's seat and tossed his keys to someone standing nearby, which Harry stared after with a frown. "Theo, I don't think that's a valet."
"Oi, Harry, have you got everything Cho's asked?" Dudley said. Fate was a cruel mistress indeed giving a woman like Cho Chang to a man like Dudley Dursley. "She'll be in a foul mood if you've not got the photo booth she asked for."

"What?" Theo asked.

"That's not a valet," Harry said again, pointing to the man who was currently holding Theo's keys. In response, Theo pivoted, whipping his sunglasses from his face with obvious disbelief. "This place doesn't have a valet—and Dudley, can you just give me a minute? I'll call you back in just a minute—"

"I thought you understood this was important," Dudley said. "If you don't want to help, I can always have Piers step in. He's a real mate," he accused snidely.

"Listen Dudley, it's fine, I'll just give Cho a call this afternoon and—"

Harry stopped as Theo yanked the phone from his hand, tossing it over his shoulder and into the street. There was a smack of metal and the crunch of a car tire before a driver shouted profanities out his open window to Theo, who strode into the Hoxton without even a blink.

"What—" Harry froze. "What did you just—? What…?"

"I need you focused," Theo said, doubling back and snapping his fingers. "Do you understand? I need your full, entire focus. Let's go, walk." More finger-snapping.

"But…" Harry stared longingly into the street at his shattered screen.

"Your cousin messaged you three times on the drive alone," Theo reminded him impatiently. "What's so important you can't devote your attention solely to this for the next month?"

With as irrational as Theo clearly was, Harry was somehow struggling to conjure up any rationality of his own. All he could think was Cho, the woman he'd loved for the last decade of his life, had specifically asked his help to give her the perfect wedding, and because he had known Dudley would not do it—and because he knew Dudley could not give her anything close to a perfect life, though nobody had asked his opinion on the matter—Harry had accepted the role of best man and shouldered all the expectations therein. He half-considered a mad dash into the street for the phone's mangled corpse until Theo waved his hands distractingly, this time right in front of Harry's nose.

"Focus," said Theo. "Aren't you unemployed? You need the money. I need the win."

Harry shut his eyes. Theo Nott wouldn't understand this, of course, being the rich prick he so obviously was, but Harry did need the money. Not just the money, but what the money meant. That for once he had done something of value.

"Good luck," Cho had breathed to him, her smile warm and soft as he'd headed out the door. "I'm so happy you've finally taken your shot, Harry."

"Harry," barked Theo. "Are you listening?"

Harry blinked. "What?"

Theo rolled his eyes.

"Come on," he said, grabbing Harry's shoulder and leading him into the hotel. "We've got to get
The room was fine. Not especially large and designed to resemble a contemporary flat which was unnecessarily kitschy, but fine. The shower was constructed improperly. Fine. The towels were decent and the shampoo was vegan. Harry was clearly going to be a lot of work. Fine.

If there was one thing Theo relished, it was the thrill of an impossible task.

Though Theo had specifically said not to google him, Harry most certainly had. Theodore Nott was the son of an English nobleman—was a nobleman himself—and had recently been honorably discharged from the British Royal Air Force. He was a pilot, a decorated officer, and most confusingly, a hero. That being said, not one thing in Theo's google search had populated any results to suggest the man Harry was currently sharing a hotel room with was even remotely the same person.

"Are you listening?" was one of Theo's top five questions, though in Harry's opinion it was physically impossible to listen to anything Theo said. He spoke incoherently, in half-sentences, and often interrupted himself to snatch the tablet from Harry's hands and begin drawing it himself. (They were, according to Theo, "casually sketching" in advance of the competition itself, though nothing about what they were doing aside from Harry's wardrobe seemed remotely near casual.)

"I'm trying to listen," Harry said. "But you've spent the last forty-five minutes alternately quoting Shakespeare at me and mumbling to yourself."

"Well, if you have any ideas, I'd love to hear them," Theo replied, dripping with sarcasm. Harry, who seemed to be the only person in the room aware that it was currently four in the morning, rose to his feet and grabbed the tablet back from Theo.

"Here," he said, sketching out a possible landscape. At this point he didn't even care what it was, so long as Theo stopped talking. "There's a good chance we'll be asked to design a dystopia, so here's a duel scene. There's the good guy," he said, pointing, "here's the bad guy, and if we put this in the middle—"

He blinked as Theo suddenly dropped beside him on the bed, the whole thing shifting beneath his weight as if an anvil had collided with the mattress.

"Keep going," Theo said.

Harry glanced at him, bracing for criticism or mockery, but Theo seemed genuinely entranced. His eyes were wide, the shadows beneath them stark against his pale skin, and for the first time it was as if Theo's entire being had temporarily quieted. He vibrated at a slower, almost tranquil frequency, his chin paused beside Harry's shoulder and fixed on the screen with obvious anticipation for whatever Harry drew next.

"Well," Harry said, shifting slightly so that Theo could see better. "What if we added… planes? Or something in the sky? Something to give it dimension, height—"

"No," Theo said. "Not planes. Doesn't even make sense." He slid an accusing glance to Harry. "What kind of narrative involves both wizards and airplanes?"

"Oh." Harry supposed he was right about that. "Maybe… monkeys with wings? Something Wizard of Oz-y?"
Theo shook his head. "People on broomsticks," he said.

"Okay." Harry bent his head, sketching something he'd imagined himself at least a hundred times. "Like that?"

"Like that," Theo agreed, before finally—thank god—covering a yawn.

The other competitors were hobbyists, also amateurs. There were two sets of twins (the Patils and the Weasleys), a father and son (the Diggorys), a set of cosplaying enthusiasts, Loony something and her bizarre partner Severitus, a pair of quarrelsome boyfriends (Sean and Deamus?), and some other people, maybe. Mostly Theo was focused from the start on the newly married couple, the Longbottoms. The husband, Neville, seemed pleasant enough, easily stomped on, but Theo got very disturbing vibes from the wife. Pansy had a slightly unhinged look to her, like possibly she kept a store of poisons under the beams of her floorboards for anyone she considered a threat.

