

Heavy Lies the Crown

by floorcoaster

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Door Number Three

Chapter 1 of 16

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Chapter 1 - - Door Number Three

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Draco stood perfectly still outside the door that led from Azkaban prison to the Ministry of Magic. He was the image of eternal patience, in pristine and exquisite hand-tailored robes, his long, thin hands clasped behind him. On the middle finger of his right hand he wore the Malfoy signet ring. It was ten generations old and a symbol of the prestige carried by the family name. He wore his hair at the same length he had in his later years of school, with a long fringe in front but well kept. His eyes were bright and, upon very close inspection, betrayed a hint of the delight and relief he felt at finally standing in that spot, on that day.

Though the prison was located on an island in the North Sea, it was linked with the Ministry of Magic by a special Apparition point. This was necessary for the secure transportation of prisoners to and from various trials and hearings. Only two people were allowed to Apparate at a time, the prisoner and a guard, and the transportation was enacted not by the travelers, but by an operative on the Ministry side who simply pressed a button. The destination point in the Ministry could only be reached from Azkaban, and vise-versa.

The prisoner was shackled prior to Apparition, and a band was placed on the left ankle of both he and the guard. The band served to activate the magic in the Apparition device; without it, nothing happened when the operative performed his duty.

Draco's eyes darted to a clock on the wall above the door. He had less than two minutes. Something inside his sternum loosened, and he took a deep breath, the semblance of a smile beginning to form at the corners of his lips. The sensation was so foreign that he took note of it, and a light feeling settled in his heart that he barely recognized as something akin to happiness.

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Standing beside Draco was his mother, dressed in a set of robin's egg blue robes that brought out the color of her eyes and highlighted the pink in her cheeks. She, too, stood perfectly still, staring at the door. In one hand she held a folded Chinese fan; in the other, a small black bag that contained another token, one that she treasured above all others for everything it stood for.

Her heart was pounding and her blood racing, but she, too, maintained an impassive facade. Her son's apparent ease seeped through her and kept her heart from bursting and her from inching toward the door with every second that passed. She marveled at how calm he seemed, how remote. From looking at him, had she not known, she would never have guessed that the last time Draco spoke to his father had been heated and ugly, poisonous words spoken that sliced deep. He almost seemed ... eager?

One man stood between Narcissa and Draco and the door. A Ministry guard, in the customary grey and blue uniform, stood as sentry at the door, ever ready to foil an escape and to make sure that the right prisoner would emerge through the door.

Behind the pair of Malfoys stood Harry Potter and the Minister of Magic himself, Arthur Weasley. Arthur was also still, but Harry kept fidgeting. He'd made a promise to Lucius Malfoy and he intended to keep it, but he was nervous about greeting the man in the presence of his family.

The room itself was bare with grey walls and a black tile floor. A table sat in one corner, upon which sat a small box that contained what Draco presumed were his father's belongings, everything he had on his person at the time of his arrest. Beside the box was a small stack of papers and a quill. A door behind everyone led into the Ministry's lowest level through a series of hallways not seen by the general public. The hallway had doors lining both walls, and on the other side of each door was a staircase that led up into a different courtroom.

Draco exhaled when the minute hand met the hour hand on the twelve and his eyes fell once again to the door. A few seconds passed, and then the knob twisted...Draco blinked, the only outward sign of his anticipation...and finally the door swung open.

Through it walked another guard, one hand holding his wand and the other firmly clasped around the arm of Lucius Malfoy. Draco sucked in his breath upon seeing his father. Prison had not been kind to him. He looked thin, almost gaunt, the way prisoners looked during the years the Dementors reigned over the prison. His hands were magically bound behind his back, and he wore the grey prison garb of Azkaban. His hair, once long and sleek, was cut to his chin and looked unwashed and brittle.

At the sound of Draco's sharp intake of air, Lucius looked up and their eyes locked. Draco was assaulted with emotions and memories, good and bad, of his childhood under the watchful eye of his father.

Lucius nodded slightly and then turned to look at his wife. His eyes were intense as he stared at her, and Draco thought they might have been having a silent conversation, so fixedly they watched one another.

Draco knew his mother wanted nothing more than to rush across the room and throw herself into Lucius' arms, but her pride and upbringing held her back. She would keep her dignity in public, even though the only witnesses would be Potter, the Minister and two guards.

Once the portal door closed, Arthur Weasley stepped around Draco and went to Lucius.

"Mr. Malfoy," he said, his voice strong and confident. "Welcome. I trust you were treated well."

Lucius took his time replying, as though trying out the words for the first time. "Well enough," he replied, finally removing his gaze from his wife's face and settling it on the Minister.

"As Molly would say, you look a bit peckish, but I've no doubt that will soon be rectified." Arthur nodded to the guard still flanking Lucius, and the man removed the bonds on Lucius's hands.

Though the shackles were magical, Lucius still rubbed his wrists as though in pain.

Arthur then put a hand on Lucius's arm and led him to the small table and the stack of papers. "We've got just a few things for you to sign, and of course some items to return to you. These are all standard forms," continued Arthur, separating the pile into three. "We've returned the articles on your person at the time of your arrest, and this stack of documents details the terms of your parole. I believe the Undersecretary went over those with you, did she not?"

"She did," Lucius responded quietly.

"Excellent. Here's the quill. Please sign here ... and there ... initial here ... there ... and finally sign here."

While his father completed the necessary paperwork for his release from prison, Draco became aware of Potter fidgeting behind him. He had been annoyed in the extreme when he learned that the war hero would be attending his father's release, but Narcissa had informed him that there was a perfectly good explanation for it. She had simply refused to explain, nearly ruining Draco's good mood.

Now Potter's slight movements were grating on his nerves. He wanted to collect his father and leave with as little disturbance as possible, something that was already unlikely considering the nature of the man being released. It would be considerably harder to duck out of the Ministry with Harry-bloody-Potter tailing along. However, if he had no intention of speaking to them outside of the room, Draco decided he could put up with the other man's presence for a short while.

He could not, however, tolerate Potter's incessant shuffling. Lucius and Arthur were bent over the table, the ever-alert guards keeping their eyes trained on Lucius and their hands near their wands. Narcissa was watching her husband intently, her only movements the steady clenching of her hand around the black bag.

Draco turned his head slightly to the right, raised his hand to his mouth and fisted it, then coughed. Just as he finished, his eyes moved to Potter's for the briefest of moments. Harry stopped moving and Draco returned to his stoic position.

Narcissa looked at him questioningly and Draco knew she was worried. Had he coughed before and she missed it? Was he catching something? Should she get him a cup of tea? Should he lie down?

He shook his head slightly and gave her a tiny smile, hoping it would stop the questions in her mind. She worried about him too much, still fretted over him as a mother was wont to do and would make him wear his heavy cloak if she thought it was cold outside. It was one of the reasons he longed for a place of his own, but he had felt a duty to remain with his mother in his father's absence. Now that Lucius was free, perhaps he could think about moving out of the Manor. After all, his duties there would soon be returned to his father.

"There, that should be everything," said Arthur, straightening. He handed Lucius the box on the table. "Is it all there?"

Lucius glanced into the box and, without inspecting anything closely, nodded.

Draco's heart panged at the sight of his father, once tall, strong and handsome, reduced to feeble nods and unsure hands.

"Good, good." Arthur looked from Narcissa to Draco and back to Lucius. "All is in order, then. The Ministry thanks you for serving your time without complaint and bids you a good day and a happy life."

Something flashed in Lucius's eyes, but Draco couldn't place the emotions he saw; they might have been anger, pride, humiliation, or any combination. When he spoke, his words were precise and short. "My wand?"

Arthur reddened slightly and scrambled in an inner pocket. "Ah, yes, of course! Can't forget that, can we? Here you are, good as the day you last saw it."

When Lucius's fingers, at first hesitant, wrapped around the hilt of the wand, Draco saw an immeasurable change come over him. It may only have been visible in the way his eyes took on a steely glint, or in his general countenance, but it was a radical change nonetheless. He had a wand; he was a wizard again.

Draco understood completely. While he had awaited trial after the war, though the period was brief, he'd been required to hand over his wand. He'd felt defenseless, inept,

and impotent. Suddenly he was no better than a Muggle, left to rely on his fists and his wits. In a prison where Dementors didn't haunt the halls, stealing any good thoughts or memories, the arrangements were much like any Muggle prison, except with magical means of restraint, control, and captivity.

He saw very quickly that prison would be nothing like school, where he was protected by two large friends, a favorite teacher, and a name that heralded his right to magic. He knew he wouldn't have lasted long in prison and was more grateful to Harry Potter than he could possibly express upon his release, though he would rather swallow flaming swords than admit it.

"How has your time in office been?" asked Lucius.

"Oh, it's been ... busy," Arthur replied, obviously surprised by the question.

"I see. Do let me know if there is any way I might be of service."

"I ... will do that, Lucius, thank you," said Arthur.

Lucius nodded and turned to his family, then noticed Harry for the first time. He raised an eyebrow. "Potter. You kept your word."

Harry strode forward, confident now at having been addressed. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"Honestly?" Lucius paused. "I expected you to approach me in a less ... public manner. This will do, however."

Draco watched with curiosity so strong it was nearly painful as Harry reached into his robes and removed a small box. He set the box on the table and tapped it with his wand, muttering a spell under his breath. The box ballooned in size to roughly the size of a shoebox. It was made of wood, very old, and the Malfoy crest was engraved, though dulled over time, on the top. An odd sensation settled in the pit of Draco's stomach; he'd never seen the box in his life, and both of his parents seemed relieved to have it back.

Narcissa finally allowed herself to smile when she saw the box. Lucius tapped the box and it returned to its shrunken state. He handed it to Narcissa, who put it inside the black bag she had been holding. At the same time, she removed the bag's previous contents and held her hand out to Lucius.

Draco knew how important this was for his parents and didn't like that there were so many people present. Just as his mother prepared to slip a gold band on his father's hand, Draco turned his head to give them some privacy. His eyes met Harry's. Somehow, Potter knew more about that box than he did, and the knowledge only troubled him further.

"Thank you, Harry," said Narcissa, extending her hand to the black-haired wizard.

"You are welcome, Mrs. Malfoy," he replied, and lightly shook her hand.

"Is that everything?" Arthur asked, glancing from Harry to Lucius.

"Yes," said Lucius, removing his cloak from the items returned to him and wrapping it around his shoulders.

Draco caught a glint of gold on his father's ring finger, and a surge of warmth and loyalty toward his family coursed through him.

Arthur nodded to the guards, and one returned to Azkaban, the other to his post by the door. He led the Malfoys and Harry out of the room and down the long hallway in silence. When they reached the lift, he pressed the button for the Lobby level, and soon they were whisked up, arriving there in moments.

Draco took a deep breath to steel himself for what he expected to see on the other side of the door. The bell dinged and the lift opened. He wasn't disappointed. The entire lobby was full of people, and they all started shouting at once when they spotted Lucius. A surge was detectable when they became aware that Harry was with the Malfoys.

Two guards on either side of the door joined them and led them through a roped-off path that led directly to a fireplace. Harry trailed behind the family while reporters were scrambling for a chance to ask questions.

Draco completely ignored them, as did his parents. He nearly reacted, however, when a voice could be heard shouting over the din. "That Death Eater scum deserves to rot in the dankest, nastiest cell in Azkaban!"

He looked to his father; the only sign Lucius gave that he'd heard the man was a slight twitch of his lower lip. Other than that, he kept his eyes forward and then took Narcissa's hand in his.

Once at the fireplace, Arthur took a handful of Floo powder. "Malfoy Manor, I presume?"

Narcissa nodded and Arthur shouted the destination while tossing the powder into the hearth. Green flames roared to life.

Lucius sent Narcissa through first, then turned to Arthur Weasley and extended a hand. The entire crowd fell silent and the sound of photographers rushing to ready their cameras was the only sound heard.

Arthur didn't hesitate to shake his hand, and then the crowd exploded with noise once again. Lucius nodded to the Minister and then released his hand and stepped into the flames.

Draco was about to follow when Harry clasped him on the back.

"Malfoy, mate. There's a pick up Quidditch game next weekend near the Burrow. We'd love to have you."

It was all Draco could do not to remove Potter's hand from his person. He was busy trying to determine what Harry had really meant, why he had extended an invitation to Draco to a game...to anything at all, really. Flashes were going off throughout the crowd and, not wanting to make a scene, thanked Harry and told him that he would check his schedule.

"Excellent. The Burrow for dinner afterward," Harry added, patting Draco's back again before exiting Draco's personal space.

Still stunned, Draco stepped into the fireplace without another word to Harry or to Arthur. He didn't envy what the two men were left with, nor did he care to think about it once he was safely inside his home.

Lucius and Narcissa were clenched fast in an embrace when Draco arrived, and they seemed not to notice his arrival. He decided that he would speak with his father later and exited the room as quietly as he could.

Once safely away, Draco exhaled, not realizing he'd been holding his breath. He was glad his father was back, but he was concerned as well. What role would he want Draco to play in the business, if any? Draco had been forced into the position of head of the business upon Lucius' imprisonment, and though he had been successful in many endeavors, he had found that it wasn't his passion in life. He was good at it; had sharp instincts for running the company, but he preferred other things.

Draco reached the study and removed his cloak. "Chippy!" he called.

A house-elf with long ears and a short nose appeared within seconds. "Yes, Master?"

"Take my cloak, and see to it that my parents are not disturbed for anything. If you need something, come to me." He was about to dismiss the elf, when another thought occurred to him. "Oh, and let me know if anyone heads this way."

The elf bowed and took the cloak. "Yes, sir, Master, sir." Then he disappeared with a sharp pop.

Draco sighed and sat heavily in the mahogany and leather desk chair. For a few moments, he allowed his mind to empty, staring at the corner of the blotter where he had drawn a broom one day while bored. He hadn't been flying in over four years. The last time he'd been on a broom was when a few blokes from the local pub put together a little Quidditch league. He'd signed up immediately, under a false name, and been the first one on the pitch when they had made teams.

He had been put on the blue squad, and their captain, Wilfred Hortlebee, led them to one corner to discuss practices and games and strategy, and then let them all fly around for a while. Draco had requested the Seeker position, but said he would play anything except Keeper if they wanted a chance at winning.

They flew for an hour and then Hortlebee called them down and started handing out their positions. Draco had colored his hair to a dark brown, but when Robin, a woman who could have easily passed for a bloke, looked him square in the eye, she recognized him and blurted out his name and said she refused to play with a Death Eater. She made such a ruckus that nearly half the people who'd shown up heard and most agreed with her.

Draco quickly bowed out and left, to the taunts and jeers of those still on the pitch. When he'd returned to the Manor, angry but at the same time understanding, he'd thrown his broom down the long entry hallway. Then he'd summoned an elf and told him to take the broom, hide it, and not give it back to Draco or let him see it.

He wondered now whether the elf would follow his earlier order or return it to him. Almost grudgingly, Draco opened the top right drawer of his desk and took out his personal calendar. It was a cube; each side, when touched by his fingers, would reveal different information. He pressed the red side and the cube became a small folio. He opened it and scanned the lines for the following Saturday. He had an appointment with Pansy for lunch, but was otherwise free.

He reached for his quill, a chocolate brown falcon feather, but paused, his hand nearly touching the base. Was he really going to meet Potter for Quidditch in a little over a week? He retracted his arm and opened the bottom left drawer, selected a 2001 bottle of Old Ogden's Finest, and poured some into a glass. He downed the drink, feeling the burn as it traveled through him, merging with the knot in the pit of his stomach.

Harry Potter and he were not friends. They saw each other on average three and a half times a month when they crossed paths in the Ministry and spoke on only one or two of those occasions, if need required it. They were cordial, but never friendly. Draco had never extended an offer of friendship, nor apologized for his behavior in school. In his mind, Harry had behaved only marginally more civil towards him, and their shared enmity had been the result of the natural order of things. Children did not always get along, and once friendships were established, they rarely branched out and formed new social groups. Potter had snubbed his offer of friendship, and though Draco's actions had been misguided, his intentions had been true. He'd concluded long ago that it was Potter's loss ...

For a fleeting moment, Draco wondered what would have happened had he successfully claimed friendship with Harry Potter that day. Would he have ended up fighting beside him? Or would there have been no war, because Potter would have given himself to the Dark Lord?

Draco shuddered at the thought and refilled his glass, for once glad that he hadn't gotten his way.

When he'd downed the fiery beverage, he was left looking through the bottom of the crystal glass at the date of the following Saturday. He had no reason to accept Potter's invitation and a hundred reasons to decline.

Draco set the glass on his desk and refilled it. He wasn't sure they could ever be mates; Draco didn't like Harry's friends, and Harry didn't like Draco's friends. They had been in different houses, had different interests, probably liked different books...if Harry even liked books. They had little in common. Obviously, there was Quidditch, which was all Draco could think of off the top of his head.

Then something jarring occurred to him. They did have something in common, perhaps the most significant thing he, Potter, or anyone in their lifetime had been through: they had survived a war. They both stood on one side of a line and said that everyone else should come to their side. Only thing was... there was more than one line. Draco didn't think Harry had understood that. Maybe he did, finally, and that was why he'd invited Draco for Quidditch. Potter found that he could cross a line and not step into the unknown void that is the Dark Side.

Draco chuckled and absently rubbed his arm where his skin remained marred from the Dark Mark. If only Harry knew ... Draco polished his third drink off and reached again for his quill. This time he managed to remove it from the holder before he had second thoughts.

