

Alone Together

by pokeystar

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Chapter 1 of 1

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If you're alone and

I'm alone

Let's be alone together

So much for the International Conference on Rights of Magical Creatures. She had hoped the community of wizards gathered at the verdantly picturesque campus would at least be open to some of her more progressive ideas. Hermione gave a heartfelt sigh and made watery circles on the dark wood tabletop with her mostly empty glass.

She had pressed the flesh, made contacts, and worked her semi-glossy heroine status threadbare. None of that had made a difference to the presentation of her paper on house-elf working conditions, which had fallen on deaf ears. *Small, judgmental, close-minded, uncaring, reactionary, non-pointy ears.* After that, all she had wanted to do was get the hell out of Santa Cruz and drink herself into a not-so-miserable oblivion.

Edna Puckwhacket, proprietress of the Fuzzy Kneazle...the magical bed & breakfast where Hermione was staying during the conference...had very helpfully suggested a few friendly pubs worth a visit when Hermione mentioned wanting to see San Francisco at breakfast.

So now, here she was, drinking alone on a Saturday night at...she checked her watch...one a.m., a shoo-in for the illustration next to 'pathetic' in the dictionary. *Sigh.* She needed another blessedly mind-numbing drink. She signaled the barmaid and while waiting for a fresh ticket to oblivion, looked around at the other late-night denizens inhabiting the Edinburgh Castle pub.

There was a semi-creepy guy in a shabby grey raincoat at the bar, chatting up the sleepy and annoyed bartender, who was clearly counting the seconds until last call. A sloppy drunk couple reclined in a booth, engaged in a public demonstration of affection that some people furtively paid to see in the lurid shops on Broadway. Hermione stared helplessly at them for a few minutes until the girl's choked squeal caused her to blush bright red and hastily avert her eyes. She looked down at her *unfortunately* empty glass and cleared her throat, praying for a prompt delivery of alcohol, forgetfulness, and equilibrium.

A darkly amused chuckle...vaguely familiar in tone...snagged her attention away from her discomfort. It had come from the booth in the opposite corner from the heavily snogging couple, just past the two ghosts sitting at a table on the edge of the central floor near the piano.

The ghosts were the reason why Hermione had stayed at the Edinburgh rather than move on to another of the pubs Edna Puckwhacket had suggested after a quick drink, which had been the original plan. They had noticed her entrance immediately and beckoned her in with a friendly wave.

When she opted to sit in an empty booth instead of approaching them directly, the dapperly dressed ghost had shrugged and continued conversing with his companion.

Still, Hermione felt cozily watched over and protected. They were now playing a game of checkers, though the chuckle had disturbed the companion's move; he frowned at the perpetrator of disharmony while fiddling with the tarnished gold-plated epaulets on his faded blue uniform, the peacock feather that crowned his beaver hat quivering in indignation.

The ghostly glare appeared to have no effect on the unapologetic culprit, who was reading a newspaper. He simply turned a page, the paper rustling quietly, as his white-blond hair gleamed dully in the low light of the wrought-iron chandelier hanging over his head.

Hermione's mouth gaped a little; she briskly snapped it shut when the barmaid set a beer in front of her. She paid the girl and got unsteadily to her feet, pint glass in hand, her eyes never wavering from that hair.

We can have a drink

And shoot the shit

And talk about the weather

"Hullo, Malfoy. Nice blanket of fog we're having."

The days-old copy of the *Prophet* rustled, but he didn't look up at her. "How about those Cannons?"

She grimaced and carefully slid into the booth facing him. "I don't follow Quidditch."

"Anymore," he stated as he met her eyes over the paper.

She downed half the ale in her glass. "Anymore," she agreed, and they both glanced at the ring-less finger on her left hand.

The silence stretched thin between them.

"So, Malfoy, why are you here?" she murmured, toying with the napkin under her sweating glass.

He smirked at her in triumph. "Five whole minutes before a question. Must be a record," he drawled. He gestured at the ghosts, the suit of armor, and the implements of destruction decorating the walls. "Reminds me of school."

She sighed. He was being deliberately obtuse.

Fine. If that's the way he wants to play it.

"No, I meant San Francisco. Why not Santa Cruz, or Venice Beach or Paris, for that matter?" All of the places she named had large magical communities and strong pure-blood enclaves.

He rolled his eyes at her. "The magical world never did me any favors."

She snorted at that. Loudly.