"Watch out for Crazy Eyes," Theo murmured to Harry, nudging him. He had dressed Harry that morning, opting to lean into Harry's professorial qualities with a shawl-collared cardigan. He'd worn a henley and jeans himself.

"Oh, that's Neville Longbottom," Harry said, glancing up with surprise. "He's an incredible brickmaster."

"What?"

"He's very good at building things," Harry clarified. "So good there's a rumor he was asked to be a designer for Lego and he turned them down."

"Why?"

"To do stuff like this instead, I guess," Harry said with a shrug.

Theo frowned. "How do you know this?"

"Dunno. I go on the messageboards and such," Harry said, turning to Theo with confusion. "Don't you?"

Theo had never had much of a childhood, so he'd only discovered the very existence of Legos approximately two weeks ago. Maybe three, depending what day it was now. He had scoured the internet for tricks when it came to building styles, mechanical techniques, and terminology, but of course he hadn't bothered to research the "community," which was full of uninhibited weirdos.

"Does it matter if I do or not?" asked Theo, sliding a glance askance. Since walking into the competition film studio, Harry had become a different person. He was still skinny and bespectacled, definitely, but he seemed to be standing straighter, holding his shoulders back with something Theo suspected was meager but noticeable confidence.

"No," Harry said, glancing at Neville again. "He's good, but I'm better."

"Big words from someone who's never actually done anything before," commented Theo, who had done precisely what he'd told Harry not to do and googled him. Harry Potter had a Ph.D. in obscure linguistics and had shuffled between universities since the completion of his dissertation. His permanent address was listed as the one belonging to his aunt and uncle, where he'd lived his entire life. Even Hermione had said quietly to Draco that while Harry was very good at building things—figurines and whatever else—he had always seemed distinctly odd. Alienated by his own inaction.
"Better late than never," Harry remarked, one hand rising to his scar, though he ultimately refrained from touching it. Theo had told him to move the hair aside, leaving the lightning bolt on display for the audience. *It's cool,* he'd said, *niche, memorable. That sort of shit sticks.*

"I don't think I'm that memorable," had been Harry's murmured response.

"Then give them something to remember," Theo replied.

By the first day of competition, there was no question about it. Theo Nott was a madman.

This had good and bad implications. On the plus side, Theo's ability to visualize something before he even set a hand to building it was fucking unparalleled. Harry had never met someone who could stare into space for five seconds and then suddenly produce a full concept of what should come next, and Harry had spent a lot of time observing Lego builds on YouTube. Theo was so proficient it was almost as if he wasn't even doing it in real time; as if he'd frozen portions of Harry's consciousness and bopped around in time and space, only allowing Harry to see the subsequent edits—the cuts and pastes that revealed the final product.

Theo was also rigorously scheduled, methodical, ruthlessly efficient. Building, this sort of thing, had only ever been for Harry's personal fulfillment, never for profit or on a timeline. Nobody had ever asked him why he started or what he enjoyed about it. Nobody cared about any of this at all except for Theo, so Harry had never been forced to admit his origin story to anyone until the day Theo drilled him about it.

"Okay no, it wasn't my hobby, exactly," Harry had said without thinking. The interrogation ("A MEANINGFUL STORY TO CONNECT WITH THE AUDIENCE," Theo had shouted at Harry like a gun going off) was part of a crash-course in media preparation that Theo considered necessary to their success. It had taken place just before sunrise, at which point Harry was too bleary-eyed with exhaustion to contemplate a better answer. "My cousin Dudley went through a Lego phase, but of course he had the most fun destroying the sets after he built them. I'd go into his second bedroom—"

"Second bedroom?" asked Theo, barking it like a sergeant.

"Yeah, he had two bedrooms," Harry said, as mechanical by then as one of his own lifeless builds. "One for him and one for his toys, which took up most of the upper floor. But at night—"

"What about you? Where was your room?"

"I… had a room also," Harry mumbled. "Anyway, at night I'd go into his second bedroom and take the broken bits and fix them and put the sets back together. I just couldn't stand it, seeing them destroyed like that, it felt… I just couldn't stand it." He blinked, rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses. "Besides, it wasn't like I had anything better to do."

Theo's silence in response had been deafening, and then he'd followed it up with an even stranger look.

"That's depressing as fuck," he said, tossing a pillow at Harry. "Go to bed."

But ever since that conversation, Harry had noticed Theo looking at him differently. Almost as if Harry was a supplementary Lego set that Theo was responsible for piecing together invisibly inside his head, though clearly none of the pieces were locking into place.

They won best build of the day in the first round. A lot of that was due to Theo's ability to finish
things with extraordinary efficiency—he took almost no time in the production process and used a schedule breaking each hour into ten minute increments—but it was Harry's detailed model of a phoenix with outstretched wings of flame that received the most praise from the judges, Minerva and Filius.

"This is so imaginative," said Minerva. "It's spectacular in the true sense of it. That sense of spectacle is there, the element of the fantastical. This is what Lego is all about: the story, the wonder. There's something very special about this build."

Harry waited for Theo to drill him on something when they returned to their hotel room, but surprisingly, he hadn't. Theo simply picked up his tablet and started drawing.

"Do you want me to work on some new sketches?" asked Harry uncertainly.

It took a second for Theo to tear his gaze from his drawing. "What?"

"Well, I don't know what you're working on, but if you want—"

"I thought you'd want to sleep," said Theo. "I'm just doing this to amuse myself."

He lowered the stylus to the screen again, continuing to work. Harry, meanwhile, shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"I'd actually… rather not," said Harry. "I don't sleep that well, to be honest. And, I don't know, I'm not tired."

Theo glanced up fleetingly. "What's your deal?" he said, as Harry blinked.

"What?"

"Your cousin," Theo said. "You rebuild his Legos. You stay in his shadow. You even take it upon yourself to save his wedding."

"I'm not saving it, I'm just—"

"You are."