He would be purposely setting himself up for an afternoon of Quidditch (a good thing) with a brood of Gryffindors (bad thing) most of which were probably Weasleys (ugly things). What was more, he'd just remembered that Potter had mentioned Molly's cooking at the "Burrow" afterwards. He had not only been invited for the game, but for dinner as well. He'd be asked to sit around the fire and swap stories about happy childhood memories.

The thought nearly sent him to a fourth drink when he realized he could simply not stay for dinner. All that would be required was to switch his plans with Pansy from lunch to dinner, and suddenly he had prior arrangements.

Still, could he make it through an entire afternoon with Potter and Weasley? With their friendliness, and easy smiles? He didn't think so.

The fact remained, however, that Harry Potter had extended an offer to him of camaraderie, and in his present situation he would be a fool to turn his back on it. Draco had learned through running his family's business that if an opportunity presented itself, no matter how small it appeared, it should be taken. Being on good terms with the wizarding world's favorite wizard could never be a bad thing.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Draco scribbled "Quidditch" across the entire block for Saturday, next.



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Draco was used to working late, and he had a few things to prepare before handing the business back to his father. The ledgers needed to be updated, reports on changes in the company over the past seven years needed scanning, and the appropriate papers for returning control over an estate needed to be signed. Usually, an estate remained in one name until that person's death, but the occasional exception had to be made in cases like Draco's, where the father is unable to fulfill his duties. When that status changed, it took a great deal of bureaucracy and no small amount of magic to return things to their natural order.

He'd taken dinner in the office and was still finishing his plate of fruit when Chippy appeared, the sound making him jump in his seat.

"I is sorry, Master Draco," he squeaked, hopping on his tiny legs.

"That's ... all right. What is it?"

"Master Lucius is on his way to see you, sir."

Draco nodded and the elf disappeared. He attempted to straighten the papers scattered across his desk, but after only a few seconds, there was a sharp rap on the door before Lucius entered.

He looked much better than when he'd been let out of prison. His hair was washed, and he'd put on a set of black robes. They hung more loosely on him than Draco remembered, but he looked like Lucius Malfoy.

"Father," Draco said, rising from his seat.

"No, sit," Lucius replied, entering the room and taking a seat opposite Draco. He glanced at the desk and then at the room. "It looks as though I left it yesterday."

"I saw no need to change anything significantly," Draco responded. Since moving into the office, he'd only added a few personal books to the shelves and a picture of his parents to the desk.

Lucius sat silently watching his son and then said, "This is unexpected, sitting like this."

"It is. I never would have imagined it." Draco gave his father the best smile he could muster. Echoes of their last conversation bounced off the corners of his mind, mixing with each other, resulting in white noise.

"The last time we spoke," Lucius began, repositioning himself in the chair and propping one leg on the other knee, "was ... unpleasant. I have replayed that conversation in my head for seven years and thought of all the ways I would have done things differently."

"The past is forever unchanging, Father," Draco said. "Let's just leave it there."

Their eyes met and for a few brief moments, Draco truly believed all could be forgotten.

"As you wish," replied Lucius.

Draco nodded and began gathering the papers into a stack. The low fire flickering in the hearth, the cool that had seeped into his bones from the window behind the desk reminded him that the hour was late. "There are quite a few things to take care of, but it shouldn't take more than an hour. Would you prefer we do this in the morning?"

Lucius regarded his son, then the stack of papers, his gaze finally settling on the signet ring on Draco's hand.

Draco saw where his father's attention rested and promptly removed the ring, holding it out to give to his father. "It's all yours."

Lucius stared at the ring for a long moment. It was more than simply handing a piece of jewelry from one person to another. The giving of a signet ring meant the passage of the title of Patriarch, the head of a pureblooded household. Draco had held the position for seven years and was eager to relinquish it. Once the ring was where it belonged once more, he could share everything with his father.

The recipient of the ring would then be entitled to all the secrets of the family, all the passwords, keys, and important documents. Even though Lucius had once worn the ring, too much time had passed to allow Draco to speak with him about these hidden matters. Once he turned over the ring, they would have a window of opportunity in which Draco could reveal things to his father, they could discuss them, figure them out ... Figure out what to do next.

Lucius reached a hand up and nearly took the ring, hesitating in the same way Draco had hours earlier with his quill. "Actually, Son, I was hoping to speak to you about this."

No, no, no! Draco's mind screamed at him. It was so close! He needed to share this secret, to get it off his shoulders. He needed his father's help to deal with it, and what was more, he didn't want Lucius to find out from anybody else. In the form of an anonymous letter, perhaps ...

"Speak about what?" Draco asked, keeping his arm fully extended over the desk.

Lucius retracted his hand. "I have given this a lot of thought. I have spent months contemplating what I would do upon my release. You have handled things exceptionally well during my absence, as your mother tells me. I am confident that you will continue to do so."

Draco's heart sank, and he finally let his arm rest, setting the ring on the edge of the desk. Never in his wildest ideates did he think his father would refuse to resume his post as head of the house. "Continue, Father?"

"For another two months. I wish to take your mother on an extended holiday. Surely, such a desire is understandable."

Draco nodded numbly, his blood cooling slightly at hearing 'two months.'

"Then you'll carry on, as you have been, and we'll take care of all this when I return."

"Two months," Draco repeated, eyeing his father warily. "Just two? Why do I feel like you'll run off and never come back?"

Lucius laughed, and the sound, which had once filled Draco with immeasurable pride, now sounded slightly hollow, as though a balloon had lost some of its air. "Don't be insensible. Of course I will be returning." He stopped laughing and looked at his son, his eyes full of pride. "You've done well, Draco. You are a good son. I know this ... burden has kept you from many things. I ask that you do me one more favor and then you will be free."

"Until the time comes for me to take over again," Draco said glumly, his tone sounding more disdainful than he'd intended. He'd waited his entire lifetime to hear the words his father had just spoken, but his circumstances, specifically one, that bound him more tightly than any shackles ever could, refused to allow him to rejoice.

"Then take your time." Lucius stood. "Spend as many years as you wish being young. Enjoy it. You have certainly earned it."

Draco rose gracefully from his chair and then lifted the signet ring from the desk, sliding it onto his finger once more. It was probably only his imagination, the knowledge of what his continued duties meant for his family, but the ring felt heavier than it had when he'd taken it off. "Of course, Father." He forced a smile. "What's two more months, after all?"

Lucius nodded. "Indeed. We'll be leaving first thing day after tomorrow, as soon as all the arrangements can be made and the elves can get us packed. Will you need anything while we're away?"

"No, I can manage. I've been alone a number of times when mother went on shopping trips to Paris or Milan with friends." Shopping trips that had him working nearly eighty hours a week for months to afford, scrounging to save every spare Knut he could. She always said he worked too much, that he should have more fun in his life. He never begrudged her innocence; he would never tell her the truth about their state. He would rather work with his bare hands until they were bloodied than tell her the truth.

"Good." Lucius smiled, and for the first time in his life, it spread all the way to his eyes. "See you at breakfast in the morning. Your mother has ordered something special to be prepared."

"Sounds wonderful."

Lucius turned to go, then paused with one hand on the door. Slowly, he turned around, his piercing gaze looking at Draco curiously. "Son, is there anything you wanted to tell me?"

"No," he answered, perhaps a little too quickly.

Lucius lingered, glancing around the office again, as though hoping for a clue as to the truthfulness of his son's hasty response. "If you're sure ... Your mother also wanted me to inform you that we will likely be having guests tomorrow night for dinner. She wants you in attendance."

"Of course." Guests meant ex-Death Eaters, many who had managed to elude capture and blame after the war. There weren't many, but they all held Lucius in very high esteem, despite Potter's claims about his family's 'good deeds.'

"There was something I wanted to ask," Draco said when Lucius reached again for the knob.

"The box?"

"Yes. What was it? Why did Potter have it, and not me?"

Lucius sighed. "It is my fervent desire to explain everything to you one day."

"Not today," said Draco, unable to help feeling a little bitter.

"No. I hope soon."

Draco nodded and Lucius left. Once the door had closed behind him, Draco slumped back into his desk chair. He gripped his hair and pulled until it hurt, then refilled and promptly emptied his glass. He was about to refill it again when the calendar caught his eye, one square somehow peeking out through all the papers on the desk. Saturday, next. **Quidditch**. How could he possibly consider going now, after learning that he would still be responsible for the business? He often met with professional associates on the weekends, for outings, meals, at parties. True, he hadn't scheduled anything else for that day except lunch with Pansy, so he wouldn't have to cancel any plans.

He decided to leave it to the fates. "Chippy!" he called.

The house-elf appeared in the middle of the room, his hands still folding the napkin it had been before Draco had summoned him. "Yes, Master, sir?"

"My broom. I require it."

The elf's eyes widened. "Master says not to give it up."

"And now Master wants it. Bring it to me at once."

Obviously torn between two opposing commands, the elf wavered, not wanting to upset Draco, or to fail whatever test he was being given.

Draco sighed. "I've got a ... game next week. If you don't bring me the broom, I shall be forced to buy another."

Chippy nodded quickly and disappeared, confirming Draco's suspicions that on occasion, he got so drunk that he shared his deepest secrets with the only creatures available to listen. In fact, he made it a point never to become so inebriated in the company of others, in case he did open his mouth and speak too frankly. Now he was glad for his personal rule and waited patiently.

Chippy returned after a few minutes and, hesitant once more, waited before presenting the broom. "Here you is, Master. Just as you asked."

Draco took the broom and dismissed the elf, thrilling at the feel of the wood in his hands. He admired the broom, the way it hummed, as though excited at being held by its owner once more, at the prospect of flying again. It looked freshly polished, as though someone had taken excellent care of it and not neglected in the back of a broom closet.

He was grateful to the elf for keeping the broom in good condition and considered rewarding him, though that task had proved difficult over the years. House-elves liked their work and got embarrassed when thanked for it. Why should they receive praise for doing what they were supposed to do? Draco had attempted a few times to leave sweets, only to find them on a tray beside his bed the next morning with a hot cup of tea. However, Draco had never asked the elf to polish his broom, to tend to the twigs, and keep the moving parts oiled. He would think of something.

With a sigh, Draco placed the broom in the corner of the room and attempted to make sense of the mess on his desk. He sorted all the papers into three piles: for Lucius to read, for Lucius to sign (brightly colored magical arrows pointed to each place the signature was required) and papers to file. Grudgingly, Draco magically wrapped each stack of papers and spun the chair to his right, where his filing cabinet sat.

He pressed his finger to the top left corner and waited until the top drawer opened. Inside was a single red folder with no label. Draco placed all three stacks of paper into the folder and said, "Lucius, turnover papers, 13 August." Draco's words appeared on the folder's tab, and Draco tapped the folder with his wand. It disappeared, to be replaced with another empty red folder. Draco closed the cabinet, finished clearing the desk, and straightened the office.

The long-awaited day had arrived and was now waning. He was relieved that soon it would all be over, but worried that somehow his father would find out before he could tell him. Draco grabbed a worn book from his space on the bookshelf, turned out the lights, and headed for bed.

Three hours later, he still lay in bed, wide awake and staring at the ceiling. His book was finished and sat on his night stand beside an empty water glass, a small journal, and an Ever-Ink quill. He had imaged in his mind the wonderful, relieved sleep he would experience after his father's release so much that now he feared it would never come. However, his father was home, safely tucked into bed next to his wife. They would go on their much needed holiday, and when they returned, all would be set right. The full relief Draco had anticipated would not be possible until then.

Determined to sleep, Draco called for the house-elf and requested a Dreamless Draught from his personal stores. The elf complied, and within five minutes of taking the prescribed dose, he fell into a deep slumber.

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A/N: Welcome to my newest story! It's going to be a long one [I've got 29.75 chapters written so far], so I hope you'll join me for this adventure. I'm going to have a long-ish list of thanks right here, but in future chapters, they'll be kept to a minimum.

Art credit: This chapter's beautiful artwork was created by melia_eothria from LiveJournal.

Beta thanks: I've become accustomed to having a few people look over my stories. One reason is that betas are busy people too, and sometimes they can't all look at the story/chapter/whatever. Another reason is that I've learned that the more I do this, the more I realize I have to learn about writing. I miss things, betas miss things, FanFiction smoothes words together...no published or posted story is ever perfect, but that doesn't mean I can't try! :)

That said, unending thanks to the best betas around: drcjsnider, manda, pokeystar, & zoe.

Title credit: The title of this story was adapted from a play by William Shakespeare. In Henry IV, Part II, Act III, Scene I, the King laments the way sleep has eluded him.

Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose

To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,

And in the calmest and most stillest night,

With all appliances and means to boot,

Deny it to a king? Then happy low, lie down!

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

I never would have thought of this most excellent and deserving title were it not for my dear friend manda, who loves this story almost as much as I do. She's been there from the very beginning, through brainstorming, frustration, blood, sweat, tears, and most importantly, countless google image searches. For you-know-what.

Other Notes: Each chapter in this story has been or will be illustrated by a fabulous Dramione (or otherwise!) artist. The same goes for music. My good friend inadaze22 is putting together a playlist for each chapter, and you can follow along [here](#).

As with "We Learned the Sea," this story will be updated AT LEAST every Friday. So there's no need to encourage me to update; I will.

I truly hope you enjoy this story as much as I've enjoyed writing it.

Comfortably Numb

Chapter 2 of 16

Old friends are reunited.

Chapter 2 - - Comfortably Numb

- - -

At breakfast the following morning, Draco sighed as he took his usual seat at the head of the ten-person table. Narcissa sat opposite him at the other end of the table, and Lucius beside her. Before Lucius's imprisonment, he would read the *Prophet* during breakfast, barely speak a word to anyone. This morning, he seemed to want to know about everything that had happened during his absence.

After he had heard a full report of the grounds of Malfoy Manor from Narcissa, as well as a basic run-down on the wellbeing of their friends, Lucius turned to Draco and asked the question that had most likely been on his mind since...and probably before...his release.

"Have you been seeing anyone, Son?"

Draco tensed and readied himself for at the very least a verbal dispute. Hadn't they agreed just the night before to leave this subject in the past? However, when Draco looked at his father, he saw nothing more than curiosity in his eyes as he continued eating his kippers. There wasn't even a hint of the stern, harsh demands Lucius had made all those years ago.

Narcissa smiled at him then squeezed Lucius's arm.

"Not seriously," he replied tentatively.

"Are you seeing anyone at the present?" He took another bite. Still Draco could detect no malice in his words.

"No. I've been rather busy with the business. There's very little free time for socializing."

Lucius chuckled. "I spent many years running the company, Son. *I know* there is plenty of time for socializing."

"Things have been difficult since the end of the war, Father. There have been quite a few changes within the structure of the company ... I look forward to discussing everything with you when you return. Have you decided where you'll be going?"

"Oh, just about!" said Narcissa excitedly. "We will start in Italy, along the Riviera, and then travel to Spain. Every year they have a large market where witches and wizards come from all over the world to display their goods. The wizarding district of Madrid has to be expanded to nearly ten times its usual size to accommodate them all, but it's such a wonderful time."

"After Spain," continued Lucius, "we'll head to Paris. You know how your mother loves the Champs Elysées, and of course the Place de Magique."

Draco clenched his jaw but otherwise gave no indication of his inner thoughts. The trip would be expensive enough, and he had expected that his mother would make at least one shopping stop, but Paris likely meant a week of shopping. How his father spent a week going through shops, watching Narcissa try on clothes, giving useful feedback, was beyond him. And what a week! He was getting a headache already thinking about how much it would cost him, and not just in Galleons. At least he could find consolation in the fact that his father was no longer in prison.

"Sounds grand. What comes next?" he managed and then took another bite of his meal.

Narcissa launched into a detailed account of which shops she longed to revisit, friends she looked forward to seeing again. One thing Draco knew was that in Paris, his mother wasn't just the wife of a Death Eater. In fashionable Paris, such things barely registered. What mattered was the brand of her handbag or the name on the soles of her shoes. She loved to escape into that world and was able to through most of the war until the Dark Lord moved into her home. This would be her first trip to Paris with her husband since Voldemort's defeat, and she was looking forward to it very much.

At some point, Lucius interrupted and indicated that they weren't exactly sure where they would go next, but that they would let him know by letter once they'd decided.

Lucius and Narcissa continued talking about their trip, but something was tapping at the door of Draco's mind, begging for attention. The wisps of idea began to coalesce, finally forming a solid thought.

"Father," he said, interrupting his mother mid-sentence.

Lucius turned to him, a stern expression on his face. "Draco, surely by this age you've learned that it is extremely rude to interrupt."

"Yes, of course, it was an accident," he said flatly, still staring at his father intently.

"What did you feel was so important that it couldn't wait?" Lucius asked with a sigh, leaning back in his chair.

"We're having guests for dinner tonight, right?"

His parents nodded.

"It occurred to me that, on the day following your release from prison for your crimes as a Death Eater, it might not be such a great idea to invite your old chums to your home."

Lucius and Narcissa exchanged a glance. "Thank you for your concern, Draco," began Lucius, his tone patronizing. "These people were friends of ours first and foremost. Surely you would not have us abandon them, just so things appear more acceptable to the Ministry."

Heat rose into his cheeks. "No, of course not."

"It's just a small dinner party, to welcome your father home," said Narcissa kindly.