He sighed, knocked back the rest of his drink and signaled for another. For her as well. He smiled wryly at her raised eyebrow. "Spreading the wealth, Granger. Yes, being a Malfoy means money and power and a cushy lifestyle." He paused to rub his temples, paper abandoned. "It also means tradition, obligations, history and strictures. It was wearing me down. I needed to get away from it."

"I can understand that," she said. The barmaid delivered their drinks, temporarily discouraging further comment. She watched as Malfoy paid for them, adding in a very nice tip. The barmaid gave him a saucy wink in return and glided off toward the still heavily snogging couple.

Hermione and Draco stared as the barmaid stood before the couple with a hand on her hip.

"Hey, you two...get a room. This isn't the Crazy Horse, you know." She slapped down their bar tab and two foil packets. "Have fun but be safe. Compliments of the Edinburgh."

The couple hurried off, too drunk and too wrapped up in each other to be shamed by the waitress's antics.

"There's a taxi waiting outside, too!" the incorrigible lady shouted pointedly, observing their stumbling zig-zaggy rush to the door.

Show over, Hermione and Draco turned their attention to the pints of beer before them.

"How's ol' Scarhead?" Draco inquired after a few minutes of companionable silence. At Hermione's look of confusion, he expanded on his question. "I saw Potter and the Weaslette once, like that, down by the lake. Sixth year. They were so hot for each other they didn't even notice me."

She blushed. "They're still like that. I walked in on them in the kitchen at the Burrow once, right before a family brunch!" She sipped her beer while Draco chuckled. "Harry is an Auror and Ginny's on leave from the Holyhead Harpies. She's pregnant with their first."

"Everyone seems to be settling down, don't they?" He tapped the paper. "The Weasel is engaged to Brown. Parkinson and Goyle have been married for ages. Daphne Greengrass is Daphne Flint now. Zabini is marrying some Italian bird his mother found for him later this summer."

Hermione ticked off her own additions on her fingers. "Hannah and Neville, Parvati and Adrian Pucey, Angelina and George, Percy and Audrey." She paused, thinking as she studied her beer. "Luna and Rolf Scamander just eloped to Peru."

"Looney Lovegood? Married?" He shook his head in bewilderment. "I had her chalked up for crazy lady, with cats." He saw Hermione bristle and smirked slightly. "Is the ragged marmalade beast you call a familiar still animate? Not that I'm surprised, really. I always thought he was half vampire. I have scars on my legs from his attempts to suck my blood."

"Crookshanks is doing well, thank you for asking," Hermione said with freezing formality. "He's half Kneazle, not vampire. If you hadn't been plotting to kill the Headmaster and let a bunch of Death Eaters into the castle, he would have left you well enough alone."

Malfoy opened his mouth to reply, his hands gripping the table edge, his knuckles impossibly white, but the bartender interrupted him with a booming "Last call!" as he rang the bell at his side. Draco grimaced, finished his beer and stood up.

"I need some air, Granger. Fancy a stroll?" His tone contradicted the friendly-seeming words, and his posture brooked no opposition. She had just enough of a childhood-induced authoritylashguilt complex residing in her conscience...conveniently enhanced by alcohol consumption...to follow him without complaining.

She suspected that he was well aware of this character foible and had just shamelessly exploited it, despite an equal share of culpability in their dirty little skirmish.

As they passed the ghosts' table on the way to the door, the dapperly suited one cleared his throat.

"Wands about you, young ones. The neighborhood is a bit dicey round here this late." His translucent eyes twinkled at them.

Hermione and Draco looked at each other. The warning, though well-meant, was completely unnecessary.

"Well, yes," the balding ghost continued as he smoothed his tie. "We are lacking in Dark Lords, but a mugger's gun can stop a wizard just as surely as an A.K."

Their mouths dropped open. "How do you know..." they started in unison.

"I know everything." The balding ghost smiled at them kindly. "I was a dab hand at Divination and Notice-Me-Not charms. Came in handy in my line of work. I'm Herb Caen and this gentleman is Emperor Norton." He gestured to the frowning uniformed ghost across from him. "We are very pleased to make your acquaintance Miss Granger... Mister Malfoy."

The pair of young wizards nodded in acknowledgment, still too stunned for proper manners.

"Do you know," Herb commented conversationally, "I went to Heaven once? It ain't bad, but it ain't San Francisco." Emperor Norton raised his transparent tankard of ale in agreement. Herb held up his lucent martini glass and tipped it at Draco and Hermione.