He never got a word in edgewise. "I'm n-"

"You can deny it however you like, Potter, but it's quite clear that y-"

"I thought I wanted to be rid of him," Harry snapped, suddenly frustrated with Theo's constant bulldozing. "I thought for years I just wanted to be anywhere he wasn't, but then I realized the rest of the world's no different. There are Dudleys everywhere, a thousand different forms of them, and at least I understand how this particular Dudley works."

He glanced down at his hands, suddenly flaming with anger. Theo, wisely or curiously or disinterestedly or possibly just bored, said nothing.

"I waited," Harry grumbled, falling onto the mattress behind him. "My entire life I waited for someone to walk in the door and tell me I was special, to explain that I was alive for a reason, that I was destined for greatness. That I was put here on this earth for a purpose. And I waited and waited and realized nobody gives a damn if I live or die, nobody cares. There's no such thing as karma, the world's not fair, and we just mythologize ourselves to get through it." He slid a glance at the window, rubbing his temples. "We want to believe in fate or destiny but there's no such thing.
There's no purpose to any of it. We just exist because of randomness, entropy, I don't know, some roll of the dice. Statistics. And it makes sense, doesn't it, because why should we be different from any other species? Flies don't have destinies and neither do we. We're not special, we don't get more credit just because we can collectively point to something and call it angst. We're part of an ecosystem that truly doesn't give a damn which of us lives or dies. It doesn't ask for qualifications. We live or we don't and either way, the rest of the world moves on."

Harry's parents had died and he had lived, but for what? Petunia and Vernon, monsters that they were, had lived when James and Lily had died. There was no logic to it, no rationality. There was no reason Dudley was considered special and Harry was not. That was just the way of it, the universe, and it didn't matter whether you were good or bad, special or unspecial. Harry had learned that lesson, finally, when Cho had chosen Dudley over him.

"Wow." Theo set down his stylus, staring at Harry with something very close to a laugh. "That's the imagination that won us the first round? You must be joking."

Harry turned away, sickened. "Never mind. I'll just—"

"Here," Theo said, offering him the tablet and the stylus. "Draw me something."

Harry glanced at him, waiting for the joke. The beat of sarcasm. The underlying pulse of ridicule, the jeering or disdain; the implications of pity or mockery that other people assumed for whatever reason that Harry couldn't hear or feel.

"What? Draw," Theo said, militaristic again. "I'm not going to just sit here waiting all night."

"Why don't you sleep?" Harry asked him, snatching the iPad from Theo's hand. It felt like a jostled recoiling, that single motion. He'd been reluctant to reach out at all, assuming things were safer if he kept within the limited frame of his limbs.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," Theo assured him, "which by your reasoning could be any moment."

He could hear that Theo was definitely making fun of him that time, but it wasn't the same as Dudley or anyone else who had ever stared at his Lego builds with derision.

"Don't tell me you're an optimist," Harry muttered, falling into the bed beside the desk where Theo sat.

"Me? I know why I exist," Theo said, shrugging. "I'm here to make my father uncomfortable and to take up space in my best friend's house. I already know that my calling is delightfully diminutive."

He propped his feet up beside Harry.

"You know what? Do the planes," Theo said. "Why not. What's the worst that can happen, someone crashes and I get a medal of bravery? The universe would never allow it, it's too divine a comedy."

He'd said it with effortless theatricality, as if he really believed nobody else could hear the echo, the cavernous drop underneath. Or possibly Theo didn't believe anyone was listening for it, and maybe also had a lifetime of watching his suspicions prove themselves true.

Harry was starting to think he understood what kind of adult man became obsessed with winning a Lego competition. It wasn't all that different from the sort of child who painstakingly put broken pieces back together again.
"Don't take this the wrong way," Harry said slowly, "but are you by any chance supposed to be on some sort of high dosage medication?"

Theo gave a burst of laughter so loud and uninhibited that Harry was sure he'd woken their neighbors.

"Aren't we all," managed Theo eventually. "Aren't we all."

Having won the first round, Theo expected he and Harry would be murdered in their beds by Pansy very shortly. By the third round, while the others were starting to be sent home, he'd begun speculating that Pansy was a very specialized sort of gold digger who'd recognized Neville's undeniable skill at Lego building and begun monetizing it, because nothing else could possibly explain their relationship. True, they were constantly holding hands and repeating the same (clearly rehearsed!) portions of their courtship, but Theo was convinced none of it could possibly be real. Pansy always seemed to go a little dead-eyed whenever it happened, and Stockholm Syndrome aside, Theo was almost positive Neville was still a virgin.

"You're being mean," Harry murmured, though Theo could see quite clearly he was suppressing his amusement.

"You know I'm right," Theo informed him. "Look at her," he added, gesturing to where Pansy hadn't blinked in the last three minutes, staring at whatever Neville was building into the scene. "I don't know whether to summon the police, child services, or the zoo. I'm genuinely concerned she'll ingest him like a spider right in front of us if they ever drop into the bottom two," Theo commented, watching Harry's hands shake slightly with laughter while he continued their city build.

They'd decided to build the tallest skyscraper in the room, complete with moving parts that Harry brought to life like magic. Unfortunately something had gone horribly wrong in the transportation of the build, and just before the judging portion of that round, the top of their skyscraper had crashed to the ground, leaving their build incomplete.

Theo had watched Harry's face go blank, his entire frame frozen, before he suddenly darted out of sight.

"You should go after him," said a producer to Theo's left.

"Shut up," said Theo, who was already half-jogging in the direction Harry had gone. The fact that a camera had followed him was not ideal; upon discovering Harry sitting alone in the dark, he desperately wished they'd had the space to be alone.

"Hey," Theo said. "It's okay."

Harry's face was buried in his palms.

"Hey." Theo knelt in front of him, trying to ignore the presence of the cameraman on his left. "Listen to me," he said quietly. "It's not life or death. It's just Lego."

"It's everything," Harry whispered back, barely audible. "Don't you understand? It's everything."

Yes, Theo understood. It was more than just a build. It was transfiguring the chaos of the world into something ordered, something beautiful, something fantastical. It was the transformation of the universe's bullshit, the outcome of their shitty lives into something notable, something of value. He thought of a younger Harry sneaking into his cousin's second bedroom and repairing the
damage his cousin had done, unknowingly tying himself to all the damage his cousin would ever cause for the entirety of a damaging lifetime.