Draco was quiet for the remainder of breakfast, nodding occasionally, making the sporadic comment when appropriate, but his mind was still churning over business matters. Specifically, the ledgers in his office, which would finally be clear and safe; no more worrying over every little Knut, no more stress when Narcissa went shopping. He just hoped everything would balance to give his parents a worry-free holiday.

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At promptly quarter of seven, the dinner guests began arriving. In the upper echelon of wizarding society, it was proper to arrive forty-five minutes prior to the time printed on the invitation and to bring a gift for the host. The forty-five minutes provided time for the Master of the house to greet all of his guests in a relaxed, leisurely manner.

In the Receiving Room, while stealthy house-elves served drinks and hors d'oeuvres, Lucius and Narcissa stood together, greeting guests upon their arrival.

Draco had held that role during the few small dinner parties his mother had given while his father was in prison. Now that his father was out of prison, he took up a secondary role, glad to be somewhat out of the spotlight, greeting each person who walked in after his parents had done so.

The Notts were the first to arrive. Theo's father, Bradford, had been a Death Eater, had fought against Potter and his friends at the Ministry of Magic, and after the war, had been sentenced to life in prison. Mrs. Athena Nott, goddess of beauty she was not, and Theodore were questioned but never charged with wrong-doing. Mrs. Nott enjoyed gardening, Mah Jong, and sleeping with her gardener, a tall, dark Italian who spoke very little English. She had him hired shortly after her husband's sentence was announced.

Theodore shook Draco's hand and gave him a strained smile. "Good to see you, mate," he said.

"Likewise. How is business?"

Theodore was in a position very similar to the one Draco had been in until the day before. His father was in Azkaban, and would be there for the rest of his life, unless something happened to spur his release. The Notts owned an antique shop that had been in existence in the wizarding world for over 300 years. Before his imprisonment, Bradford and Athena had traveled the world seeking items to sell while Theo's oldest brother, Robert, and older sister, Amelia, ran the shop. Now, Athena and Amelia went in search of wares while Theo ran the shop exclusively given the imprisonment of his father and the death of his brother during the war.

"Good, good," he replied, his eyes betraying his boredom with his current lot. Draco knew he would rather be treasure hunting himself or cultivating his talents in Transfiguration. "We just got a piece in that I think you would like to see, actually. It's an old clock from the 15th century. The face is made of stained glass, and the hands have gems at the end."

"It sounds amazing, I'll try to drop by this week."

"Bring your mum, she'll like some of the new platters we've got as well."

"My parents are going on holiday tomorrow, so she won't be able to join me. But I want to see that clock, and perhaps any new books you've got in."

Following the Notts were Rodolphus and Rabastan Lastrange. They'd managed to avoid capture following the last battle and had spent the last seven years in hiding. They'd had their fill of Azkaban and were willing to do anything to stay out. Still, they were quite accessible by owl post and never missed an invitation for a free meal. This night was no exception.

Draco hated when they visited, but Narcissa had insisted.

"They're family," she had said on the first occasion, just six months after the end of the war. "If it were possible, they could stay here, but with the frequent and random Ministry searches, that's simply impossible."

Draco had been amazed; he'd never thought he would ever be grateful to the Ministry for anything.

Draco's uncles by marriage behaved as they had on every prior visit. Rodolphus was morose and eternally downtrodden as he was greeted by Lucius and Narcissa. When they inquired about his well-being, he scoffed and muttered under his breath. He didn't linger for the usual exchange of pleasantries and barely looked at Draco when he shook his hand.

"Evening, Uncle," Draco said stiffly.

Again Rodolphus muttered, then headed straight for the liquor table and downed two glasses of bourbon. Narcissa had explained to Draco that Rodolphus had once been a charming and handsome man, but that the death of his beloved wife had broken his heart, leaving him shattered.

It was a family adage he had heard many times, irrevocably overused and rarely true. Draco knew it, Narcissa knew he knew it, but why she felt she had to use it with him, he never understood. Perhaps to honor the memory of her sister, whom she would never see as anyone but the girl she'd had tea parties with as a child.

Rabastan, who had always been slightly eccentric, had gone nearly mad in the last war. He always seemed to be teetering on the edge, sometimes so literally that Draco felt he was constantly swaying whenever they conversed to avoid his uncle falling over on him. Rabastan continually wrung his hands and never stood where he didn't have a clear shot at the nearest exit. He could be charming, but his gaunt face, stringy, unkempt hair and missing teeth tended to make people uneasy around him. Draco included himself in that group.

"Evenin', Draco, lad," he said, taking Draco's hand and shaking it forcibly.

"Uncle, thank you for coming."

Rabastan clapped him on the back with surprising force for such a thin man, and his left eye twitched rapidly for a moment, giving the appearance that he was winking. "Enough of that tripe. How ya been? Things keeping in shape for ya, my boy?"

Another side effect of Rabastan's near-insanity was that on occasion, he was difficult to understand. Draco simply did his best to answer the question he thought he had been asked.

"Things are quite well for me, thank you."

"Good to hear it. Any pretty lasses running around here for ya?" He glanced around the room, his head jerking erratically, as though expecting one or two to pop out from behind the sofas or the drapes.

Draco ground his teeth, then said, "No, afraid not."

Again, Rabastan clapped him painfully on the back. "Ah, well, find yaself a couple...nay, a few...and alternate. They seem happier that way."

Draco could only nod and wish with all his might that his uncle would move along and join Rodolphus, who was able to hold his glass steady now that he'd had a few drinks. They both gave Draco the creeps; he had met them for the first time when his Aunt Bellatrix brought them with her to speak to Narcissa over the summer following his fifth year. He hadn't cared for them then, and even less now.

Rodolphus had a very sinister, slightly crazed look in his eyes before Bellatrix's death that had frightened Draco considerably. After Bellatrix died, an empty, haunted look rode the derangement in his eyes.

Trailing in after the Lestrangle brothers was the Goyle family. Gregory Goyle was probably the one person from his house at Hogwarts with whom Draco was still on decent terms. It hadn't always been that way. After the death of their friend, Crabbe, they hadn't spoken for three years. Then one night, Greg had knocked on Draco's door and said he had to talk, had to, before he went insane.

Draco had fixed him a shot of whisky and offered him a seat in the parlor. Greg had spilled his heart out that night, saying how stupid he'd been as a kid and how his life was in shambles because of it. He couldn't hold a job and most places didn't want to hire him in the first place. Money was always coming up short and he had borrowed so much he didn't think he would ever be able to get out from under it. Unlike most of the pureblooded families, the Goyles weren't rich. They had connections, which kept most of their friends happy, but money had always been tight.

Eventually, the subject turned to Crabbe, to the friend they'd both lost in the final battle.

"I saw myself when I looked at him that night, Draco. I could have been looking in a mirror. We were the same, nearly, he and I. I was just one or two steps from going over like he did. It scared me."

Draco could empathize; he'd been a few steps from going the other way, the right way, for a time during the war. He just couldn't work up the courage to do it. They had talked long into the night and Draco had offered him a position with his company. Greg had accepted and in the years since had settled nicely into a position he was good at with decent pay.

The rest of his family was just getting by. Greg's father, Joel, was charged with being a Death Eater, but was let off on a technicality. Still, he hadn't been able to return to his job and now worked at a bar in Knockturn Alley. Theresa, Greg's mother, was a co-owner of a Divination store off Diagon Alley that sold crystal balls, exotic teas, astrological paraphernalia and shawls, among other things. Her partner was Pansy Parkinson's mother, Hyacinth.

Draco's first genuine smile of the evening went to his friend. "Good to see you, Greg," he said, clasping hands with the other man.

"You too, Draco. Been a while, eh? Busy?"

"A bit, yes, getting things ready for my father's return."

"Oh, right. Wonder how Theo feels."

Draco nodded and glanced at the man in question, talking with his mother in the corner by the window and casting worried looks at Rabastan. Theo's father and Lucius had been contemporaries, imprisoned for the same crimes, yet Lucius served only seven years while Bradford would likely never see daylight again except through the tiny, square-foot window in his cell.

"Of course, your dad never spent a night in prison, just those during his trial."

"Best not to bring it up," added Greg.

"I'm sure he's thought about it plenty. Hopefully there will be no hard feelings. I can honestly say that I don't know why my father got such a short sentence, only that it has to do with Potter."

Greg chuckled. "Saw your picture in the *Prophet* this morning. Potter and you getting chummy, then?"

Draco scoffed. "What? No!"

"One of those reporters heard him invite you to Quidditch. You gonna go?"

"I ... I don't...good evening, Mr. Goyle, Mrs. Goyle." Draco was momentarily saved from answering by the arrival of Greg's parents.

"How are you doing, Draco?" asked Joel with a smile.

"Just fine, and yourself?"

"The same, the same."

Theresa Goyle held onto Draco's hand a little too long for a casual handshake. Draco frowned slightly at her and she winked. He shuddered once they'd moved on.

Last to arrive, as usual, were Hyacinth and Pansy Parkinson. Pansy's father had been killed in the war and due to some careful maneuvering on Hyacinth's part, the Ministry wasn't able to touch a Knut of the Parkinson fortune. Following the trials, the Ministry had passed a law called the Death Eater Tax, which required all families with known Death Eaters relations to pay a one-time tax of one million Galleons, or a yearly tax of ten thousand, to cover reconstruction efforts. Very few families had been exempted; the Goyles because they didn't have the money to pay and the Parkinsons because of Hyacinth's cunning.

Draco suspected she'd slept with enough people enough times to be given a special loophole out of it, though he doubted that he'd ever know the truth.

After a few rather well-placed investments, the Parkinsons were soon one of the wealthiest families in wizarding England, third only to the Notts and the Malfoys. All Pansy and her mother did these days was shop, travel, and shop. He'd tried not to begrudge her the freedom she had, but sometimes, after very long, stressful days, he wasn't

very good at hiding it.

Pansy said a hurried greeting to Draco's parents and then rushed to speak with him. He didn't like speaking with her in large, or even small, crowds, because she had a way about her that completely excluded everyone else in the room. She would speak very closely to him, turn her body in such a way that told others they weren't welcome.

"Hello, Pansy," he said, hoping her mother would be along soon.

"Draco!" she cried, throwing her arms around him and then kissing his cheek. "Merlin, I've missed you!"

He couldn't honestly say the same, since whenever they were together all she did was talk about her recent purchases and the men she met on her trips. They were friends because they had always been friends, and he didn't have the energy or the desire to fight her.

Somehow, Draco and his mother had come through the war with the cleanest records and best reputations. Narcissa, for her part in saving Potter's life, and Draco, for being too cowardly to admit that he recognized Potter, Weasley and Granger when they had been brought into his home during the war. The way Potter had sold it to the Wizengamot, Draco and his mother had been put in terrible situations and had to make the best of them. Apparently, it had been enough to secure them 'second chances at life.'

Pansy knew that Draco, of all her acquaintances, had the best position in wizarding society and wanted to be right there with him. When he had refused her attempts to seduce him, she had settled for friendship.

"You're looking lovely tonight, Pansy," he said, knowing it would spark a story about where she had purchased her robes and how the man in the shop had tried to feel her up while taking her measurements.

"Thank you. But," her voice dropped ten-fold, and she leaned in the way she always did, "I heard that you're going to socialize with Potter. Tell me it's not true."

Draco glanced at his parents and saw to his dismay that they were still conversing with Mrs. Parkinson.

"He merely extended the invitation in a show of good will. For what reason, I have no idea."

"You're going then?" she said, crossing her arms and giving him a disapproving glare.

"I ... yes. I'm going." Draco felt an odd sense of relief at his admission, even though he knew he wouldn't hear the end of it all night.

Her eyes widened and her mouth started twitching on the right side, at the apple of her cheek, the way it did when she was incensed. "How could you? It's Harry-bleeding-Potter!"

He thought quickly, a skill he had honed during his years of running a billion-Galleon company.

"Think, Pansy, what could I do? Tell the Golden Boy no?" That seemed to hit her, and her glare went from deadly to cold. "It's one morning of Quidditch, it won't ruin me. Speaking of which, I need to reschedule our lunch that day for dinner."

"Why?" she asked, narrowing her eyes to slits.

"They asked me for lunch. Before you go off on a rant, understand that I don't want to go, but I'm doing this in the best interest of my family. That much I think you can understand."

Pansy was about to protest when Draco caught a whiff of strong perfume. Hyacinth was approaching. Pansy gave Draco one last glare and left him.

"Hyacinth, you're looking fabulous," Draco said, taking her proffered hand and kissing it.

She simpered. "Thank you. You've always had such great taste. Of course, I'm just her mother, so I'm not sure if I can be believed, but I do think Pansy is looking radiant this evening."

Hyacinth was always trying to convince Draco to marry her daughter. She made every attempt, took advantage of anything that remotely resembled an opportunity to make her wishes known. It was obvious the woman didn't care about her daughter marrying for love.

"She is, yes. Quite beautiful. Is she wearing a new pair of shoes?"

Mrs. Parkinson took the bait and began to tell the story of how Pansy acquired her shoes, complete with the man helping her nearly begging for her hand by the end of the fitting. Draco could have told the story himself, he'd heard a similar one told many times.

Fortunately, the Parkinsons were the last of the guests to arrive, and soon Lucius announced that everyone should move to the dining room.

The meal was as pleasant as it could be. Rodolphus glared at his plate the entire time, though he ate his fill and then some. Rabastan seemed to make it his mission to entertain the crowd, while at the same time eating as much as he possibly could, despite Narcissa's assurances that he needn't worry; he could take something with him when he left.

Theo and Greg were seated together, and so they talked nearly exclusively throughout. Draco, through what had to have been his mother's involvement, was seated beside Pansy. Narcissa wanted Draco to settle down, and Pansy was the only witch she really knew that was her son's age. Though, unlike Pansy's mother, Narcissa wanted her son to be happy. She hadn't risked her life during the war so he could end up in a loveless marriage. Why she thought he could be happy beside Pansy, he would never understand.

The general conversation at the table was politics. The men, especially, seemed keen on getting Lucius caught up on the goings on in the wizarding world. They discussed the latest blunders of the Minister, the ridiculous laws that had been passed, and took jabs at the notion of 'tolerance' that the Minister was touting. Draco thought they might get into a bit of Muggle hating or at the least tell a joke or two at the expense of a Muggle-born.

He was relieved when pudding began and not a single prejudiced word had been uttered, but he was suspicious also. True, the Ministry had cracked down on intolerance the best way it could, by punishing those who blatantly discriminated, but people's minds were made long before the Dark Lord came on the scene. The group of people with whom Draco dined had never before hesitated to make jokes about Mudbloods, half-bloods, half-breeds and blood-traitors. The total absence was so stark that he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something else going on.

Following the meal, Lucius and the men went into the smoking room while Narcissa took the women into the parlor for gossip and wine.

Lucius stood tall and proud, speaking jovially with his friends about trivial matters. He had handed out cigars, and Draco had to covertly cast a Filtering Spell on his nose; he had never enjoyed smoking or the resultant smell that followed him when he was around people who did. For the most part he stayed quiet, his mind elsewhere, while the other men talked. Greg and Theo stood nearby, talking about women.

"What do you think, mate?" Theo asked Draco, dragging him out of his thoughts.

"Think about what?"

"Once your parents are gone, throwing a party here, just us! We can invite all the old crowd, even those we don't speak to so much anymore. What do you say?" said Greg.

"I've heard Daphne Greengrass had some sort of ... Muggle enhancement. Supposed to be better than the magical version, look and feel more real," Theo added, winking at Draco.

"A party? Here?"

"Yeah, you'll host it, we'll all eat and dance and get wasted, then fall into bed with whoever in one of the dozens of bedrooms you've got here ..."

"As delightful as that sounds," Draco said impatiently, "I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it."

"Psst! Draco!"

The three young men looked toward the sound of the distinctly feminine voice and saw Pansy peeking in through the door.

"What?" he asked, going closer.

"Come out here!" she demanded.

He rolled his eyes. "No."

Greg came to stand at Draco's elbow. "Hi, Pansy," he said.

"Hi," she replied, barely glancing in Greg's direction. "Draco, please?"

"Why?"

"Just..."

Pansy reached inside, grabbed his arm, and pulled him through the door. He was so surprised that he didn't resist.

"...Come. There," she said, once the door was closed behind them, "that's better."

"What do you want?" Draco asked crossly, wishing he'd been holding a glass of whisky so he could finish it off.

"I was wondering if you've thought any more about my ... proposal."

"Merlin, Pansy!" he said, staring at her incredulously. "You had to ask right now? It couldn't wait?"

"No," she said defiantly, jutting her chin out. "I was bored to tears in there. I couldn't care less about Armando, the garden boy, or who shagged whom last weekend. I needed out of there for some air and thought of you."

"How delightful," he muttered. "We aren't supposed to ... intermingle during this phase of the evening. Men in one room, women in another."

"Better that they get used to the idea, right?" She smiled and put a hand on his cheek.

It was cold and clammy and he flinched away from her touch. How could he even consider what she'd offered if he hated when she touched him? She was trying to be alluring, he knew, but he wanted to get away from her. Gently but firmly, he removed her hand from his face.

"I'm still ... considering it," he said tersely. "If, and it is a very strong **if**, I agree, you must understand what it will mean. I do not love you, I am not attracted to you. You may touch me only when I tell you to touch me. Is that clear?"

She rolled her eyes and pulled a cigarette out of her purse, one of those thin, dainty sticks. "You say that now, Draco. Just wait until I've got my hands all over you; you'll be begging for more."