"Here's to the roses and lilies in bloom

You in my arms and I in your room

A Door that is locked, a key that is lost

A bird and a bottle and a bed badly tossed.

And a night that is fifty years long."

The ghost clicked their drinks together and finished them off. "Time to head out, my friends." Herb gestured toward the bartender, who was wiping down the bar and frowning in their direction. "Sam is eager for home and bed."

A voice rusty from disuse spoke up. "And Tom." The Emperor announced it as if it were a proclamation. His mien was regally amused.

"Yes." Herb rolled his eyes. Norton persisted in challenging *his* title as King of Ellipsis... "We mustn't forget Tom."

"Just so," The Emperor returned with an authoritative wave as he nodded a good evening to all and slowly faded from sight.

"I never lose at checkers and he always has the last word," Herb chuckled to himself. "What a fine pair we are." And with a fond farewell bob of his head to the living, the ex-columnist vanished so quickly he kicked up swirls of dust on his chair.

The former schoolmates exchanged looks of bemusement and headed toward the exit, Draco pausing briefly to put some money on the bar and say goodnight to Sam.

Cause baby I know

This world has got you

Shaking in your shoes

Once they were out on the street, Draco motioned vaguely in a direction away from the bright lights of Geary. They walked along, side by side, the atmosphere between them somewhat tense; Draco was pensive, almost brooding, and Hermione maintained a stubborn silence. After several blocks, he came to a sudden stop in front of a nondescript alley. So sudden it took Hermione several steps to realize he was no longer beside her. She turned back to peer at him quizzically.

"I'm sorry," he said kicking a pebble into the gutter. "For that 'crazy lady, with cats' comment. It was a low blow, and you didn't deserve it." He looked at her, a sheepish grin on his face. "Old habit, I guess."

She regarded him in silence for some moments and then sighed. "You don't corner the market on low blows and old habits." She smiled ruefully back at him.

He moved into the alley and beckoned for her to follow him. "I'd like to show you my favorite spot in San Francisco. Have you Side-Alonged before?"

Hermione hesitated to answer, but something about the open urging in his eyes and the eagerness visible in his bearing, so different from the Malfoy she knew in school, convinced her to step into the alley too. She clasped the hand that reached for hers and squeezed her eyes shut as his other arm fell around her shoulders, holding her close to his chest. Apparating always made her tummy flutter.

When she opened her eyes again, they were at the very top of a tower on a hill, the city spread beneath their feet, a blanket of starlight seemingly fallen from the sky. She traveled the perimeter of the structure, feeling her way blindly, unable to tear her gaze from the incredible view.

"It's so peaceful and beautiful up here. I can see why it's your favorite," she murmured when she finished her circuit, finally returning to his side. He hadn't moved a muscle in that time.

"You asked me why I was here in San Francisco?" He waited for the bob of her head and continued, "I spent almost seven years running from my past, and I could never get away from it. Everywhere I went, there it was staring me in the face." He ran his fingers through his hair in mild agitation and flung his arm out in a dramatic flourish, encompassing the stone edifice on which they stood. "Big Ben in London. Clonmacnoise near the River Shannon. La Tour Eiffel in Paris, the Donauturm in Vienna. The Giralda in Seville. And Italy. Do *not* get me started on Italy. Did you know those crazy Muggles built *seventy-two* towers in one town?" He paused for breath, an echo of horrified amazement rendering him temporarily mute.

"It's a good thing you didn't go to Prague," Hermione murmured caught between a laugh and reluctant sympathy. She understood well that desire for escape.

Far away in his thoughts, Draco didn't hear her. "San Gimignano," he pronounced, shuddering in recollection. It had been cold that night, so very cold. Or perhaps it had just been the fear flowing through him...chilling him from the inside out, making his fingertips so icy it was hard to keep a grip on the wand in his hand. He had called Dumbledore a liar, but he had learned that night that the one lying was him. And he had been lying to himself for a long time.

"So I came to America. Fortunately, they are not big on towers here, if one does not count those enormous steel signal catchers. Yanks do love their telly." His half-smile quickly turned into a grimace. "Not that it mattered. By this time, the mere suggestion of the t-word was enough to get me packing. Well, actually, by this time I never unpacked at all." He started pacing a little, as if he were warming up for a race. "The Statue of Liberty, the Washington Monument, Sears Tower, Kennecott smokestack, the Stratosphere, the Space Needle. Worst of all were the prison guard towers. There are more of those than signal towers. Also, not so much symbolic as sledgehammer-like literal."