Even if either of them were normal people, it would have been a shame to lose nearly ten hours of work. But they weren't normal, not in the least, which made it infinitely worse. They were the sort of people who had to be rebuilt from night to night, from day to day. They were faulty structures with broken parts, men who were hardly even standing.

"Come on," said Theo, pulling Harry to his feet and tugging him into a spontaneous embrace, obscuring their conversation from the camera. "You never know. There might be some sort of miracle that keeps us here."

Harry's reply in his ear was thin and unconvinced. "Like what?"

"Maybe Crazy Eyes out there murdered someone on the studio floor? That's got to merit a spot in the bottom two, at least."

Harry laughed, which might have been a sob, though Theo held him through it regardless.

"Alright, fine," Harry exhaled, pulling away. "I guess the universe is random enough that miracles are bound to happen."

"Statistically speaking, one mustn't discount the anomalies," Theo reminded him.

In the end, they were all tasked with another five hours to add an additional narrative onto their builds, allowing Harry and Theo to repair theirs as part of the subsequent challenge. Pansy shot daggers at them from across the room as if they'd somehow conjured this outcome into being, though Harry was so relieved by the opportunity to fix his mess that he hadn't even noticed.

Theo, for his part, was feeling something very different than he had been. He'd arrived there a man with a plan, intending to win, but now there was… something else.

He was a member of a team, which he had not been for some time. The last time, of course, someone had died, which was why Theo suddenly felt that nothing should ever harm Harry Potter again so long as he was there. From now on, Theo reasoned internally, everything he built with Harry would have to be perfect, if only because it was what Harry Potter deserved.

Harry wasn't surprised when they were asked to build bridges. The competition had always been part science, part art, so the physics of building was certain to come into play. He and Theo constructed something of a stylistic aqueduct, for which Harry was happy to let Theo take the lead. Theo's expertise was architecture, structure, while Harry built a series of ornately grotesque gargoyles to overlook the bridge.

The night before, he and Theo had been spitballing further fantasy narratives (Harry's specialty, given his work) when the tablet made a small sound indicating an email on Harry's account. He saw the name Cho and quickly swiped it away, which of course Theo hadn't missed. He had a hawkish sort of observation, which was funny when it was directed at others and horrifying when it was directed at Harry, the only other person in the room.

"So, you're in love with your cousin's betrothed," Theo drawled. Sometimes when he used that particular voice, Harry pictured him on the cover of a satirical newspaper: Local Man Observes Surroundings, Declares Them Unfit.

"Is that a question?" Harry prompted.
"No."

"Oh." Harry frowned. "You're not going to ask… why?"

"Oh, I know why," said Theo, hauling his long legs from the floor to set them on the edge of Harry's bed. Neither of them slept much, and truthfully Harry was getting used to it, the feeling of drowsiness that accompanied his sleeplessness. He'd never felt refreshed in the mornings before this anyway, and now the sense of having uncovered something interesting during the night was more invigorating than any cellular recharging.

"Oh." Harry slid another look at Theo. "Well, fine."

Theo chuckled. "I take it you want to tell me about it?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't say much," Theo agreed.

Again, Harry felt the little irk of being under Theo's surveillance.

"I met her first," said Harry. "At university."

"Mm," said Theo. "Riveting. Go on."

Harry glanced up, anticipating ridicule, but Theo was looking at him expressionlessly, waiting.

"She came to visit me once over the Christmas holidays. Friends," Harry clarified, clearing his throat. "We were friends. She'd had a boyfriend and—"

"Ah," Theo said, stretching out until he'd slumped down in his chair, ankles beside Harry's seated hips. "She wasn't available, so you didn't push her. But Dudley did."

"Not exactly."

"Hm?" Theo's smile twitched. "Delightful. I do so love to be proven wrong."

"It was more a matter of… timing," Harry explained. "Cedric, her boyfriend… he was a mate of mine, and well, he died."

"Oh." Theo propped himself up on his elbows. "An unexpected twist. So Dudley was there to comfort her in her time of need while you were both in mourning?"

"I…" Harry hesitated. "Evidently."

"Which he did with his prick, I presume."

Harry felt his cheeks flush. "I really don't kn-"

"Grief," Theo supplied dismissively, "is highly amorous under the right circumstances. It's biological, did you know that? A member of the herd dies, the sexual impulse kicks in. The urge to procreate is a matter of sociological dependency."

"I thought you said it was biological?"

"I haven't the faintest fucking clue," Theo replied, appearing to have already grown tired of the conversation. "I went to military school my entire life and my curriculum was lacking. I only know
how to follow orders."

"I find that incredibly difficult to believe."

"Believe whatever you like," Theo assured him. "My father's the one who decided I needed structure. And what's more structured than a cage?" He let out a bark of a laugh, like cannon fire. "Gilded, though. Something like that. The finest iron a man can wrought."

"What might you have been otherwise?" Harry asked, staring down at his tablet. He was learning it was better not to make eye contact when he asked personal questions. Theo, predatory though he liked to pretend he was, was extraordinarily skittish.

"There's really no value to pondering conditionalities," Theo said. "What we might have been, what we deserve, what we are, those are the irrelevancies of life, the superfluities. Aren't you the one who said we mythologize ourselves in order to survive? I have no interest in doing so."

"In surviving?"

To that Theo glanced up so sharply Harry felt it like the pull of his own chin.

"I look forward to being rot," Theo said. "Putting myself to use in degradation."

Harry looked over the features of Theo's face, assessing them again. The arrogant mouth that was nearly feminine. The prominent brow that sat furrowed and angry, perpetually entombed by the wounds he couldn't speak of without causticity. The eyes that saw everything, both existing and not.

"And until then?" Harry asked.

"Until then I will be nothing. I will be anything," Theo clarified, "but the kind of man who breaks things."

Then he removed his legs from Harry's bed and used them to stride into the bathroom, the door securing in the latch without any further sound.