He snatched the lighter from her hands and threw it behind him as hard as he could. "You may not smoke in my house!" he said angrily, fearful pride getting the best of him. He got right in her face. "I will never beg for anything, not so much as a Knut, if I had nothing and needed it to buy my next loaf of bread."

She laughed uncomfortably. "You never know, Draco."

He backed away and straightened his robes. "That much I know. Don't ask me again about your offer. I will come to you."

Pansy shrugged. "I'll be waiting. Just remember, there aren't many of us left, and I'm just about the only one who's willing to put up with your ... colorful side." She smirked and headed back toward the parlor.

By 'us,' she meant pureblooded witches his age, and she was right. Most of them had married or moved away, and the few remaining were all undesirable for one reason or another. Pansy was different, though; she had money, she was unquestionably pretty, and she was well-mannered. Draco had heard rumors of many men courting her, but she always turned them down.

One month before, she had sent him a formal proposal, drafted by her lawyer and notarized by the Minister himself. In it, she offered herself to him. In addition, he would take control over the Parkinson estate, by far the most appealing part of the proposition. As it was, he would have to wait until he received another message before he could make that decision.

If his circumstances were different, he would have rejected her immediately. They were friends because they had grown up together, had been through many 'firsts' and milestones. They tolerated each other for the most part, but whenever Pansy got it in her head that they would be perfect for each other, Draco had no patience whatsoever for her...like now. The smallest things she did annoyed him immensely, and he'd long concluded that it was his attempt to rid Pansy of her daydreams. He cared about her very much, but it was strictly as a friend.

Draco silently fumed as she walked away and then forced his blood to slow so that he wouldn't appear out of sorts when he returned to the smoking room.

All the men were huddled together near the fireplace, the smoke so thick it was hard to make out their features. They were speaking in low tones when Draco entered the room. Theo motioned for him to join them.

"Lucius, it's got to be you," said Rodolphus as Draco came near enough to hear.

He was surprised to hear not only his uncle's harsh, ragged voice, but the passion behind it. Draco saw fire in his eyes, and it sent a chill down his spine.

"Yes, Lucius," said Rabastan silkily. "Only ya can carry us. With yar ... resourcefulness, ingenuity, and charisma, it'd only be a matter of time before we were once again a force."

Dread filled every space inside of Draco as the gist of his uncles' pleas registered. They wanted to start up the Death Eaters again and wanted Lucius as their leader. Draco glanced at his friends. Greg looked nearly sick, but Theo looked ready to join up. Greg's father, too, had a hungry glint in his eyes.

Not wanting to look at his father, but needing to see what his reaction was, Draco slowly dragged his gaze to the man who had only the day before returned to his life. To his surprise, Lucius was looking at him, his eyes swirling with emotion. Draco sent his father silent pleas to stop this, end this discussion now and run away.

Lucius frowned, then looked away.

In his mind, Draco saw everything that he'd worked for in the past seven years go to waste. All of his efforts to bring credibility to the Malfoy name once more: the donations though grossly inadequate, allowing the Ministry uninhibited access to the Manor and their financial records, and publicly destroying the dungeons beneath the Manor were just a few of the things Draco had done for his family, for his father. If Lucius agreed to this wild scheme, Draco didn't think he could bear it. He would leave, he decided the instant his father had frowned. He didn't care how much it would cost him; he couldn't go through more darkness, and he wouldn't live in the shadow of war.

"Think, Lucius!" continued Rabastan, eagerly. "It'll be like the World Cup eleven years ago. I wasn't there, but I heard about it. Terrorizing Muggles, and Mudblood filth..."

"This Minister is a disgrace to magic," spat Rodolphus. "Mudbloods should be rounded up and given what they deserve. Make them beg, make them wish they'd never heard of magic! What's to stop us?"

Lucius sighed. "If the Ministry didn't have every single one of us on a list, watching our every move, then perhaps it might be possible, however unwise."

Draco exhaled in relief and Greg looked at him, his eyes clouded with fear.

"While your idea is intriguing, gentlemen, I must postpone my decision. I'm leaving with my wife on holiday tomorrow. When I return, we can continue this discussion."

Now Draco's heart fell into his stomach. Lucius hadn't said 'no,' just 'later.'

"I believe it's time to join the women," said Lucius, finishing his glass of brandy. "Remember, not a word leaves this room."

The others agreed and followed Lucius from the room. Once they were gone, Draco sank heavily into an armchair. Greg sat opposite him.

"They're serious, aren't they?" he asked Draco, his brow furrowed.

"Sounds like it. Should've known," he muttered darkly. "Why must they insist on this course? Why not just ...?" His frustration was mounting the more he thought about what his father's friends wanted. "I'm not saying I'm all for this tolerance rubbish, but why can't we simply ... endure them? We ignore them, they go about their lives ... No one is requiring us to be friends with Muggles or Muggle-borns! Let's just leave them be! Look where intolerance got them last time!"

Greg ran a hand through his hair, his dark brown locks falling around his face. "All I know is, I want nothing to do with it. I got my thrills once, and never again."

Draco nodded miserably. "I'll try to talk some sense into my father, but honestly, if his attitude is unchanged, then there's no point. I thought, after he shook hands with Weasley yesterday, that it meant something."

A few moments passed, and then Greg said, "I guess we'd better get going, eh?"

"Reckon so," said Draco. He sighed and stood, feeling older than his twenty-five years.

"What did Pansy want?" Greg asked hesitantly once they were in the hall.

Draco shrugged. "Nagging, as usual." He stopped walking and turned to look at his friend. "Why?"

Greg avoided Draco's eyes. "No reason."

He tried to keep walking, but Draco put a hand on his chest. "No, not true ... Greg, mate. Tell me. Does she owe you money? Do you ~~owe~~ money? I'll lend you whatever..."

"N-no, it's nothing like that." Greg's shoulders slumped. "I don't reckon it was anything to do with me, then."

"Oh. Oh, bugger, Greg. You fancy her. How long has this been going on?"

"I dunno ... Year or so."

"It's nothing, right? Just fancy a shag?" Draco needed to know the depth of his friend's feelings.

"No! Of course not!" Greg said, anger flashing through his eyes.

"You love her?"

Again Greg looked away and shrugged.

Draco shut his eyes and clenched his fists. Here was another reason to reject Pansy's offer. Would Greg ever forgive him if he married the woman he loved, especially since Greg knew that Draco didn't love her one whit? He didn't want to marry her, but he was hesitant to reject her entirely. Draco was in a tight spot and he knew it.

"Bollocks," Draco cursed, shoving his hands in his pockets and walked toward the room where everyone was now gathered.

"What?" Greg asked, hurrying to follow.

Draco stopped suddenly. "Look, mate. Pansy ... she's not right for you. She's spoiled and petty, and you could do so much better. Besides, when do you even see her?"

"Every time she comes down to the office to meet with the Manager," Greg replied, his eyes telling Draco once and for all that he was crazy about the witch and nothing Draco could say would sway him.

"Bloody fantastic," Draco muttered. He forced his negative thoughts aside for the moment. Greg was a good man, the best Draco knew. If anyone would be good for Pansy, it was him. Draco just wasn't sure he could say that the opposite was true, that Pansy was the best woman for him. He sighed. "I'm glad you told me, Greg. Really. Let's go on, shall we?"

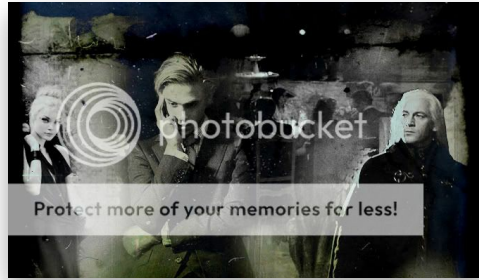
As soon as Draco and Greg entered the parlor, Pansy attached herself to Draco's side, dismissing Greg with a tiny wave. It made Draco angry, so he left Pansy and went to speak with his mother. He saw Greg approach Pansy, and they spoke for a few minutes before Pansy moved away. Greg's disappointed face further rankled Draco.

He hadn't been in the room ten minutes before he felt like he would suffocate. Pansy, Hyacinth, and Athena wouldn't give him a moment's peace, he couldn't catch his mother alone, he would never willingly engage his uncles in conversation, Greg was staring at an oblivious Pansy, and Greg's father was monopolizing Lucius. Draco wanted to leave the gathering and retreat to his office where he could add the new wrinkle of his father's friends' ideas to his plans and mull over his options.

Instead, he was required to stay until the last guest left, which wasn't until after midnight. As soon as the flames in the Floo died after the Parkinsons left, Narcissa excused herself, leaving Draco and Lucius alone.

Draco knew he might not have another opportunity to speak to his father before his trip, and despite the unpleasant conversation he knew would result, asked his father to

remain for a few minutes.



Lucius agreed and sat on a sofa, perfectly at ease. Draco remained standing, his arms crossed and his brow furrowed.

"What's the matter, Son?" Lucius asked tiredly. "Did you enjoy the evening?"

"Not especially, but when have I ever?" Draco replied. "Father ... I must ask you. The conversation in the smoking room. Do you ... I mean, what are your intentions in that regard?"

"Ah," said Lucius, nodding. "The efforts to put the gang back together, so to speak. That worries you."

"Yes, it does. Father, you have the chance to start fresh. The Minister thinks well of you, and being seen with him and Potter could mean we have the opportunity to be what we once were. The Malfoy name has the chance to be respectable again. I've done everything I could to make it so over these years you were in prison, and ... well, I would like it to stay that way."

Lucius propped one leg on the other and regarded his son. Then he chuckled. "In other words, you want me to stay out of trouble."

Draco ground his teeth, but the good-natured look on Lucius's face told him the man was making a joke. Of all things.

"You have nothing to worry about, Draco," said Lucius. "I have no intention of returning to Azkaban."

"That's not nearly close to what I would have preferred you to say." Draco was still staring at his father with an intensity that would have made his underlings mess themselves, but Lucius remained unaffected.

"First of all, what I do with my time is none of your concern. Second..."

"It most certainly is my concern, Father. If you get locked up again or, worse, killed, then I will be responsible for all of this again. That concerns me greatly."

The older man stood to his full height and looked at his son, who stood two inches shorter than him. "Second," he said, the calm in his voice inadequately covering a much deeper emotion. "And I want you to understand me very clearly, Draco. I would never do anything to put you in danger."

The way his father's eyes looked, as if they could bore through solid steel, kept Draco from saying what went through his mind then. *My whole life I've been in danger because of you.*

"One must never agree or disagree to requests like your uncle made in the situation in which we found ourselves: overfull on food and drink, surrounded by monstrous egos. Rodolphus and Rabastan have been twisted beyond the realm of reason. While they can be spoken to civilly, they cannot be helped to see that the circumstances require a different course of action. They will always be of the type who picks up his wand upon command and never asks questions."

"That I believe."

"That is why they want someone to give those commands. If enough people of like-mind get together, it may only be a matter of time before they act."

"I don't want to be in that group."

"You certainly do not have to, son."

"Nor do I want you to be."

"I have given your mother my word that I will put her and you first. I intend to keep my word."

Draco exhaled slowly, letting the words sink in. "You won't be leading a rogue band of Death Eaters in the sport of Muggle-torture."

Lucius smiled wryly. "No."

Draco's entire body relaxed and for the first time in a very long time, he truly felt like smiling.

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A/N: Thank you so much for reading! Chapter title comes from a song of the same name by Pink Floyd.

Art Credit: The amazing artwork in this chapter was again done by the fabulous melia_eothria.

Beta Thanks: Once again, a hundred thank-yous to manda, zoe, drcjsndier, and pokeystar.

Music: inadaze22 gets all the credit for the playlist! Check it out [here!](#)

Such Great Heights

Chapter 3 - - Such Great Heights

Draco bid his parents goodbye first thing the following morning. They traveled by Floo to the International Apparation Point in Diagon Alley where transport was arranged to take them to Spain.

Draco stared into the fireplace after they'd gone, wishing his father would return and ease his burden. When his stomach rumbled, he dragged himself to the office where he ordered breakfast and grudgingly opened his calendar. He had made appointments for his father for the entire week designed to reacquaint Lucius with the people he had once interacted with and to introduce him to the new partners Draco had cultivated in his absence. Most of the appointments he would keep, in order to inform everyone of the delay in handing over the reigns of the company. The extra workload made him scowl.

The week flew by, one appointment after another, and not a single letter arrived by way of a jet-black owl. Draco's spirits rose with each passing day, and when he sat down to look at his calendar Friday morning, he was stunned to see that the following day was his Quidditch appointment with Harry Potter.

Draco had the urge to write Potter and ask him who would be in attendance, but he fought it, not wanting to seem too interested. Friday afternoon, a letter arrived attached to the leg of a snow-white owl that Draco recognized instantly. Potter had been on the front page of the *Prophet* buying his new owl, saying the new one could never replace the friend he had lost in the war, but he looked forward to getting to know his new familiar. Draco remembered it well; it had been the same issue that had announced Lucius's sentence.

It was strange taking a letter from this bird, but he made sure to give her an extra treat. Herschel nuzzled Draco's hand in thanks before flying out the window through which she had come.

The letter was simply a reminder of the game the following day with the location: Briar's Field, near Manchester. It also included a reiteration of the invitation for lunch, which brought to Draco's attention the fact that he hadn't officially changed his plans with Pansy. He scribbled a note, telling her they would meet for dinner in Hogsmeade, and sent it off right then.

That evening before dinner, Draco went flying. At first he'd been slightly worried that he wouldn't remember how to fly, that the broom wouldn't respond to him the way it used to...that he might even fall off...but within moments it felt as though he'd never stopped. After taking a few laps around the Manor grounds, he went to the pitch on the property, set up a ward around it, and let loose a Snitch. He was fairly certain he wouldn't be asked to play Seeker the next day, but it was what Draco loved more than anything else. After an hour or so, the sun about to set, Draco got out a Quaffle and practiced dodging Bludgers and scoring.

He took dinner in the dining room, enjoying the thin line of sweat at his hairline and the way his blood rushed through his veins.

As he soaked in the bath, Draco pondered over the day to come. He knew it could end badly, but he wanted things to go well for a few reasons. His answer to Pansy about why he was playing had been truthful. Not being enemies with Harry Potter could only be a good thing for Draco's family. More than anything, however, the practice session earlier had lit a fire in his blood, and he was thrilled at the chance to fly, to play. He resolved to be on his best behavior and make the most of the opportunity.

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The next morning, Draco Apparated a quarter of a mile from Briar's Field a few minutes after he was supposed to be there. He certainly didn't want to be the first person there and arriving late would give him a chance to see who else would be playing. Plus, the walk would help him steady his nerves. He had dressed in a traditional practice uniform and brought along something to change into for lunch.

He could hear people talking and laughing as he approached the field, and his stomach flopped nervously. He stopped on the edge of the woods and surveyed the scene before him.

There were thirteen people gathered in the center, all with brooms, and it looked as though they were sorting teams. A chest containing the game balls sat off to the side. He counted four redheads, spotted Potter, and recognized a few people from his days at Hogwarts.

"They're waiting for you."

Draco jumped, startled, and spun toward the owner of the voice.

Hermione Granger...at least he thought her name was still Granger...was sitting on an orange sofa about twenty yards away, her legs propped under her, and a book in her hands, watching him curiously.



He'd been so focused on the field that he hadn't noticed her, or the horrible sofa.

"I ... yes." He looked back at the field and took a few steps. Then the reality of what he was about to do crashed around him, and he couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs. His vision started to get spotty on the edges, so he stepped back, closing his eyes breathing deeply until the tightness cleared.

"All right, Malfoy?" Her eyebrows quirked with concern.

He tried to say yes, but found he couldn't yet, so he nodded instead.

"Here, sit."

She was at his side, pulling his elbow toward the sofa. He sat, feeling much better now that he could breathe again.

"Nervous?" she said, her tone amused.

"A bit."

"Don't be. Everyone's agreed to be nice today." An amused smile touched her lips.

"Right."

He looked at her then. She was wearing a white sundress that went just past her knees, thin straps over her delicate shoulders. Her feet were bare, but he saw a pair of sandals on the ground beside the sofa. Her hair was mostly the same, but the sun was hitting it just right, bringing out the different colored strands of gold, bronze and auburn. She was smiling, still amused at his discomfort, and he thought he'd never seen a more beautiful woman in his life. Not in the way most men saw beauty...legs and chests and face...but in the way her pretty mouth was curved higher on one side, her eyes were radiant with life, and her face told the story of how happy she was.

"You sure you're all right?" she asked, a shadow of concern passing over her face.

Her question broke his train of thought and he blinked, thinking he'd been caught in a strange vortex. When he looked at her again, she was still there, still happy, still beautiful. His heart started pounding.

"Yes, I ... I'm fine."

"Can you walk?"

He nodded, though he wasn't sure he could.

"They're waiting," she said, pointing at the field.

Two teams had been formed and had Charmed their uniform tops to either red or green. The red team, Potter's team, was short one player.

"Right," Draco said, feeling surer of himself. He wanted to ask her why she was there, why she was sitting on a sofa so far from the action, what she was reading, but he couldn't. He stood, tested his legs, and started toward the field.

He didn't look back at Hermione, but an image of her was burned into his brain, as though he were staring at her. And then, without warning, the image blurred and he saw her seven years earlier, writhing on the floor of his drawing room, his crazy aunt pointing her wand and cackling. He shivered and nearly tripped, then stopped to look at her again.

She was sitting just as he'd left her, reading. It struck him that part of what made her so captivating, so instantly interesting, was her grace and poise following the events in his home.