"You didn't kill him, Draco," Hermione interrupted softly.

He eyed her cynically. "I tried. I almost killed two classmates and let Death Eaters into the school, remember? Oh, and a rabid child-preying werewolf."

"Don't you think playing host to a maniacal fiend and his henchmen for over a year is payment enough?" She had come to that conclusion herself after Harry let her see

certain court transcripts. They both frowned at 'henchmen,' thinking of one very dangerous henchwoman.

"Is it?" he replied faintly, not convinced in the least. "After so long, I got tired of running. Or rather, I thought my swimming skills might not be up to par." He glanced at her to see if she caught his little joke. Her eyes were glistening, her demeanor intent, but her lips curled slightly in recognition. "Somehow, I ended up here, staring down yet another tower. A tower on a hill."

He approached one stony side of the platform, pointing down to the barely discernible neighborhood below.

"One day, I decided to confront my past." He remembered the bitter, metallic taste of terror in his mouth, the way his legs shook, and that his body was covered in a sheen of sweat unrelated to the physical effort of climbing the incline.

"I hiked up that hill, Telegraph Hill, trying to gather some courage, when I saw a parrot. A bleeding Cherry-headed Conure. He was like me...so clearly out of place. But surviving. Thriving even, in this environment alien to his breeding and birthplace. And I thought, if some stupid bird can do it, so can I."

"Parrots are quite intelligent, you know. Well, for birds, anyway. The Nanday Conure, for instance, is highly social and is capable of acquiring quite a good vocabulary..." She trailed off at the patient yet glazed-over look on Draco's face. A look that made her briefly nostalgic for Harry and Ron.

"Why Weasley?" he asked abruptly.

"What?" She was startled by the confluence of their thoughts.

"Why did you love Weasley? Why were you involved with him for so long?" he asked with patient curiosity. The same patient curiosity she always used to tutor Neville in Potions. "He was and is so clearly wrong for you."

She couldn't deny that statement. It was the same conclusion she had reached... eventually.

"I'm not sure, really. I think initially I was attracted to Ron because he didn't think very much." Draco snorted and she quirked an eyebrow at him.

"He's very intelligent. He just... doesn't analyze or quantify or examine everything. He lets stuff be. Also, I was used to looking after him. I suppose I was invested. And then... after..." Her voice broke and Draco shifted closer to her, not quite reaching for her, an abject apology in his eyes, on the tip of his tongue. She saw it and took a deep, shaky breath. "At Shell Cottage he was so considerate, almost courtly. It took my breath away. But there was never time to stop and figure things...how we felt, what we wanted...out. We were pretty busy helping Harry."

She hugged herself, rocking a little for comfort and warmth. Draco Transfigured his handkerchief into a heavy cloak and threw it around her shoulders, tucking it together under her chin.

She gave him a crooked grin in thanks and continued, "Then it was over. Nothing felt safe or reliable or familiar except for Ron. My parents were in Australia and they wouldn't have known me at that point anyway." Draco frowned in puzzlement, so Hermione elaborated. "Not until I removed the Memory Charms, at any rate."

Draco regarded her with a mixture of approbation and respect as she went on, "We'd been through so much together. I thought that made a relationship."

"It usually does," he couldn't help but comment, thinking of his parents.

"But it's so much more than that. Or it should be," she returned. "I thought we had it, too. The same goals, the same values, shared commitment to a future together. I was wrong."

"You were lying to yourself," he said. She started to reply, her eyes bright and snappy but he held up a hand to forestall her. "I'm not being hypocritical or judgmental here. Just realizing we have more in common than I thought. I lied to myself, too. So much and for so long that I didn't even know who I was, really."

He ran his hand along the rough edifice in affection, and then looked her in the eye. "It was only when I came up here, after seeing the wild parrot, that I truly faced my fear. It wasn't some stone cylinder I was afraid of. It was myself. I wasn't a killer. I didn't enjoy hurting people or making them scared. Hating someone, hell, even being angry at them, is exhausting." He sighed. "Power is such a double-edged sword. It can do so much good, and it can destroy indiscriminately. If I was none of those things, if I didn't want to be any of it...what I was raised to value and be...who was I? What could I be? I finally stopped running and started to figure that out."

Draco looked over the edge and noticed that the sun had just started to rise. It bathed the city with a peachy glow that made everything look new. "That's why I love this spot...why Coit is my favorite place. I started fresh here; everything can be new here again." He gestured to the view. Her eyes followed the elegant movement of his arm.