Theo was aware that Harry had gathered things about him. Harry was a hunter-gatherer; he plucked things up and stowed them, putting them away for safekeeping. Theo could see Harry looking over his little collection, frowning at it, wondering what else he needed or wanted to have while measuring it against what he thought himself likely to get.

"What do you know?" Theo asked him over their sixth build. It was a battle scene, good and evil. Harry had wanted to be good but they'd gotten evil, and Harry was struggling with it at first, poor thing, until his instincts took over. Power was a wonderful thing, a terrible thing. It was appealing in its ugliness, its deformities. There was such incredible beauty to the corruption of the human soul.

Harry slid a glance to where Neville and Pansy, their collaborators, were working on the other half of the scene, and then returned his attention to the snake he was constructing. It was haunting, a nightmare snake. Theo would dream of it again and again.

"Someone in your command was killed," Harry said in an undertone. "You're relatively decorated, which means you must have killed someone, too. Many someones. I assume you had some sort of psychological evaluation afterward that you must have failed, which is why they discharged you instead of sending you back into service." He paused. "I'm guessing you failed it on purpose."
"Interesting take," Theo said, glancing at Pansy. She was saying something in Neville's ear that was giving his hand a slight but noticeable tremor of nerves.

"You know what people want to hear," Harry continued to Theo, and then shook his head, amending his answer. "No, that's not right, that's not it. You know what people don't want to hear. You must have sat there for hours saying everything they didn't want you to say. I wouldn't be surprised if you looked them in the eye while you recited it verbatim. I don't think you'd have had any trouble failing." Harry paused again. "I think you must have stayed awake all night memorizing it, the red flags. The loaded phrases. They wouldn't be difficult to find and I know you know how to research. I think you liked flying," Harry added, "because you thought you were out of reach and out of sight and then you realized that was never true and it broke the latch somewhere, the component they installed in you. All that time they spent teaching you to follow orders, it was like one of those retractable coils, a catch in the mechanism. It worked every time until it misfired."

Theo looked over at Harry's snake, the burst of green light he'd constructed as a backdrop, the work of his imagination. He hadn't just built a battle scene; he'd built a death scene. None of that would be mentioned aloud during the judging period, of course, but it was obvious to Theo. Harry had built the split-second of life just before everything went cavernously dark.

"So what's it like," Theo said casually, "being partnered with a madman?"

"You'll hate to hear this, I'm sure, but your madness is actually very serene," Harry said. "There's clarity to your insanity."

"Clarity?"

"I think you're astoundingly rational for a man out of his wits," Harry confirmed. "Almost clinically so. Your lucidity is what's so unsettling."

"To you?"

"To everyone else."

"And it doesn't upset you?"

"It enrages me," Harry said.

Theo fought a smile. "You're angrier than you think you are, generally speaking."

"I know." Harry looked up. "I didn't say I didn't appreciate you for it, did I?"

Fair point. And for one fair point, another: "You ought to be angrier."

"You think?"

"Your docility is letting people get too comfortable."

"You," Harry posed neutrally. "Are you comfortable?"

"Me? I'm on pins and needles," Theo said. "I'm in a constant state of static shock."

He brushed Harry's fingers with his own, passing the sensation along. The hairs on Harry's forearms lifted from his skin just slightly, the skin pebbling beneath.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Harry asked, which seemed to be either a question or an
"Agonize," said Theo.

"Masochist."

It was unclear how serious the conversation was. It had the rhythm of flirtation, percussive and quick, but meaning was another matter. Hour thirteen of a nearly-completed build on the dichotomy of good and evil wasn't exactly the place to theorize about sex.

"As a rule I don't crave blindly," Theo said.

"Meaning what?"

"I accept devotion or nothing."

"You must have very little, then."

"I," Theo confirmed, "have nothing at all."

At one hour remaining, Pansy came over to speak with Theo about combining the two halves of their scene. He noticed she spoke with an affectation, a lilt.

"Researcher to researcher, I respect your work," Theo commented blithely. "What is that, a clean octave above your usual speaking voice? No, don't tell me. I love a mystery."

She glared at him.

"What exactly do you do when you're not using your husband?" Theo pressed her. "Does he just sort of sit in the cupboard next to the Hoover, or...?"

"Well, I'd have gone with yours," she replied with a flick of a glance to Harry, "but even I know when something's too weird."

"Is that an admission? You won't win."

"We'll see."

She flipped her hair and sauntered away, leaving Theo to glance again at Harry.

Too weird. That was an understatement. Harry belonged to a species Theo felt sure he would never encounter again.

"How's it going?" Cho said on the phone. She'd rung Harry's hotel room that afternoon, missing him, so he'd called her back. She chattered for several minutes about this and that, bridesmaids and hen parties. "I miss you," she said with a sigh, and Harry opened his mouth to answer, but Theo interrupted from where he was lying on his bed.

"Tell her how you'll fuck her when you get back," Theo suggested without looking up from the magazine he was reading. "And I don't mean sentimentally. Give the poor girl some filth."

"Harry?" asked Cho uncertainly. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, sorry," Harry said, his hand tightening around the phone as he looked at Theo. "Sorry, Cho, what did you say?"
"I said—"

"Tell her you've no plans to do it slowly," Theo said, flipping a page. "Let's be honest, we're all aware of her suspicions. She thinks it would be lovemaking with you, pure softness."

"Harry?" Cho said again, sounding confused by his inattention. Which made sense, since as far as their past went, she was almost always his entire focus. "Are you still there?"

"Truthfully, I don't think you'd want it soft." Theo paused to glance up at Harry, musing it to himself. "You strike me as just on the manageable side of sadistic, maybe more so if you really gave in. I think you're just as capable of selfishness as anyone, if anything more so. A little darkness," he advised, finishing his thought and returning his attention to his magazine. "Tell her you won't do it quietly, either."

"Harry, if this is a bad time—"

"Cho, just so you know, I'm perfectly capable of fucking you," said Harry into the phone, and Theo looked up, obviously delighted by the unexpected turn of events.

"What?" Cho asked.