He resumed his walk to his team, wondering how he could have forgotten about Bellatrix hurting her before his very eyes. He had never especially cared for the girl, had carried his usual prejudice against her and took every opportunity he could to ridicule and belittle her, but the hate, the spite was all borrowed. He'd never fully taken it into his heart for himself. His formative years were spent trying to impress his father, then the Dark Lord, and then suddenly he was all grown up, yet also a small boy, stuck in man's world. He couldn't even recall her face between the Yule Ball fourth year and that day in his drawing room.

Both memories were so different ... In the first, she was fetching with her hair under control and a touch of coloring. In the last, she'd been fighting against screaming and crying, her jaw and neck clenched, but unable to hold it in. Then her eyes were shut in pain. Once, when Bellatrix let up to interrogate her, she had looked at him, pleading evident in her eyes. She had wanted him to do something, but there was no way she could have known he was just as scared as she.

He'd been in her position a few times when his parents were gone. It didn't take much to set Bellatrix off, and she took pleasure in "teaching him lessons his mother should have." He knew inside that he should have helped Hermione, the same way he'd known he shouldn't kill Dumbledore. It was a deep, resonating knowledge that he felt in his bones to the very core of his heart and soul. It went beyond everything he had heard, everything his parents had ingrained in him, touching parts of his subconscious he had never known were there.

He had been too much of a coward to listen to the voice in his head, and Dumbledore had been killed and Hermione had been tortured. He didn't know how the outcomes would have been different if he had acted, but that was the thing. He would never know.

"Oi, Malfoy!"

Draco looked up and saw Harry waving him over and the rest of the red team watching him. He took a deep breath and went to Harry.

"What position do you want?" Harry asked.

"What's left?"

"You choose first."

Draco blinked. It was strange, being offered the chance to play Seeker by Harry Potter. "I'll take Chaser," he said.

Harry nodded and motioned with his head. "You're with Charlie then."

"All right."

"Don't forget to Charm your shirt red," Harry added.

Draco was still nervous, still felt as though he might pass out at any moment. He felt as though he were lifting a hundred pounds with each step he took toward Charlie and Ginny. They were talking quietly, but when Draco neared them, Charlie gave him a welcoming grin. It startled Draco.

"Hallo, mate. Welcome to the club." Charlie Weasley stood as tall as Draco, his straight red hair falling around his face in thick clumps. It was longer in the back and pulled into a ponytail.

"Er ... what club?"

"The 'Once-Seekers-now-Chasers-because-of-Harry-Potter Club,' of course." He grinned.

Draco was so taken aback that he just stared blankly at the other man. Charlie laughed and nudged his sister.

"You played Seeker, right?" he asked.

Draco nodded.

"So did Ginny, for a year, and I did for five. But now we'll forever be Chasers because of Potter. He's always Seeker."

"Oh," said Draco, feeling his nerves calm due to Charlie's infectious good nature and easy smiles.

"Hey, I wanted to be Chaser," said Ginny, crossing her arms.

"Sure, sure, so Potter could have his spot back." Charlie turned to Draco and said, "She always fancied him, you know."

"Oh, stop," said Ginny. "Let's get to work."

As it turned out, Charlie was very good at Quidditch, no matter the position. He outlined a few plays for Draco and Ginny before the game and, since Draco had never played with their Saturday bunch, told him the weaknesses of the opposing players.

When the game started, Ron flew to his position at Keeper. George and another former Gryffindor, Dean Thomas, were the Beaters. Draco's nerves stopped bothering him the moment he was in the air. He was flying; he could fly almost before he could walk. It was the most natural thing in the world, the one thing in his life he could count on.

The game was informal and no one called fouls, though there were plenty. The opposing team was made up of mostly former Ravenclaws, with a single Hufflepuff as Beater. She was quite a force to contend with, as Draco soon found out, and he kept note of where she was at all times.

Draco had played the Chaser position as a child, but had craved the glory of the Seeker, who seemed to hold the game in his power. It wasn't until he learned more of the strategies of Quidditch that he began to appreciate the other positions as well. A Seeker might catch the Snitch but lose the game, as Krum had done at the World Cup the last time England had hosted it. Bulgaria had their star, but the Irish team as a whole had been solid. In the end, the stronger team had won.

In the air, Draco forgot about Hermione, he forgot about his parents, the week he'd been through, the letters that came with the jet-black owls. He focused on getting past the large Keeper, getting the Quaffle through one of the gold hoops, on the feel of the wind in his hair and the warm sun in his face.

Far too soon, Potter caught the Snitch, and everyone landed. They had won, 270 to 90. The other five members of Draco's team congratulated him on well-played game. They told him not to let it get to him, that Potter always won. Draco nodded and slowly walked to join Potter and the Weasleys.

A few members of Potter's team spoke to him as he walked, told him he played a good game, and they hoped to see him out again the following week.

Draco thanked them, feeling nervous again now that he was no longer flying. He hurried to join his team, anxious to be done with it.

Charlie grinned and clapped him on the back. "Nice flying, mate! Excellent hands with the Quaffle."

"Er, thanks," said Draco. "Nice catch, Potter," he called.

Harry grinned and nodded. George and Ron were trying to get the balls into the chest where they belonged but the Bludger was proving difficult.

Draco considered leaving then. He had never confirmed that he would stay for a meal, and he could always duck out, claiming work or other plans. He was debating it when Dean said goodbye to all of them and Disapparated.

"Right," said Ron immediately after the sound of the pop had faded. "Let's go eat." He looked at Draco. "Coming?"

Everyone looked at him then and he spoke without thinking. "Yes."

Ron grinned. "Excellent. Don't mind Mum; she'll think you peaky, but just nod and eat what you want."

"She'll try to force second and third helpings on you," said Ginny. She was holding hands with Harry. "But don't be afraid to tell her no."

"Sure," he said, wishing they would do something other than stand in a circle.

George joined them then. "Well, all, into the forest. Let's not keep Mum waiting, you know how she is." He started off without waiting for them.

Draco thought it strange seeing George without his twin and, for the first time, wondered about the Weasleys. How had they gotten on following the war? Their father was the Minister of Magic; had that changed them? How had they dealt with the loss of a son?

Harry, Ron and Ginny followed George, leaving Draco and Charlie. It might have been awkward, but Charlie, having never been the victim of Draco's childhood antics, had the least to forgive of any of the Weasleys. It appeared that he already had, because he started talking to Draco as though he were an old friend. Draco felt perfectly at ease around Charlie.

"What's it like?" he asked as they walked. "Working with dragons? I've always been fascinated that you do that."

Charlie laughed. "A lot of people are, though they wouldn't get close to the beasts themselves. It's wonderful, it's perfect. Exactly what I want to do."

Draco nodded and glanced ahead to make sure he was still heading the right direction. He saw Hermione walking toward them, the wind blowing through her hair and whipping her dress around her knees. Draco swallowed hard.

She spoke first to Harry, Ron and Ginny, and fell back to walk beside Charlie. "Good game, Malfoy."

"Thanks," he said.

Then Hermione grinned and linked arms with Charlie. "Nice flying," she said pleasantly.

"Thank you, mon cheri." Charlie bent down and placed a kiss on the top of Hermione's head.

Draco felt slightly ill. The thoughts that hadn't formed in his mind yet, of stealing glances at her, talking to her, making her laugh, running his fingers through her hair, kissing her, now bombarded him as he listened to her chat with her beau.

The force of the feelings shocked him. He barely knew the woman, hadn't seen her in years, and now she winds up in his day, taking his breath away with her grace, and then running off with the only person around whom he'd felt comfortable. Since when did he have these kinds of thoughts, anyway? True, he hadn't been in a relationship in a long time, but these thoughts felt so ... juvenile. He pushed them away and saw that they had reached the forest.

George, Harry, Ron and Ginny were waiting.

"Malfoy," said Harry. "You've never been to the Burrow, and there are wards up. You'll have to go with me."

Draco frowned. "Side-along?"

"Afraid so. All right?"

He considered telling Potter that he would rather go a month without a meal than get close enough to Side-Along Apparate, but he'd sworn to behave. He gritted his teeth and nodded. "Make it quick."

Ron sniggered. "Merlin, Malfoy. It's not like Harry's gonna pull a tooth out or something."

Ginny rolled her eyes and Hermione scowled at Ron.

Draco ignored them and waited awkwardly for Harry. "Potter?"

The bespectacled wizard went to him and held out his arm. Draco took a few deep breaths, stared above everyone's heads, and lightly put his hand on Harry's arm. Almost immediately, he felt the pull at his navel that signified Apparation, ten times worse as a passenger.

When they landed on solid ground, Draco let go of Harry's arm as though burned. Harry just gave him an amused look.

They were standing outside what appeared to be a house with another house stacked on top of it, and a few extra rooms thrown on top for good measure. It would appear that becoming Minister of Magic had not affected Arthur Weasley in the least.

Draco glanced around the yard and saw an open shed with a car sticking out, a pair of men's legs extending from underneath it. It looked as though the car had rolled over the man, which couldn't be possible, because the car was tucked halfway into a shed.

Harry saw where Draco was looking and explained to him that Arthur had always been fascinated with Muggles and their cars. After the disaster with the Ford Anglica, he had promised his wife he wouldn't purchase another car in order to magically enhance it. Instead, he found an old Volkswagon and liked to spend part of his Saturdays 'tinkering under the hood.'

"I see," said Draco, catching the faint sound of whistling coming from the shed.

"Look, Malfoy. Thanks for coming out," said Harry. "I'm sure you didn't know what to make of my inviting you, but I'm glad you came."

"I had a great time," he said truthfully.

"So great that you'd agree to come out next week too?"

Draco looked at Harry skeptically. "Why?"

"We're one man down. Bill...that's Ron's oldest brother...and his wife, Fleur, are in France for a month visiting her family. We could find someone else, but if you want the spot, it's yours."

"Why did you invite me in the first place? Was that a show for all those reporters?" What Draco really wanted to know was why Potter had kept a box safe for his father while he was in prison. He didn't think it was the right time to ask, and he should probably be asking his father. Still, he was intensely curious.

"No," said Harry. "No show. I had just got to thinking, with your father's impending release. It ... seemed like the right thing to do."

Draco waited for more, but the others were arriving. Charlie and Hermione appeared closest to the house and walked together toward it, still arm in arm.

Ron came up beside Draco and Harry and scoffed. "Disgusting, isn't it?"

Harry chuckled.

Draco glanced at the redhead. "What, are they together?"

"Who knows?" said Ron. "They've been off and on for years. One week they're not talking, the next they can't live without each other. Bloody obnoxious. Wish they'd just get married and be done with it."

"Ron, you're always saying that," Harry chided. "She isn't going to marry Charlie. They're good friends."

"I heard Charlie's got a girl back in Romania," said Ginny, catching up to them and taking Harry's hand.

Just as they reached the house, Charlie emerged, his wand in hand. "We're eating outside. George, help me with the tables?"

It wasn't long before Draco felt completely ill at ease. After the Quidditch players had changed their clothes, all of the Weasleys, plus Harry and Hermione, were rushing about being productive. Some of them carried things, others chopped, and poured, and stirred. Draco tried to be as unobtrusive as possible and ended up standing alone near the tomato bush, watching a garden gnome sneaking through the rows of vegetables.

"Ready!" cried George.

Everyone descended upon the table like locusts to a field of wheat. Draco approached slowly, worried that if he made any sudden movements, he might lose a finger. Harry noticed him first and scooted closer to Ginny, pushing Ron away, to make room.

The meal was unlike any in his home, but reminiscent of Hogwarts. They sat at a picnic table in very close quarters, passing food every which way, talking loudly and over everyone else.

"Ooh! Draco, dear," said Molly when she spotted him. She smiled and waved pleasantly. "Nice to have you! Stay for tea?"

He groaned inwardly, the limits of his patience already expended. He could not make it an entire Weasley day. Fortunately, someone spoke to her, so he ducked out of her sight and tried desperately to think of something to say that would get him involved in a conversation. By sheer luck, he was seated across from Hermione.

She was sandwiched between Charlie and George, and neither was speaking to her at the moment. She was eating her meal, chewing slowly, and had a far-off look in her eyes, as though she was thinking deeply about something.

"Why did you come?" he asked her, hoping she would hear him over the ruckus around them.

"Hmm?" she said, her gaze dropping to meet his eyes. "To Quidditch?"

"Yeah. All you did was read."

"I watched," she said in mock indignation. Her eyes were dancing with mirth, the sun hitting them in such a way that they seemed to stretch for infinite. "That move you did, where you had the ball, and were flying at the other team."

"Right. That one," he said, teasing her.

She quirked an eyebrow. "You spun around on your broom to fake the other person out. Then dodged the other two between you and the goal. Scored. I saw it."

He hated the swell of pride that bubbled in him at the knowledge that she had paid special attention to him, if only for a moment. Juvenile, it was. He reminded himself that she'd probably seen all of Charlie's moves, good or not.

"So you glanced away from you book for half a second."

"It's a lovely place to read, very relaxing. I go every week." She smiled at him as a basket was passed in front of her face.

"What's with the sofa?" he asked.

She laughed. "It's the most comfortable thing you could ever sit on."

"But it's ... orange, it's hideous!"

"I'll have you know I rescued that delightful piece of furniture from certain doom and restored it to health. Cleaned it, refluffed the cushions, and brought it back into its prime."

It was his turn to laugh. "In other words, you nicked it from the rubbish pile."

"I ... well ... you sat on it. Is your only complaint the color?" she challenged.

"I reckon so ... though the fabric was scratchy. Probably had fleas," he teased, finding it rather natural to flirt with her.

She laughed again, and then George called her attention away. Though Draco was unhappy that she was no longer talking to him, it gave him the opportunity to stare at her a bit. He wanted to see if he could pinpoint the source of her radiance, to find some tell that would give away her secret. All through lunch, he watched her talk to her friends and laugh; he noticed that she constantly tucked her hair behind her right ear. Near the end of the meal, he became enamored with her hands. They were thin, but strong, worn from hard work. She held her fork with a serene grace that pureblooded witches would sell their kidneys for.

Harry tried to make conversation with him a few times, but it was stilted and inevitably they fell to silence, and Harry was swept into another conversation.

After the dishes had been cleared and everyone remained at the table, talking, Draco stood to take his leave.

"No, no you don't," said Molly, getting up and going to him. "We haven't had pudding yet, young man."

Arthur smiled at him kindly from the end of the table, as though to say he was sorry for his wife's persistence, but that he really should stay for pudding.

"Really, Mrs. Weasley, I've lingered long enough. I should be going."

She looked as though she might force him back into his seat, but Harry stood up and clapped him on the back.

"Good having you out, Malfoy. I'll walk you outside the wards."

Molly sent a short-lived glare Harry's way and returned to her seat. The rest of the Weasleys waved goodbye and he returned it, glancing at Hermione as he did. She was smiling at him like the others and gave him a small wave.

They walked out of ear-shot of the table, and Draco let out his breath. He was nearly free; though his day hadn't gone as badly as he had feared, it had still been awkward and he could sense all of the things that remained unsaid between him and them. One Quidditch game and lunch couldn't erase the past and he knew it.

"That was ..." he began.

"Interesting," Harry finished, walking into the woods on one end of the property, his hands shoved into his pockets. "Could've been worse."

"No kidding."

"I think George and Charlie had a bet going about you and Ron, which of you would physically assault the other."

"Well, neither of us did."

"I have a feeling Ron got wind of it and had Ginny bet that way for him. Charlie and George's bets are famous for approaching ludicrous. I think that's one reason Ron didn't interact much with you. Which means, now that I think of it, that Ginny and I should have a neat little sum headed our way. Maybe we'll go away for a weekend."

"I'd like to have been in on that," Draco said, his boots crunching twigs with a satisfying *snap* on every step. "Might have made the occasion more interesting."

Harry chuckled. "I don't think we needed any help with that."

Draco stopped walking and looked at Harry. "So, what gives, Potter? When do we talk about this?"

Harry frowned. "About what?"

"About ... that time in fourth year we tried to hex each other and ended up hitting Granger and Goyle. About you pummeling me after beating us in Quidditch fifth year, me constantly cracking on Weasley and his family, Granger ..." He didn't like to think about that because, always, it ended with images on her writhing on his drawing floor in agony.

Harry waved his hand dismissively. "No need."

"Are you sure?"

"We've all talked about it," said Harry. "Ron, Ginny, Hermione and me. If you're willing to overlook the past, so are we."

Draco pursed his lips and considered Harry. "We were kids, but I was more at fault than any of you."

"You had some stupid ideas, but you inherited them. So long as you aren't spouting off that ignorant rubbish, we'd like to think we might get along with you."

Draco wasn't ready to let it go yet. He had said and done a lot of terrible and stupid things as a child, and over the years, he'd come to recognize that. He'd repeated the things he'd heard at home, but after being forced into a man's role at the age of sixteen, he quickly found he didn't know what he believed. He remained in a state of constant fear, hoping that no one would notice him or ask him to do anything. After the war, he'd again been put into a position usually reserved for someone much older than he, and childish insults, pranks, spells, and words hadn't been a part of his life since.

Still, he was aware of the effect his behavior as a child had on those around him, and he was willing to accept that some damage was too deep, too thorough to be forgotten. With Potter and Weasley, it had been words, Quidditch, mildly harmful curses in the halls. With Granger, it had been far worse. He'd not only attacked her for her house and friends, but for her very nature, her essence. And he had watched her be tortured and done nothing.