"Wonderful," she breathed, not sure if she meant the vision of grey-greens and peachy dawn that met her gaze.

"The sunrise is even better from Twin Peaks." He offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

She did not hesitate. She did close her eyes, of course, although she knew the fluttering in her tummy wasn't solely due to the sensation of Apparition this time either.

When they appeared in the street near a curve of sidewalk in front of an elaborate concrete barricade with a panoramic view of the bay, a flock of seagulls was startled into flight.

Hermione laughed in surprise and delight, watching the birds' panicked flight against the sky's now rosy hue. Draco was enthralled, taking in her impossibly bushy hair shining with fire in the early morning light, and sparkling brown eyes; no longer irksome, they were comforting in their familiarity and yet strangely exciting too...different from the girl he had known...and alluring.

A car rolled into the turnout, breaking the hushed silence and their respective reveries. She turned to step onto the curb, to get out of the waiting vehicle's way, still watching the avian antics in the sky. He followed closely behind.

As she turned to point out the bird's acrobatics, she was distracted by an especially convoluted pattern and tripped on a crack in the sidewalk. Draco reached out and caught her, the height of the sidewalk and her momentum bringing their lips millimeters from touching.

They stood like that, frozen, the air around them heavy with expectation and magical recognition, until Hermione righted herself by gently pressing against Draco's chest.

"I may be over Ron, but I'm not quite ready for *this*, either." Her hands dropped reluctantly to her sides.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to," he said lowly in reply. "But my head's not on completely straight yet."

She cleared her throat in empathy. "Thank you for showing me a glimpse of San Francisco. I'd really like to see more sometime."

"Are you planning to attend the big shindig in May?" he asked looking at her with just a touch of longing in his wintry grey eyes.

The abrupt shift in conversation and the fluttery feeling in her stomach threw her off a bit. She replied uncertainly, "You mean the Ten Year Ball?"

He smirked slightly and nodded. She was usually very quick on the uptake. He had pierced her swotty façade. Good to know he wasn't alone in *this*.

She grimaced in distaste. "No, I hadn't planned on it."

"Meet me here, then... In San Francisco, at Coit Tower. I can show you around more. In daylight, even," he drawled, feigning a casualness his bated breath denied. He stepped up onto the curb, trying to sway her with his proximity.

She gazed up at him from beneath her lashes, a knowing smile on her lips.

That proximity works both ways, buddy.

He was captivated by those lashes that guarded the secrets in her cognac-colored eyes.

"May second, two thousand and eight. Eleven a.m. alright?"

He nodded in bemusement, his attention still riveted on her coy gaze.

"It's a date," she said smugly. And giving him a slow sultry wink, she turned on her heel and disappeared with a near-silent pop.

He had a date with Hermione Granger. Their first date. Life kept surprising him, but he expected that was the point. Draco wanted to remember this night, to capture the smell and the look and the feel and the sound of her in a Pensieve or trap it in amber. He had a funny feeling their grandchildren might want to hear this story again and again. He knew he would always want to tell it.

So if you're alone and

I'm alone

Why don't we be alone together?

~*~*~*~*~

Many thanks To Manda, Peggy, Bunney & Ilkee for input, suggestions and eagle-like beady eyes.

Lyrics (in bold italics) from Secret Song by The Pink Spiders

Additional inspiration provided by the city of San Francisco and the movies "Before Sunrise" and "Before Sunset"

Written for inadaze22, who requested "first date."

Since I cherry-picked the epilogue, it shouldn't matter that James Sirius's birth is off by a few years.

Edinburgh Castle Pub: http://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/vbuiWssdvlk_luNOZjAlkQ?select=87OQ3juJRQbF-5jJ6--vgg on Geary & Post in the Tenderloin. Fish & chips served wrapped in newspaper.

Crazy Horse: <http://www.crazyhorse-sf.com/> - on lower Market, next to the Warfield (a concert hall).

Herb Caen: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herb_Caen

"It ain't bad, but it ain't San Francisco." actual quote.

"Here's to the roses...fifty years long." his favorite toast.

Emperor Norton: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Norton

Telegraph Hill: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telegraph_Hill,_San_Francisco

Nanday Conures: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conure>

Twin Peaks sunrise time lapse: <http://www.vimeo.com/1635766?pg=embed&sec=1635766>

Nice little car tour of San Francisco: <http://cezornow.net/sftour.html>