"It's more than sex," Harry said. "I've always thought it was, at least. For me it always has been. But if the question has ever been sex," he exhaled, "then the answer is no, it wouldn't be soft, and it wouldn't be selfless. In fact I think it wouldn't be anything like our friendship has been until now."

He heard Cho swallow through the phone. "Harry, I don't think we should—"

But Harry was looking at Theo, who had shifted on the bed to sit upright, waiting. They were positioned symmetrically now, facing each other.

"It would be possessive," Harry explained. "A little toxic, even, and not nearly gentle or tender enough. I would say a lot of things to you that I've never said before. Things I'd like to say with my fingers on your neck."

"Harry," Cho exhaled.

But she didn't tell him to stop.

"I'd want that as well," Harry decided aloud. "I'd want you to say my name. Mine, over and over. I'd want to make demands. I'd want control, I'd want you on your knees, I'd want to choose how and when, how fast. I wouldn't touch you, not the way you wanted me to, until you were begging, because truthfully there is a part of me that wants you to be sorry. I love you, I always have," he said, his hands tightening around the receiver when Theo's lips parted, just slightly, "but I'd fuck you like you owed me every breath of satisfaction that you got."

"Harry," Cho breathed again. "Harry, does Dudley know?"

"Of course he doesn't know. But now you do. So think about it," Harry said.

"I… I don't know what I'm supposed to say, I don't—"

"Think about it," Harry said again.

"But Harry, there's a lot more to it than just us. I… I admit, there might be something between us, but I can't just cancel the wed—"
"No," Harry said, stopping her in her tracks. "No, you misunderstood. It's not going to happen, Cho. I'm never going to touch you. You made your choice. But I do want you to think about it. When you're living your life with my cousin, when he's failing to give you everything I would have offered you gladly, I want you to remember this conversation. I want you to wonder what you gave up."

He slammed the phone down, suddenly breathing hard, and looked up at Theo, who sat motionless on the opposite bed.

"How did that feel?" Theo asked curiously.

Harry could still feel it buzzing around in his veins. Exhilaration. Rage.

"That was really fucked up," he said, a cool breeze from his conscience reminding him why he'd never said any of that before, why he'd kept it to himself. "I… that wasn't okay, she's… I care about her, she's—"

Theo planted his feet on the floor between them and stood. Then he took a step toward Harry, sinking to his knees.

"Tell the truth," Theo said.

Harry stared down at him and Theo stared back, his hands wrapping around Harry's thighs slowly, one singularly manic finger at a time.

"You're like an infestation," Harry said. "You drive the people around you to madness, don't you?"

"Mm." Theo slid his thumbs along Harry's inseam. "One of my talents."

Harry reached a hand out, smoothing his fingers through Theo's hair. It was soft, still growing in from his former buzz cut, and Harry tightened his fingers around the roots, tugging lightly at the back of Theo's head until Theo groaned quietly, the sound almost inaudible against the fabric of Harry's jeans.

"Be honest, you're hard as fuck," said Theo. "You loved it, telling her off. You'd do it again in a heartbeat."

Harry yanked Theo up by his collar, tossing him brusquely onto his back in the opposite bed. Theo said nothing, eyes wide, and one hand rose to curl around the faint evidence of a smile as Harry straddled him slowly.

"Thought you only accepted devotion," Harry said, tracing one thumb over the motion of Theo's throat while he swallowed.

"I'll make an exception."

Harry reached down, palm grazing the stiffened evidence he'd expected to find.

"Maybe you will," Harry said, and leaned closer, turning his head to brush experimentally against the stubble on Theo's cheek. "But I won't let you."

Then Harry rose to his feet and walked into the bathroom, turning the shower on cold.

Maybe it had been the distraction. Maybe it had been the way Theo could no longer concentrate
"We're so sorry to say this," Minerva said tearfully on the day of their seventh build, "but Harry and Theo, you're the builders going home this week."

She said something else, many things, something about the story not being clear in their time-turner narrative, the judges' inability to visualize their intent the way they usually could. Pansy pretended to cry. Neville looked genuinely stricken; he had expected to be cut. The other two, the Patil twins, were obviously next on the chopping block. Theo could think of a million reasons their design had been worse; how were they even supposed to put themes like time and love and impossibility into Lego form?

It was Harry who took it stoically, unblinking. He must have known, must have felt it coming. Harry was accustomed to disappointment of this kind, unearned and unjustified, but Theo wasn't. He had prepared for every possible outcome but the one where he let Harry down.

"I don't know what to say," Theo said during their closing interview, staring blankly at the camera. "I don't know what to say."

"Is there anything you'd like to tell us about your time in this competition?" asked the producer. It was the same one who'd told him to go after Harry, which now felt like lifetimes ago.

"We're very grateful for the opportunity to work alongside such talented builders," said Harry graciously. "We wish them the best of luck."

Theo, beside him, fumbled for his mic. He suddenly felt he was being strangled by it, rising to his feet in a fit of discomfort. Something in his mind wasn't working, the mechanism wasn't catching. He could feel the burst, the shift in his narrative, the break. His internal voice wasn't speaking anymore, the train of thought that usually directed him. All he felt was numbness, emptiness, suffocation, the anesthesia of worthlessness that fell around him like a shroud.

He stumbled to his feet, Harry chasing after him as he fled the interview green screen.

"Theo," said Harry, and this time no producers followed them. They were no longer interesting, no longer the subjects in this odd, contained experiment. Theo would not build anything anymore, he couldn't feel his fingers. There had never been a purpose to it, not beyond winning. He hadn't actually projected a time after the competition itself. He couldn't feel his face, couldn't feel it when Harry pinned him to the studio wall. Couldn't feel it when Harry's lips met his. "Theo, Theo, it's not life or death, it's just Lego."

Harry's lips were velvet, passion dripping from the walls like the cool trail of sweat down Theo's spine, impermeable. He could taste Harry's desperation, the hands in his hair, the motion of himself reaching for more until his arms suddenly gave out, falling limp at his sides.