"No ignorant rubbish. I've been extra-educated in that regard."

"Good," said Harry. "Then, friends?"

"Why?" asked Draco. "Why now, why ... friends?"

Harry shrugged. "Why not?"

"It's not done for no reason. What made you invite me here, what makes you want to ... be friends? And don't give me some empty cliché that means nothing. I'm not looking for a new gaggle of mates, so there had better be a really good reason for me to accept this."

Harry sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, Malfoy. What's wrong with wanting to set things right? You offered friendship once, and I spurned it. Now, I'm trying to fix it. If that's not a good enough reason, then ..." Harry stopped then and looked at Draco intently, searching his eyes so hard he was squinting. Then he continued. "Don't take this any way, and don't even bother asking questions; I can't answer them. You may not need friends right now, this moment, but you might, someday."

At once, Draco thought of the box Harry had stored and remembered the way Lucius had looked when Harry had returned it to him. Potter knew something.

In two quick strides, Draco was in Harry's face, looking down at the slightly shorter man, anger evident in his sneer. "Tell me," he said, his voice shaking with fury. "Tell me, or so help me, I will..."

Harry pushed Draco away with surprising force, his face set but not angry. "I told you, I can't answer your questions. Malfoy, just think about it, all right? Come back next week if you'd like. You are welcome."

"How much farther?" Draco demanded.

Harry pointed. "That tree with the red leaves. You'll be able to Apparate beyond it."

Draco was already walking, his blood pounding in his ears. He heard Potter sigh. Once he reached the tree, he Disapparated without a look back.

He arrived in his bedroom and took several deep breaths to calm himself. Then he went to the window, threw open the curtains and sat in the window seat, leaning his forehead against the window.

It irked him tremendously that Potter knew something about his family, something that would one day affect him...from the way Potter spoke, negatively...and he had no clue about it. His father had refused to speak on the subject, and it appeared that his mother knew about the box and its significance as well. Why was he being left out? Why was Potter let in? None of it made any sense.

Potter's offer of friendship was insane. How did the man think they would ever be more than acquaintances? Did he envision Draco joining them for meals or inviting him to parties? What could they talk about? Their lives were completely different; in the seven years since school, they had only intersected on a few occasions, all of them war-related. Draco donated money, publicly, and then Potter thanked him, publicly. That's how it had gone.

The others ... Weasley, Ginny, George ... He hadn't seen them since the end of the war, and he didn't assume that Potter's invitation came from them as well. He knew better than that.

Charlie, on the other hand, Draco could see himself actually talking to.

But Granger ... she was completely different. He felt uncomfortable twinges in his heart when he thought of her and knew that he wanted to apologize to her. He hadn't admitted regret or sorrow at his previous actions to very many people...perhaps only Greg...but he had wronged her most egregiously, and to her he wished to make it right. Or, rather, better; he could never make right what he had and hadn't done in the past.

Slowly Draco's blood cooled, and he made a point to pin his father down about that box when he returned. Then he decided that if the chance ever came up, he would speak to Hermione and make things better.

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"You look awful," said Pansy Parkinson as Draco slid into the seat across from her. She was wearing a revealing, dark blue dress that displayed her chest in such a way that all the men who passed their table glanced over. Her hair was pulled back with a sparkling barrette and done in an old-fashioned finger-wave.

"Nice to see you, too," Draco said, barely glancing at her as he reached for the wine menu.

Pansy inhaled on her cigarette and blew the smoke to the side.

Draco scowled and reached over, took the fag from her hand, and put it out in the ashtray. "You think I'd ever want to kiss you? That's so disgusting, Pansy."

She pretended to be upset and opened her menu. "Why are you late?"

"Busy," he said, still reading the wine list.

"Draco?" she said in a strained voice that made him look up. "Why do you hate me so much?" Her eyes were full and bright, as though she might cry at any moment.

He closed the menu, forcing a steady stream of air through his nose. "I don't hate you, Pansy."

"You do," she pouted. "Here we are at a nice restaurant, and you're late, in a bad mood, and you haven't even seen what a pretty dress I'm wearing."

Draco gave her the once-over and forced a smile. "You're smashing, as always."

"You're such a liar," Pansy said, reaching into her purse for more lipstick.

The waiter arrived then and they ordered.

"Well?" Draco said. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"I'm sure there are places you'd rather be," she simpered. Then she was all business. "Why don't we just get married, Draco? Things will be so much simpler. Think what an asset to your business I would be."

He scoffed and took a sip of his wine.

"I'm serious!" she said, upset at his dismissal. "I have taken my father's money and increased it by over fifty percent, and you know how much traveling and shopping my mother and I do. I'm really very good with making money, although I much prefer spending it."

"We don't love each other," he said, tired with the same argument. "Never have, never will."

"Oh, don't be such a romantic, Draco. There's no need to bring love into this equation. We'll both make do. It will be a mutually beneficial partnership, one where we are both accepting of each other's dalliances."

"Perhaps I am something of a romantic, Pansy, but I don't want a partnership. I want ..." He had no idea, really; all he knew was that it wasn't what she was describing so flippantly. "Something else. I wouldn't be opposed to loving the woman I marry."

"But think, will you?" She leaned closer, talking quietly. "You'll always have me, and I you, but we'd be free to seek out and find love in other places."

"Yes," he said, getting annoyed. "I grasp the concept. What you fail to hear is that I don't want that sort of arrangement. I ... fine." He leaned forward as well. "Let's discuss your arrangement. What if I agree, and we ... dally, and one of us falls in love? What if I want to be with her, or you with your lover? What then?"

"We won't let that happen. But if it does, then, you can be with her," said Pansy stiffly. He could tell she didn't like the idea one bit.

"Not just be with her, but make her my wife. What then?"

Pansy glared at him. "We would be married. You would have to settle for having a mistress."

"Would she move in with us?" he bit out. Draco's words were laced with ire and his tone venomous. "Share the bed? Better yet, we'll take the bed, give you a cot. Or you could have your own room, find someone for yourself."

"Stop it!" she cried, banging her fist on the table.

Draco leaned back, aware of the looks they were getting. "No. I wouldn't risk it. If I accept your proposal, I will have no intention of seeking a woman to love. If it happens anyway, well, we would cross that bridge when we got to it."

Pansy was breathing very hard, her chest heaving. Draco wondered for a moment whether she was trying to catch his attention, but her expression was one of frustration and hurt. Unfortunately, she caught the waiter's attention instead, and he tripped, spilling their meals all over the floor right beside their table.

Draco rolled his eyes and finished his glass of wine. Pansy, on the other hand, shrieked and jumped away from the mess, her hand flying to her heart. The waiter apologized profusely, and Pansy berated him for nearly spilling something on her dress. made a show of having him help her see if anything had gotten on her or her dress.

Meanwhile, Draco sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose at the minor scene Pansy was making. By the time the waiter left, he was muttering apologies with every breath, backing away like a puppy with its tail between its legs. That was Pansy; she could chew a man up just as easily as she could seduce him.

"That could have ruined my dress," Pansy said when she finally sat down.

"That would have been a tragedy," said Draco in a bored tone.

"The meal should be free," she muttered, scowling at the empty spot where her plate should have been.

He chuckled. "The man dropped our food. I should hope we'd get some sort of compensation."

"We've gotten sidetracked." Pansy raised a well-groomed eyebrow, as though daring him to be the one to resume their discussion.

Draco let out an exaggerated sigh. "Call me a romantic if you will. I want more than what you're offering. It's as simple as that."

"You see?" she said, her eyes blazing. "You do hate me."

"I don't hate you. I don't love you the way you want, and I don't understand why you want to marry me. You barely tolerate me as it is!"

Tears welled in her eyes, and Draco knew he had finally hurt her. He hadn't meant to, at least, for the most part. He had wanted her to understand why he couldn't accept her proposal, and he never really knew how far he could push before she'd feel it.

"Merlin, Pansy, I'm sorry," he said, reaching for her hand.

She snatched it away and pulled a handkerchief from her purse. "Don't touch me, Draco. I don't see why you'd want to. Since you hate me."

Draco growled quietly in frustration. "Pansy..."

"You know what? I'm not even hungry anymore." She stood up, tossed her napkin on the table, drank what was left in her wine glass, and stormed through the restaurant toward the door.

She'd never resorted to such dramatics before, and it took Draco a few seconds to react. He stood, apologized to the waiter who was bringing them a second bottle of wine, tossed down a handful of coins, and went after her. He caught up to her at the door where she was putting on her light cardigan.

"Pansy," he said, taking her elbow.

"Don't, Draco," she said, her tone dangerous. She flashed him another glare and burst through the door onto the street.

Again, Draco followed her.

"Honestly, Pansy, I don't get it. I..."

He wasn't able to finish his sentence, however, because Pansy spun on her heel, closed the short distance between them, and kissed him. Her lips moved fiercely against his, desperate, insistent. She prodded his lips with her tongue, and when he didn't admit her, bit gently on his lower lip. Draco didn't know what he was supposed to do. Should he kiss her back? Would that help the situation? Or would she think he was responding to her because she had ignited something inside him? Stuck in indecision, Draco merely stood there for the few seconds it took Pansy to get out of her system whatever had propelled her to kiss him.

She backed away from him and sighed. "Well. That was awful. You're a rotten kisser."

Her words jolted Draco from his shock and he leveled his gaze on her. "I am not a rotten kisser."

"Yes, you are. I just kissed you, and it was terrible." She sniffed and pulled her cardigan around her. "This dress is so impractical, what was I thinking?"

Draco stood rooted in place, and his hands felt oddly out of place. He had no idea what to do with them, so he finally shoved them in his pockets. "Pansy"

"I love you," she said, laughing lightly, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Doesn't that count for something?"

He stared at her, stunned into silence and inaction. She wiped her nose on the handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes, a futile exercise since she was still crying.

"Merlin help me, I do, Draco. Did you really not know?"

Slowly he shook his head, his mind frozen, locked in panic.

"I've tried so hard to get you to n-notice me, pay attention to me as a woman. I do things I think you'll like, buy clothes that are supposed to help me. Remember when you said you liked the way dark purple looked on me? I spent almost a thousand Galleons on dark purple clothes. I *hate* purple. And you never noticed any of it."

Draco was desperately trying to form a coherent thought that he could turn into something useful to say. All he could do was wonder how she thought sleeping with every man she came across would make him notice her. "I ... Pansy, I didn't know."

"Now you do," she said, her anger deflating. "I finally decided the only way I could get you to listen to me, to consider being with me, was through an official proposition, drafted by a lawyer."

"Pansy," he said, still not knowing what he could say. "I've never felt that way about you. I'm sorry. I thought you fancied the life you'd have with me; I thought it was a phase." He nearly slipped and told her that the only reason he hadn't said no yet was because he needed the money. Not only would that have made her feel even worse, but she would have demanded to know what he meant.

"I guess ... that's a no, then," she said, sniffing.

Bugger, it would have to be. His chest tightened at the idea of losing a way out of his financial difficulties, but a moment later it relaxed and he felt better, though only slightly, than he had since he'd received the elaborate document by official post.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She looked like she might cry again, then she sucked in her breath and gave him a small smile. "I think this might be the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Draco was still recovering from her declaration and her comment confused him. "How's that?" he asked gently.

"I have wanted to kiss you for years," Pansy said, pulling a cigarette and her wand from her purse. With a flick, she lit the end and inhaled deeply. "Years, Draco."

"I'm sorry it was so terrible then. What a disappointment."

She laughed and started walking. "It really was. I thought there would be ... sparks, fireworks. I thought the world would stop and that you would finally see me, see what we could be together. I think I've been in love with an idea for so long that I'd come to imagine it was the only way I could possibly be happy."

He still didn't know what to say, so he walked beside her, comfortable for the first time in years.

"I think I'll take a holiday," she mused. "Alone. It would do me some good, I think. I need to remember me, I think. Instead of the me-who-is-waiting-for-you."

"Pansy," said Draco. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Really. I feel like a whole new woman already."

Draco scowled and, after a few moments of silence, muttered, "I'm not a terrible kisser. I've never had any complaints before."

"Fine, fine," she said impatiently. "Your ego must be soothed after that egregious wound it suffered. That was a terrible kiss. Better?"

"Mildly." He smiled slightly.

They stopped outside an alley from which they would both Disapparate, and Pansy smiled at Draco in a way he'd never seen before.

"Pansy, I'm confused. What happened tonight?"

She sighed dramatically and tossed the butt of her cigarette on the ground, then snuffed it with the heel of her shoe. "My world...at least, what I thought was my world...got turned inside out, but it was okay. I'm going to be okay. I'm going to travel somewhere I've never been, see what I can see with new eyes."

"Do you ... still fancy me?" Her demeanor was so serene now, so calm, that if he hadn't been with her the entire time, he would have bet she'd taken a Calming Draught.

"I'm not sure!" she marveled. "Even if I do, that kiss doesn't exactly pique my interest. How about I come over when I get back? We'll have tea, and talk. Like we did, once."

"Sure, I'd like that."

"Night, Draco," she said and stepped into the dark alley.

Draco waited for the characteristic *pop* and then continued walking down the street in search of something to eat.

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A/N: Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Hermione's entrance into the story. I'd love to hear any and all theories you have so far on what's going on. Many thanks to my betas: manda, zoe, pokeystar, & drcjsnider. Chapter title belongs to The Postal Service.

Art Credit: The fabulous manip for this chapter was done by silverotter1 of LiveJournal.

Don't forget to check out the [music!](#) Playlist by inadaze22.

A Day's Work

Chapter 4 of 16

Draco runs errands, meets someone unexpected, and gets disturbing news.

Chapter 4 - - A Day's Work

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Draco was in a quandary. He had one hour until he had to be in his office in another part of London, listening to a presentation on why investing in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes was a good financial venture. Though he was actually looking forward to the meeting, following his not-so-horrible interactions with both George and Ron the previous Saturday, he had several things he had to take care of, and he would be hard-pressed to make it on time.

First, he had to Floo to Gringotts for the daily deposit. Usually someone else went instead, but on the third Wednesday of every month, he was required in person to sign

monthly statements and to compare his ledger with the bank's. With so much money being transacted, it took nearly fifteen minutes to complete the task, once he got in to speak with his liaison.

He checked his watch and scowled at the line in front of him. He kept glancing around the lobby, hoping to see one of the goblins with whom he was on slightly friendly terms so that he could be shuffled into the back room to complete his business.

With luck, he spotted Marmoot and gestured for his attention. Marmoot held a senior level position within Gringotts and often assisted Draco personally with anything he needed. The Malfoy name still held sway here, where Galleons, gold, and gems moved the world. Of course, Marmoot hadn't missed the steadily dwindling balance; he'd simply been too professional to mention it.

Marmoot shuffled across the lobby and stopped in front of Draco. "Mr. Malfoy. Follow me."

They entered a small room, and Draco set his briefcase on the table.

"I will be back with the necessary paperwork," said Marmoot. He returned in under five minutes, and they began the process of signing, initialing, checking and double-checking that everything was in order.

Twelve minutes later, Draco snapped his briefcase shut and shook hands with the goblin. He walked briskly across the lobby, his shoes click-clacking against the marble floor and his robes billowing out behind him. He checked his watch as he exited the bank. Forty-four minutes remained until his meeting.

Draco mentally went through his checklist and headed to the Apothecary, as it was nearest the bank. The Apothecary for Essence of Murlap, then Obscure Books to pick up a book he had ordered, next the Quidditch shop for a new bottle of polishing oil, and finally, Twilfoot and Tattings to pick up a new shirt he had needed fitted.

He had very little time to run his errands and tried to get to them all during one trip. He usually wrote the shop ahead of time, asking that someone put his purchases to the side, so he would only have to go to the counter and pay.

The one place he didn't write ahead was the Apothecary, because the purveyor was disabled and had a hard time ambling through the narrow aisles. Draco knew exactly where the item was that he sought, which aisle, which shelf. He was still going through his list as he walked into the shop, turned right, found the third aisle, and headed for the second set of shelves. It would be on the top, third space from the left. He was so immersed in his routine that he didn't notice a young woman approaching his destination from the other end of the aisle. He didn't see her at all until his hand closed around her hand, which was also wrapped around the last bottle of Essence of Murlap.

Surprised at the unexpected contact, he looked down, without releasing his hand, into the questioning eyes of Hermione Granger.



As though a jolt of magic had touched his spine, Draco immediately jerked his hand away, but was unable to avert his eyes. Wordlessly, she pulled her hand away as well, leaving the bottle on the shelf.

"Granger," he said, stunned at seeing her.

"Hallo, Malfoy," she replied cheerfully.

Hermione was wearing a pair of jeans and a jumper, and her hair was pulled back with a purple ribbon. Even though they were in the middle of the most concentrated Wizarding area in all of England, next to her, he felt out of place in his stark black robes.

Draco glanced back at the bottle. "You take it," he said. "I can return in a few days when there's a new shipment."

"No, you take it," she said.

"Really, I insist." He picked up the bottle and extended it to her.

"I don't really need it," she said. "I've got a nearly full bottle at home. Whenever I open a new bottle, I like to buy another, to make sure I've always got plenty. Honest, I won't even touch it for weeks."

He hesitated. Courtesy dictated that he allow her to purchase the bottle.

Hermione smiled, and he saw again the beauty he had seen the previous Saturday. She gently pushed the bottle away, her fingers grazing his and sending nearly imperceptible waves of electricity through his hand.

"I mean it, Malfoy. I'm sure you need it more than I do."

"You're sure?" he said, holding the bottle as though it might bite him.

"Quite. Take it." She nodded and smiled.

"All right." He decided to write the Potions firm that afternoon and have them send a bottle to her, on him. Draco nodded and was about to wish her a good day when he remembered his pledge to speak with her the next chance he had. This was a perfect opportunity, as she was alone. The only potential complication was his meeting in thirty-six minutes.

"Er, Hermione?" he said, tasting the sound of her name on his tongue.

She looked up from a piece of paper in her hands, obviously surprised at hearing her given name. "Yes?"

"Could ... we go somewhere and ... talk?"

Hermione stared at him for a moment, searching his face. "Well, all right." Her tone was wary.

He let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding and gave her a small grin. "I'll go purchase this and join you outside."

Soon they were walking together toward the nearest café, neither speaking, not knowing what to say.

While Draco was well-known in the Wizarding world, and received his share of odd looks whenever he went out, Hermione was a celebrity. Even seven years after the war, she still turned heads, especially those of witches and wizards who didn't live in London or Hogsmeade and, therefore, didn't see her often.

The two of them walking together drew more looks than either alone had received, combined. For Draco, interest was generated by his being seen with not only a Muggle-born, but the most famous and memorable Muggle-born witch of their time. He knew that Hermione was getting looks, not only because he'd been a Death Eater but also because of his name. He had been in the paper a lot in the weeks leading up to, and the days following, his father's release from Azkaban.

When the unlikely pair arrived at the café, they were asked if they preferred a table in or out of doors.

Both Draco and Hermione said, "Inside," at the exact same moment. They looked at each other and Hermione blushed, then quickly they nervously averted their eyes elsewhere.

Once seated across from each other at a quaint table near the back, Draco ordered a cup of tea and Hermione a glass of water.

"Have something else," Draco told her after the waiter left.

"I'm fine, really. Just finished lunch."

"There were some incredible looking pastries under the glass," he said.

She smiled shyly. "No, really. Thank you, though."

Draco nodded and attended to his tea, adding two sugar cubes and stirring, concentrating on not thinking about what he was about to do.

"Do you always do that?" Hermione asked, drawing his attention.

"Do I always do what?"

"Stir your tea that way. Three turns clockwise, one counter."

He stopped and looked at his hand, then back at her, and resumed stirring. "I suppose I do, unconsciously."

"It's like Pepper-Up Potion," she remarked, taking a sip of water.

Draco chuckled. "You're right. Merlin knows I've brewed that potion more times than I can count."

"Oh?" she asked.

"During the most hectic business seasons, I practically live off of a modified Pepper-Up...essentially a stimulant...and coffee. It's terrible, I know, but I do what I must."

"How often do you have busy seasons?" Hermione asked.

"Well, September through December, small break for a few weeks in January, then the end of January through June." It struck Draco that she was genuinely interested, not just asking questions to fill the silence. Her manner was easy, and the more they spoke, the more relaxed he became.

"Then this is a slow period?"

"Yes, though things will pick up soon. After school starts again, people will be focused on business once more."

"Ah." She glanced toward the counter as she took another drink.

"Order something," Draco said, guessing that her gaze had landed on something sweet. "It's on me, might as well take advantage."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely." He motioned for the waiter, and Hermione ordered a chocolate-filled croissant.

After she took her first bite, her eyes fluttering as she tasted the pastry, he decided he'd best get on with things.

"So, Potter wants to be friends." She nodded and immediately he saw skepticism in her eyes. "That's what I suspected," he said.

"Don't get me wrong," she said after swallowing. "I have nothing against the idea of being friends, I just haven't really worked out how it's supposed to happen yet. I've tried thinking about it, picturing you in the group whenever we're together."

"Doesn't really work, does it?" His smirk was teasing.

"No," she said, smiling. "But then, we don't know you at all. It will take some time, and I'm sure it will be awkward at first. Are you coming out this weekend for Quidditch?"

"I haven't decided yet." He paused to carefully consider his next words. "Regardless of what I choose, I wanted to speak with you."

She nodded, chewing, her expression full of curiosity and skepticism.

Draco took a deep breath and continued. "With Potter and Weasley, I can dismiss my past actions as those of childhood. Potter refused my friendship, so I didn't like him. Weasley was Potter's friend, so I didn't like him either. Children don't always get along; they get into fights, call names, make fun. Curse each other in the hallways. They were just as guilty as I was."

"You have no idea," she agreed.

"The same cannot be said for the way I treated you. The way I spoke to you, the names I called you, were drawn from an inherited well of hate and intolerance. I simply repeated what I learned at home. By the time I was forced to think for myself, I didn't spare any thought about you or any wrongs I had committed. I was focused on not getting killed."

He chanced a glance at her. She had put down the croissant, half eaten, and was watching him with a slight frown on her face. He returned to watching the steam rise off his untouched cup of tea.

"I realize that apologizing for my actions means very little. I can't change the past, and in this situation, my words have little meaning to you, I'm sure." He paused. "Therefore, in addition to my apology, I ... I want you to know ..." Now he met her gaze, an action he hadn't been sure he would be able to accomplish.

She returned it, her eyes full of questions and searching his.

"I know I was wrong," he said, feeling his chest tighten from stretched nerves. "It was wrong to hate you for something over which you had no control. To ridicule and belittle you at every turn for it." Now he couldn't look away, even if he tried. She didn't seem to be breathing, either. He swallowed hard.

"And, lastly, I was wrong not to help you that day, during the war. In my ... with my aunt."

Hermione inhaled sharply and bit her lip, her brown eyes now shining.

"I'm not saying that my sixteen-year-old self would have done any differently, but I knew, that day, that it was wrong to just stand there, yet I was too afraid to interfere. I would like to think that the man I am today would have tried to help you."

He let out his breath, feeling lighter than he had in years. No matter what her response, he had done what he could to make it better.

When he looked at her again, she was staring at her hands, folded in her lap.

"I should have apologized much sooner, but ... suffice it to say that my life has not exactly been mine. I've tried very hard not to think too much about the war and hadn't thought much about that day until I saw you on Saturday." There; he'd done it. He was finished.

They didn't speak for a few minutes, and then Hermione looked at him, her eyes brimming with tears but a smile on her face.

"Thank you. Draco."

He returned her smile with an even bigger one, feeling oddly at peace and almost ... happy.

"You're right, a simple, 'I'm sorry,' wouldn't have meant a lot, but to know you've grown up from that boy in school means a great deal."

"Have you ... Did you have any lasting effects of the curse?" he asked tentatively.

"No," she said quickly, looking at her pastry.

Draco's watch beeped at that moment, indicating that he had five minutes to get across London to make his meeting. He turned it off and took a sip from his now tepid tea.

"Do you need to go?" she asked.

"Yes. But if I'm late, it's not the end of the world."

"Are you sure?"

He shrugged. "It's not as if they can start without me." He took two more quick swallows of tea before he'd had enough. "Would you like to take your pastry with you?"

"I would; it's delicious."

Draco again called the waiter, threw down a few Galleons to pay for their snack, and requested a bag for Hermione.

She took it and wrapped up her croissant. "Thank you again, for this."

"It's not a problem." He stood and brushed off his robes. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me."

For some reason, she broke into a smile, and it set his heart pounding. "You should come on Saturday. They're expecting you."

"Maybe," he said, knowing he probably would go. Draco led Hermione out and held the door for her. They stood facing each other on the sidewalk, people once again staring.

"See you, then," she said, giving him a small wave before turning around and walking into the busy lunchtime crowd.

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Draco was, in fact, late for his meeting. As soon as Hermione had disappeared from his sight, he Disapparated, appearing seconds later inside the lobby of the Malfoy Inc. Caleb, his personal assistant, looked frantic for an instant before recognizing his employer and relaxing significantly.

"Are they here?" Draco asked, accepting a folio from Caleb.

"They arrived ten minutes ago," Caleb replied, his tone clipped. "I've offered beverages and biscuits, which neither Weasley accepted."

Draco nodded and headed for the conference room with Caleb trailing behind. "Thank you. Let's hope we don't run over time."

The conference room in Malfoy Inc. offices was the third door down a hallway of twelve doors. Inside, a long, black table seated twelve, and there was a display screen on one end of the room. On a small table near the door was a fresh pot of coffee and small snacks: fruit, crackers and biscuits. One wall was made of glass and looked onto the hallway. On the opposite wall were generic paintings of country scenes. Butterflies flitted through the air, birds chirped occasionally, and in one, the faint sound of running water could be heard.

"Sorry I'm late," said Draco, removing his outer cloak and setting his briefcase on the ground near his chair. "Let's get started, shall we?"

Seated around the table were three of Lucius's...and therefore Draco's...most trusted advisors, an accountant, and George and Ron Weasley. Caleb took the seat to Draco's right. Ron looked as though he might be ill, but George seemed completely relaxed.

He stood and waved his wand at the projector. A picture of his shop in Diagon Alley appeared on the screen. "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, for meeting with us." When he said Draco's name, the right side of his mouth curved up in amusement. How strange it must be for George and Ron, making a formal presentation to the bloke they'd played Quidditch with a few days before.

An image popped up on the screen of a bar graph, with arrows representing sales for each year growing from the x-axis, each getting progressively taller. "As you can see, since the war, Weasley's Wizard Wheezes has managed to turn a sizable profit which grows with each year that passes. In 2001, with the opening of our Hogsmeade branch, profits nearly doubled. We believe this trend will continue ..."

Another image, showing projected earning, appeared next. "And, by expanding into the greater European market, we predict a sevenfold increase in profits over the next decade. We believe that now is the time to get on board with Weasley's Wizard Wheezes."

Next up were rendered pictures of the shop in Paris, Rome, Prague, and Madrid.

"We've done extensive field testing in Paris, and many of our items are already available to the continent through mail order."

"The European Union has different standards for wizarding establishments," Draco said. "Will you be able to meet their requirements in a timely, efficient manner, and at

minimal cost?"

Ron stood then, his knuckles white as he gripped a stack of portfolios. "Yes, we will." He passed out the portfolios. "Enclosed you'll find our business plan for adapting our current methods to meet the EU's requirements."

Draco thumbed through the portfolio, aware that he had the power to make Weasley squirm. He wondered if Ron would have been more, or less, nervous about this meeting had Draco not attended the Quidditch match. The information presented was good, detailed, and thorough.

There was obviously a great deal more to the presentation, but Draco was hoping to end things early. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley, and Mr. Weasley. If you don't mind waiting in the hall, we'll have an answer for you shortly."

George and Ron exchanged a look. George said, "Don't you want to hear the rest?"

"I've seen enough."

Exchanging unsure glances, the two brothers left the room.

"Well?" Draco said, closing the portfolio. "Thoughts?"

Chambers, an old, fragile wizard who had been old when Lucius had first hired him, spoke first. "Those lads have very red hair."

Next to speak was Dodd, another of Lucius's contemporaries. "My grandchildren love the Weasley products. George Weasley was only seventeen when he and his brother opened their shop. Nearly ten years later, he shows no signs of slowing down. I'm in favor of supporting their expansion."

Lucy Davenport, the first woman Lucius had hired, spoke last. "George Weasley has been featured in numerous journals for his innovations in spell and potion work. I heard he never took a single N.E.W.T., and barely passed any of his O.W.L. exams, yet it's obvious the man has a brain for business and magic."

"Excellent," said Draco, turning to his secretary. "Caleb, would you ask the Weasleys to join us?"

Draco watched interestedly as George and Ron returned to the room. Ron was clearly still nervous, and for the first time, George didn't look so sure of himself.

Draco stood, looking at both men, two people he might soon consider friends. "Congratulations. I look forward to the opening of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes in Paris."

Ron let out a tremendous sigh of relief, and Draco thought he might collapse. George grinned widely and held his hand out to Draco, who accepted it.

"You won't regret this," said George enthusiastically. Then he turned and thanked each of Draco's advisors, plus his accountant and even Caleb. He gathered his presentation items and then he and Ron left.

Draco thanked Chambers, Dodd and Lucy for their time and bid them good fortune until he saw them again.

"You've got a meeting at two, Mr. Malfoy, and then a rescheduled appointment from last week with the Head of WhizzHard Books."

"Followed by the usual tedious paperwork and answering mail. Thank you, Caleb. I'll be in my office until two."

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Draco arrived home at quarter to six. He stepped out of the fireplace into what was called a Travel Room. While most wizarding homes had one primary fireplace, those of the upper class usually had several. A special room was built solely for the purpose of traveling. There was always an ample supply of Floo powder, extra cloaks for keeping one's clothing clean of soot, and a place to wipe one's shoes. There were also hooks for each member of the family. Draco placed his outer cloak on the hook, to be picked up by the house-elf and laundered. When he needed it again, it would be right where he left it.

"Chippy!" Draco called once he'd left the Travel Room.

The house-elf popped in next to him and did his best to keep up with his master.

Draco was in an exceptionally good mood. He had seen Hermione, had completed his task where she was concerned. His meeting with George and Ron had gone well, and he'd felt a strange sense of satisfaction from approving their request. The rest of his day had gone quickly and without incident, and he had even stopped into the Quidditch shop on his way home for the polishing oil he needed. He was looking forward to Saturday's game of Quidditch.

"Anything of note happen while I was away?"

"No, Master."

"Good. What's for dinner?"

"I thought, perhaps, a brisket."

"Excellent. I'll have a bottle of wine with that, the '97 Chardonnay. Is there any mail?"

"Yes, Master, it is being on your desk, sir."

"Thank you, Chippy. Let me know when dinner is ready. I'll be taking it in the dining room tonight."

Chippy nodded and disappeared just as Draco reached the staircase to the second floor. He took them two at a time.

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The evening did not go as Draco planned. He did not take his dinner in the dining room, and he changed his mind about what he wanted four times, finally canceling the whole thing. He drank no wine, only his father's best bottle of cognac that he had been saving for the birth of Draco's first child. Draco didn't think he would ever have children...never find a witch he wanted, never have a moment for himself...and so selected the vintage bottle.

He sat slumped in his office chair, facing the double French doors behind the desk that opened onto a small balcony overlooking the grounds. The doors were open and the cool night air blew through his hair. All the lights in the office were off save one candle on the desk that was almost completely gutted. The only sounds were those of the garden: crickets chirping, wind blowing, the occasional squawk of a peafowl.

Draco's mind was spinning, and there was a piece of parchment sitting open on the desk beside a small stack of photographs.

He had truly believed it would end with his father's release. After all, how could it possibly continue?

He knew he needed a plan, and he was in no mood to bother coming up with one. He took another sip of the alcohol and sighed, shutting his eyes and leaning back in the chair. The wind blowing through his hair reminded him of flying and he thought of the coming Saturday, and the Quidditch game. He could scarcely believe he'd played that one game, that he'd smiled, laughed, felt almost happy. The worst part, the part he wanted to beat his head against a wall for, was that he'd believed it could last. He had

thought his life might finally begin.

A plan. He mulled over the words, hoping something would come to him. In order to form a plan, he would need details, information. He needed to find the wanker and hex his bits off, then cut his fingers off one by one and stick his bleeding hands into a hot, boiling cauldron of acid. Then ...

Draco finished his glass and Summoned the bottle. It wouldn't do to dwell on all the unpleasant things he wanted to do to the fool once he found him. He needed to focus on the plan.

He was alone, which made things infinitely difficult. If he had someone...just one person...off whom he could bounce ideas, someone to brainstorm with him, he would feel better. That person would have to be told his secret, then. His chest tightened at the thought of telling someone. It wasn't that he wanted to bring another person into his mess, but the thought of unburdening himself was exquisite.

There weren't a lot of options for people he could tell. His father, once he returned the signet ring, but that would be another two months, and Draco had to take action before his parents came back. He couldn't tell anyone else in his family, none of his acquaintances. There were deep and Dark spells cast on every parchment he had received, binding his tongue. The only person Draco trusted enough to even consider telling was Greg, but he was pure-blooded, bound by ancient magic as well. Even if he weren't, Draco couldn't be sure he would confide in him. They were friends, true, probably the closest friend Draco had ever had, but he'd never been one to share much about himself.

He was a private man, who had never felt the need to express his musings, thoughts, or feelings to another. As a child, he had come to learn that 'friend' meant anyone who would watch his back if given enough sweets or another payoff. He had marveled at the closeness between others, wondered why they opened themselves so much, gave other people so much power over them.

Something clicked in Draco's mind.

You may not need friends right now, this moment, but you might, someday.

Potter ... was it possible he knew? Draco sat up in his chair, his brow furrowed. How would Potter know? He'd been sure Harry had been referring to the box he'd held for Lucius, but now he couldn't be too sure.

He stood and went onto the balcony and started pacing. After a few moments, he stopped and leaned against the railing. There was no way Potter knew anything about the letter Draco had received. Surely he would have mentioned it, not withheld that information, especially considering his offer of friendship. Draco didn't know a lot about Harry Potter, but he was certain that if Harry considered him a friend, he would tell him any news he had about Draco's troubles. He also knew that Potter was the kind of person who would help Draco, even if they weren't friends.

The wind picked up again and whipped around Draco, tousling his hair. It carried a sweet scene, of jasmine and gardenia from his mother's garden.

You may not need friends right now, this moment, but you might, someday.