He wanted to go limp, to rag-doll into Harry's arms. But training kept him aloft and he turned away, walking and walking and not stopping until the ringing in his ears rendered him deaf to the sound of Harry's voice, which faded to nothing behind him.

Harry no longer had a phone. What he did have was whatever Theo had unwisely ignited. That
fury, whatever it was, that spark. It had lain dormant for years, dying off—or so he thought—with his hope, his longing, but now it was awake, mutinous. He returned to his aunt and uncle's house and took nothing but the old Lego sets, the ones that were Dudley's until Harry made them his. Vernon yelled and so did Aunt Marge, who, again, wasn't even Harry's biological aunt. Which was why he didn't feel particularly sorry when he wordlessly removed the leash from her hand and walked away with her beloved bulldog Ripper.

"Harry," Cho called, catching up to him after he'd walked two blocks in the direction of the nearest train station. "I wish I'd known," she said miserably, her lips finding his through tears. "If I'd known—"

She tasted like salt and disappointment, but only distant traces; it was all substantially less than Theo's kiss, which had been hysterical and overwrought until it had gone flatly catatonic. Harry knew it probably wasn't Cho's fault; that maybe Dudley had given her something she wanted that Harry hadn't offered her at the time, that maybe she'd want something else in the future and it would be someone else and maybe right now that was Harry, but he wasn't the same Harry he'd once been and that was thanks to someone who wasn't her. It wasn't her at all.

"Yeah, well, good luck," he said, disentangling from her. "Though you really ought to marry someone else, for whatever that's worth."

"Harry—"

But he and Ripper kept on walking until he found a phone.

"Hermione," he said when she picked up the phone. "Can you help me find him?"

"Actually, not even Draco's heard from him," she said, sounding apprehensive. "I really thought this would be good for him, but he just… he walked in and then walked out again without saying anything, just grabbing his things and disappearing on foot—"

"I think there's something really wrong with him," Harry said, which was strange, because even as he was saying it, he kept thinking that the only thing wrong with Theo was the rest of the world. He thought about the fact that someone must have noticed that about Theo right away; someone must have felt threatened by it, because they'd gone and put him in a cage. Harry realized that maybe Theo hadn't purposely said the wrong things during his psych evaluation. Maybe he'd just said Theo things, and everyone else was just really fucking wrong about what the right things actually were.

Hermione made fretting noises and then Draco, Theo's friend, got on the line.

"Yeah, I don't know who you are or what the fuck you want," Draco said, "but I've known him my whole life, I know him better than anyone, and I can tell you right now he doesn't want to be followed. Not by me, not by anyone."

Harry glanced down at Ripper, who was actually not so demonic when he wasn't with Aunt Marge.

"No," Harry said.

"What?"

"No."

"No what?"
He shook his head. "You're wrong. Devotion," he explained.

"What?"

"Theo only accepts devotion," Harry said again.

"Jesus, you sound just like him. Look, forget it, I'll take care of it—"

"No," Harry said. "I've got it."

Then he hung up the phone and got on the next train.

Theo's father's house was palatial. There were plenty of rooms for a child, but of course children were not the ideal occupants of a house of this nature, and certainly not a child like Theo. What had been wrong with him then? What was wrong with him now? Nothing, everything, something. It didn't really matter in the end, the difference. He and his Legos would only be underfoot; not that he'd brought any with him.

He felt Harry before he heard him. "Odd place for a nap."

Theo said nothing from where he'd curled lethargically on the floor.

There was a clatter of sound, some footsteps.

"Build something with me," Harry's voice said.

Theo didn't answer.

"Okay, fine," Harry said. "I'll start. You can join me whenever you like."

Theo didn't turn, though he heard the signs of plastic blocks tumbling onto the floor. He listened carefully to the sounds at his back while he kept one eye on the antique mantle clock, wondering how long it would be until Harry gave up. After an hour, nothing.

After two hours, Theo turned slowly onto his other side, observing Harry's build. It was a castle of some kind, which made sense. Harry had a very medieval aesthetic, very fantasy-based. He was constructing some small figurines, tiny suits of armor, which he was placing experimentally along the half-constructed halls.

"What else does a castle need?" Harry asked without looking up, surveying the build and considering how he wanted to line its interiors.

Theo had to swallow before answering. Nobody had spoken to him in days.

"Ghosts," he said.

"A bit gloomy," Harry noted, "but I'll take it."

After five hours Harry had finished the castle's skeleton and made prototypes of the characters filling it. He had selected four different house colors, arranging the figurines into groups.

"Brooms," Theo said.

"Good idea," said Harry.
After Harry had been building for ten hours, Theo suddenly got up and disappeared. Harry stopped, wondering if he should go after him, but instinctively he felt that was an unlikely solution. Draco had been partially right, at least—Theo did not like to be chased. He was the sort of creature who only approached on his terms, when he was ready.

Theo returned twenty minutes later with a tray of assorted teas and baked goods, setting it beside Harry, who paused.

"English Breakfast?"

"Yes, please."

"Cream?"

"A bit."

"Sugar?"

"Sure."

"There should be something odd in the lake. Merpeople. A giant squid."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Biscuit?"

"Please."

"Why are you here?"

"Because you're here."

"I'm not very good company."

"No, and you're a very sore loser, too."

"Did Pansy and Neville win?"

"Yes, but you were right about one thing."

"What?"

"Neville's gone missing."

"What?"

"Yes, it's the strangest thing but he's gone."

"Fled? Absconded to freedom?"

"Or ingested by Pansy."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You've absconded, in a sense."
"Yes." A pause. "Help me with the astronomy tower, would you?"

"There's an astronomy tower?"

"Of course. Where do you expect them to see the stars?"

"How long are you staying?"

"Well, it's not my house and I've not been officially invited, so I suppose until this castle's finished."

"And then?"

"And then I'll come back with another build."

"What is this supposed to be, an intervention?"

The opposite, if that were possible. "Build the tower, Theo."

Theo looked up, appearing to spot for the first time the extremely fat bulldog who was sleeping in one of the room's panels of sun.

"What's that?"

"A dog."

"Has it been here the whole time?"

"He's wandered in and out."

"What's his name?"

"Theodore."

"Is not."

"You're right, it isn't. It's Ripper."

"Uncreative."

"I didn't name him."

"Did you steal him?"

"Yes."

"Did you really?"

"Yes."

"Are you lying to me?"

"Theo," said Harry, pausing his motions to look over at him. "Build the tower so we can do other things."

He saw the vestiges of a familiar recklessness crossing the planes of Theo's face.
"I'd like to taste you properly," Theo admitted. "This time."

"You will. And the next time as well. And the next."

"Hm. Is that devotion I hear?"

Harry watched Theo reach out for one of the tower bricks, cradling it gently in his palm.

"Yes," Harry said.

They took breaks from building only to walk the dog in the gardens, eat, or doze off on the floor. Theo had the sense Harry was watching him, measuring his progress. The more they created, the more Theo returned to himself, slowly, gradually. They built a secret room into the castle and then Theo got to work on a nearby village while Harry designed the lake.

And then at some point after days and days of building, they stopped.

They weren't normal people and so there was no normality here, nothing recognizable. Theo had never crawled on his hands and knees like this before, their eyes meeting over the build that had taken over the room. He had never acquiesced like this, lying on his back when Harry told him to, closing his eyes and letting someone else's touch take over.

"Tell me what you want," said Harry.

"Are you ordering me to give orders?"

"Yes." Harry's calloused fingers dragged along the inseam of Theo's calf. "Tell me."

"Touch me."

"And?"

"Fuck me."

"And?"

Theo exhaled, Harry's breath perilously close to the zipper on his trousers.

"Love me," he said.

Harry dragged himself upright until he was stretched out next to Theo on his side, one hand reaching over to slowly undo the buttons on Theo's shirt. Harry's fingers traveled over the skin beneath the fabric, torturous. There was nothing economical about his touch. He wasted it, lavished it, until Theo was distorted and emaciated for the ecstasy, an eternal want of more.

"Which version of you do you want me to love?" Harry asked neutrally, and Theo's exhale was a slow, shuddering breath that rattled his insides, scrambling his thoughts.

"Which one do you want?"

"All of them. All of them or nothing."

"None of them scare you?"

"All of them scare me." Harry's lips were acid with lemon, bitter with oversteeped forgotten tea.
His voice was jagged-edged, broken, and Theo was moving beneath his hands, communicating his distress with the motion of his hips, the curl of his toes. "Makes me feel alive."

They kissed infinitely. All kisses were conversations and theirs was an argument, no resolution, winner-take-all, until it dissolved into the murky, unintelligible markers of escalation, agitation and panting breaths.

"You're going to have some rules from now on," Harry said with his teeth gritted beside Theo's ear. "You'll not walk away from me again. You'll eat, you'll sleep, you'll create things and not destroy them, and that includes yourself. Are we clear?"

Theo had a feeling Harry had found a purpose in life.

"Yes," he said, and let Harry make him over from scratch, building him up again from nothing.

Several months after Theo ceased his hazardous occupation of Malfoy Manor but one or two weeks before the competition actually aired, Draco looked up from his reading to find that his prodigal friend had returned, the leather leash of a magnanimously sized bulldog looped casually around his arm.

"Where've you been?" asked Draco guardedly, followed by, "Please don't damage any further upholstery."

"Well, primarily I've taken a lover," Theo replied, "but I should think you know perfectly well I've never harmed an innocent textile in my life."

"A lover," Draco echoed. "Surely you don't mean that very strange friend of my wife's?"

"He's quite a dextrous academic," Theo said. "Currently at work on a very impressive book about the philosophy of magic. Or at least an impressively lengthy one."

"Magic," Draco echoed again, "meaning the thing that doesn't exist?"

"Doubtless you're aware of this, Draco, but the frailty of your imagination has always disappointed me," Theo said. "Which is why I've gone ahead and directed my attention elsewhere."

"Can you do nothing without overdoing it?" sighed Draco. "Other people manage to have relationships without acquiring their partners as pets."

"I've heard that," acknowledged Theo. "But in any case, I thought you ought to know. I'm aware how matronly you get when you've grown concerned for my well-being."

"False," said Draco, who had hired a private investigator several weeks to find out precisely what Theo had just told him. "The possibility of your demise delights me, as ever."

"As it should," Theo assured him. "But in any case, do thank Hermione for me."

"You say that as if you have grand plans to disappear somewhere."

"I do, mightily grand ones," said Theo, glancing down at the dog. "Sit if you like."

The dog looked doubtfully upward.

"It's entirely your choice," added Theo.
"That's not how dog training works," Draco said.

The dog sat.

"Well, shows what you know," Theo replied. "In any case, I'm thinking Cornwall will be the place, should you need to reach me. Harry's very partial to open sky."

"I'm fairly confident I won't have any reason to seek you out," said Draco, though of course he would very soon become a religious viewer of the Lego show, and would also write a very strongly worded letter following Theo and Harry's unjust elimination that would involve several deeply litigious threats of judicial incompetence and a scathing public review, ultimately resulting in the show's cancelation. After all, even a cursory reminder of the Malfoy name in the context of immense displeasure was enough to bring things crashing down.

"I'll miss you too," Theo said.

"Get out of my house."

"No need to be so sentimental, Malfoy. You're about as subtle as a brick through a window."

"Goodbye."

"Say goodbye to Draco," Theo said to the dog, whose tongue lolled lethargically from the side of its pronounced underbite. "Well, that's your choice." He straightened and slid on his sunglasses, giving Draco something of a mutinous salute. "Until next time."

And with that he was gone, the sanity in the room finally returning to normal.

Chapter End Notes

Uhhhh so some things: 1) I know it's LEGO and not Lego but nobody has time for that. 2) Yes I've been watching the show Legomasters. I'm furious with it. There's nothing for my creative process like rage. 3) I hope you're all doing well and I'm sorry everything I ever write for this pairing involves such lengthy contemplation of mortality. It's their brand, I'm afraid. 4) Lastly and most importantly: this is for you, ellejb, on the occasion of your betrothal.

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