Draco was considering telling Potter when it occurred to him that he didn't trust anyone. If he couldn't trust his closest friend with his problem, how could he expect to trust a near-stranger? And what could Potter do that Draco couldn't? He wasn't sure if he was any good at brainstorming, or research. He would probably tell Draco he felt really bad for him, spend a few minutes pretending to think, and then say he was sorry that he couldn't help.

He didn't need to consider Weasley; Draco trusted him less than Potter.

Inevitably, his thoughts fell to Hermione. She was the last person he wanted to involve, only because he'd already been the cause of too much misfortune in her life. Moreover, if he did find the bastard, he or she could be dangerous. Hermione owed him nothing; there was no reason to ask her.

Yet the more he thought of all the reasons why he didn't want to tell her, his mind conjured that many convincing arguments of why she was the perfect person to aid him. For the strangest reason, he thought he could trust her. Maybe it was what happened between them that afternoon over cold tea and half a chocolate croissant, but he felt a connection with her. She, like Potter, was the kind of person who would do anything for a friend, and even though they weren't exactly friends yet, he knew that with the proper persuasion, she would help even him. At least, he hoped.

Still, he didn't want to ask her. He had just put an ending on their past, and he hated the thought of intruding, asking for her participation in his future. On the other hand, she would be ideal for brainstorming and research; so far as he knew, anyway. She'd always been exceptionally bright, and people still talked about her prowess with the wand.

The main reason Draco wanted to talk to Hermione, however, was because he suspected that he would be able to tell her everything. He would look through all the letters he had received and check, but he thought that she might be exempt from all of the dark and dangerous spells and curses put on those letters.

It occurred to him that Draco couldn't simply walk up to Hermione and ask for her help. He didn't even know what she did for a living, where he could find her. He would have to find out, and then come up with a way to make his proposition of helping him benefit her, as well. He could always offer to pay her, but he doubted that would be the proper motivator.

Draco felt himself relax for the first time all evening. He had a plan or, rather, a plan before the actual plan could take place. Step one: recruit Hermione Granger. Step two: come up with a plan. He chuckled at his list and ran a hand through his hair.

He returned to his chair and sank into it. He felt old, too old for his twenty-five years. More than anything, he wanted this mess dealt with. It couldn't continue, it simply couldn't. Ideally, he would like to resolve it before Lucius found out, but he wasn't counting on it. He'd been putting up with it for seven years; he didn't think he'd solve it in two months.

He thought about his mother, her life over these seven years. They'd grown closer, developed the kind of friendship where they talked about their activities, their preferences on certain things...food, décor, wine...and other people. They never delved deeply into the other's life, perfectly satisfied to watch as though inspecting a painting. It was interesting, beautiful and tragic at times, but it wouldn't do to touch.

Draco didn't want her involved at all. He loved his mother, loved the sacrifices she had made for him, loved her for helping Harry Potter on the day of the final battle. She had been through so much, had never asked for her life to be caught up in war, for her son to pledge loyalty to the man who had robbed her of her husband those many years before. She didn't need to suffer any more. Draco wished she could remain forever unaffected by anything ugly or unpleasant. He knew it wasn't possible, but if he could do something to prevent her pain, he would do it.

What he wanted most was the normal life of someone his age. He had missed out on the extra training that most of his peers went for and hadn't even taken his N.E.W.T.s. He barely remembered the seventh year or the last half of his sixth at school. He'd been forced into the role of businessman and had learned that trade as a result. It was some comfort, he supposed, to know that he would always have a place in his father's company if he wanted it, regardless of how little he wanted it.

Yet many of the witches and wizards he had gone to school with were now married, some even had children. There had been a tremendous boom in couplings and weddings following the resolution of the war. Of all those in his house, who weren't dead or in prison, only he, Pansy, Greg, Theo and Daphne Greengrass were yet to be joined in marriage.

Pansy, because apparently, she'd been in love with him since they were teenagers and had been waiting and hoping that he would suddenly wake up and feel the same way. Greg hadn't married because he had been forced to focus on helping to provide for his family. Now he was crazy about Pansy, whom Draco didn't think would ever look at his friend as anything other than 'that guy that's always around.' Theo stayed busy with the antique shop, but had been seen with a witch every now and then.

Draco had always had the suspicion that Theo preferred blokes, but was always careful to be seen just enough with women that no one thought anything of his chronically single status. Draco and Daphne had dated briefly right after the war, but the strain of his job quickly got in the way. Then she had dated Blaise Zabini for three years before she found him cheating on her. Now she was seeing a man from a powerful Dutch family.

As for Draco, he had been too busy to have time for properly courting a woman. Besides that, he had never come across anyone he would like to court. He kept himself occupied, however, and was never in want of female company. He had a list of women he could call if he needed a date for an event, and they were usually willing to attend to him afterwards.

None of it really meant anything to him, and he made sure the women knew his heart was not available. A few of them hadn't taken him seriously, had caused scenes, and he had been forced to remind them that they had been warned.

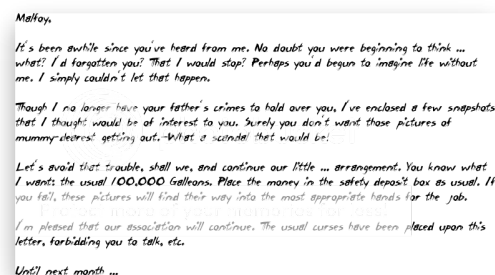
In the seven years his father was in prison, Draco had never really allowed himself to think about what he was missing. During the five days since his father's release, he had savored the idea of what life would be like after he returned the business to his father. He hadn't gotten close to making plans, and had only formed a few generic thoughts. He wanted to travel, to answer to no one, and to experience life. Draco knew his mother, especially, wanted him to find a nice witch and settle down, but his father had seemed to indicate that he could do as he pleased. It was a stark contrast from their conversation before Lucius had been sentenced.

Regardless, Draco wasn't even close to thinking about marriage. He wanted freedom before he thought about anything else.

Draco sighed, feeling tired. He glanced at the clock inside the office and saw that it was nearly one. He had to be in his office at eight the next morning, but he still wasn't motivated to go to bed. He knew he had to though and hoped that lying there would encourage his body to respond appropriately.

He stood and closed the doors, then snuffed what was left of the candle. He picked up his book and left the study.

The moon was bright that night, and it shone through the glass of the French doors, falling on the piece of parchment that lay, still visible, on Draco's desk.



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A/N: Thank you for reading! The plot thickens... From this point on, I hope to hear your theories on WHO is doing this to Draco. I'll be collecting names based on the responses I get in the coming 3 weeks. After I get a pool of names, I'll post a poll on here and you can vote every week about who you think the blackmailer is. I hope it'll be fun!

Art Credit: The fabulous manip for this chapter was done by pink_martini2 of LiveJournal. Isn't it amazing??

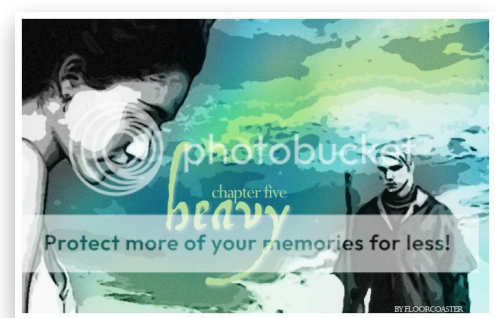
Don't forget to check out the [music!](#) Playlist by inadaze22.

Machinations

Chapter 5 of 16
Draco begins plotting.

Chapter 5 - - Machinations

- - -



Draco was at the pitch before anyone on Saturday, and by hours. He was very focused as he flew in practiced routes through the air, dipping here, rolling there. He had purchased a book on the position of Chaser and had studied it dutifully over the course of the week; if he was going to play, he would be the best. He watched the world wake up from high above it; the sun slowly rose over the trees, spreading its light through the usual haze that covered the morning sky in the late summer.

Today he was on a mission, and not only to win the game. He needed to learn as much about Hermione Granger as he could, as inconspicuously as possible. A plan for what he would do once he'd won her to his side had started forming, and these Saturday meetings would be essential for ensuring her safety, as well as his.

Top on his list of 'Information to Glean' was what she did for a living, which he suspected was his best shot at finding a way he could make his proposition attractive to her. If it turned out that she did something completely uninteresting, with no hope for advancement, then he would simply offer to hire her. Of course, she could still refuse, but he didn't let himself dwell on that thought. He needed to be relaxed when he talked to Hermione, not anxious over what might go wrong.

He didn't think that she was necessarily the best choice for investigative work. Unless he was very fortunate and she happened to work for the Ministry in an information-gathering capacity, he knew she wouldn't have any particular skills for identifying suspects with insufficient evidence as a guide.

She was the most desirable choice because he trusted her, for whatever reason. His trust was not something he bestowed lightly, nor all at once. It was gained over time in increments. She, of course, was the exception. There was something about her, something about the person he knew her to be, that made her uniquely trustworthy in his mind, without having earned it.

Second on the list was learning about Charlie. If he and Hermione were seriously dating, or serious in any form of a relationship, then the plan he'd been formulating might not be possible. Their interactions had been confusing at best to define, and from the way her friends had acted the week before, none of them were quite sure what was going on between the two.

Draco had spent a considerable amount of his free time analyzing their behavior the previous week. They'd been close with each other, very familiar. She'd linked arms with him; he'd kissed the top of her head. They'd sat together at the meal, but then had barely spoken. Draco had no idea how to get the information he wanted and so decided to focus on finding out her current employment situation first, and worry about her personal life later.

At quarter to ten, people began showing up for the game. Draco remained in the air, others joining him in warming up, until Potter and the Weasleys arrived. As Draco landed, he noticed that Charlie was not among them.

Harry seemed genuinely surprised to see him. "Hallo, Malfoy," he said. "Good to see you."

Draco nodded, glancing around the pitch. "Good to be here." Surprisingly, he meant it.

"Well, then, we should be all right."

"Where's Charlie?" Draco asked, slightly concerned that he wouldn't be able to observe him around Hermione.

"He usually doesn't come. Last week, another of our regular players couldn't make it, in addition to Bill. She'll be here today though."

George came up to him then, grinning, and clapped him on the back. "Blimey, Malfoy. I thought when you sent us out, we were done for. Thanks again, mate. Listen, if all goes according to plan, we'll be opening a shop in Paris in under two months. You'll come to the opening, won't you?"

Draco was slightly taken aback, but recovered quickly. "I can't say for sure, but ... we'll see. Probably. I like to keep tabs on my investments."

Ron and Ginny joined them then.

"Hey," said Ron, meeting Draco's eyes for an instant before looking away. "Here's Dean," he said and then walked away.

Draco looked at Harry and raised an eyebrow.

"No bets today," said Harry.

"Ah."

"He'll come around," said George, leaning on his broom. "Reckon you haven't forgotten that pummeling we gave you during your, what, fifth year?"

Draco grinned. Finally someone mentioned the past. "Sounds right."

"Katie's here," said Ginny, looking between Draco and George and smiling. "Hi, Katie!"

Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson joined them, greeting everyone enthusiastically before finally noticing Draco. Katie's expression went murderous.

"What's *he* doing here?" she demanded.

"He's, well, playing with us," said Harry, his tone unsure, his eyes darting between Draco and Katie.

"I refuse to play with him." She rounded on Harry. "On either team. In case you've forgotten, he nearly killed me."

Draco thought back to sixth year, of purchasing the cursed necklace from Borgin and Burkes, of having it carefully wrapped, giving it to Rosmerta and forcing her to give to the first girl who walked into the loo, commanding her to take it straight to Dumbledore. It had been a terrible plan, but he'd been desperate. He remembered sitting on his bed after news of the incident had spread, with his arms wrapped around his knees, pulling them as close to his chest as he could. He'd sat on his bed with the curtains drawn and rocked back and forth, thanking any and all deities he could think of that the girl hadn't died.

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Draco cut him off.

"It's all right, Potter. She was here before me. Nice seeing you all again," he said, indicating George and Ginny, then started walking toward the woods.

"Malfoy," called Ginny.

Draco turned around. "What?"

"We're having lunch at a nearby pub, so stick around."

"Will ... er, Bell be joining you? I probably shouldn't, if she is."

"No. It's just us."

Though she didn't elaborate, he knew she meant herself, Harry, and all of the Weasleys. And now, him, as well, at least that day.

"All right," said Draco. He waited until everyone was in the air, watching with mixed emotion. He was disappointed not to be playing, something he had been greatly looking forward to. On the other hand, if Hermione was there, as she had been the last time, he would have the entire game to talk to her.

As he neared the woods, he hoped that the scene from the last week would be repeated. Finally he saw it, the hideous orange two-seater sofa, sitting partly in the sun, partly in shade. Most importantly, Hermione was reclining on it, already absorbed in what she was reading.

He felt a slight tugging in his heart at seeing her. She wasn't wearing the white sundress that had so undone him the week prior. Instead she wore a chartreuse green skirt, white top with thin straps, and a light yellow jumper. Once again, a pair of sandals sat on the ground beside the sofa. She looked amazing.

Hermione looked up when Draco approached and slightly tilted her head to the side. When he stopped in front of the sofa, she shifted to make room for him to sit.

He did after removing his Quidditch gear, leaving him in black pants and a long-sleeved black T-shirt. "What are you reading?" he asked, getting comfortable.

"Nothing that would interest you, I'm sure," she replied, glancing at him from behind her reading material.

Draco examined the cover closely. "*Journal of Botany*. What's that?"

She put the journal in her lap. "It's a scholarly journal, Malfoy. Researchers perform experiments and publish their findings in journals."

He fought the urge to roll his eyes, but lost. "I know that. What is that specific journal about?"

"Oh," she said, her cheeks flushing a delicate pink. "It's all about the different potions ingredients that come from plants."

"Fascinating," he said, grinning. "Which article in particular are you reading?"

She looked at him strangely, as though she wasn't sure what to think of his behavior. "'Biological and analytical characterization and known and theorized uses of six extracts from asphodel.'"

His eyes widened in surprise. "Asphodel? You planning on offing anyone, Granger?" The powdered root of the asphodel plant was a main ingredient in the Draught of Living Death. More than that, Draco knew it had uses in Dark Magic, especially potions dealing with death and the places between life and death.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, turning her body slightly, as though preparing to launch into a detailed explanation. She started, paused, and then changed the subject. "It's for some personal research. Why aren't you playing?"

He leaned back, propped one leg up on the other, pushed up his sleeves...the right higher than the left...and put his arm on the back of the sofa. If he reached just a few inches, he could touch her shoulder. "Difference of opinion. Someone didn't care for the fact that I was nearly responsible for her death, and refused to have any association with me whatsoever, including Quidditch. I bowed out."

Hermione gave him a stern look. "You speak of it so flippantly."

"Not at all," he said, meeting her gaze. "I know what I've done and I accept the consequences. I do not take lightly others' injuries when I have been the direct cause. But the pitch is hardly the place to make a proper apology, and as we have already discussed, a mere 'I'm sorry' doesn't mean sod all."

"True, but what you did to her goes beyond the natural way of children as well, don't you agree?" Hermione's tone was gently but insistent; she wasn't going to let him talk his way out of this.

"I didn't target her; she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"So you aren't going to give her a heartfelt confession of the kind you gave me?"

She was baiting him, testing him. It was the first test in a long time that he had to pass. If he really wanted Hermione's help, he would have to follow through with whatever he said he would do. "If the opportunity presents," he said, wiping a few leaves off the cushion between them to avoid meeting her eyes.

"I hope you do," she said.

Her voice was so soft, so gentle, that he looked back to her. She'd returned to reading her article.

"Tell me, Granger. What do you do?"

Again she set the journal on her lap and gazed at him quizzically. "I'm a teacher. I work at Hogwarts."

"What do you teach?"

"Why so interested?"

He chuckled, rapping his hand on his knee. "I'm stuck waiting for this game to end. This sofa is the most comfortable place to sit, and you happen to be sitting here. I would prefer not to sit in absolute silence, but if that's what you wish, you have but to say the word."

"Oh. I ... I suppose I'm not quite sure how to take you, not knowing you all that well," she said, closing the journal and putting it away entirely. "I teach Arithmancy."

"That was one of your favorites, as I recall," he said. He silently cursed his fate; Arithmancy was a fascinating field, but not one that opened many doors for him.

"It was my very favorite, actually. You were quite adept at it as well. Remember in fifth year when we found out we'd been working together and didn't know it?"

"That ridiculous assignment!" he said, angling himself toward her on the sofa. All the students had been required to submit a theorem, which the teacher then paired up and assigned anonymous partners to work on combining the theorems. They were supposed to work separately, submit their results, and then work together to find the best solution.

When their names were announced in conjunction, they'd glared at each other. When they were told to move closer to work on their assignment, Draco abjectly refused. He didn't budge an inch. He got detention, and Hermione ended up doing all the work.

"I have yet to inflict any such misfortune on my students," she said with a smile. "I can't believe you did detention to avoid working with me."

"It seemed the better alternative," he said.

"You're hopeless," she said, shaking her head.

"I was, certainly. I'd like to think I'm not so much anymore." She didn't speak, just stared at the ground. "How long have you been at Hogwarts?"

"This will be my third year of teaching."

"Right, it's nearly time to go back, isn't it?"

"Yes. I've got a week left."

Draco nodded, thoughtful. He'd succeeded in learning what she did, but he still had no idea what he might tempt her with. He doubted a lifetime subscription to *Arithmancy Today* would get him what he wanted, though the possibility still existed for offering to pay her. Surely he could offer her more than she made at Hogwarts, and she wouldn't even have to leave her position.

"I know what Weasley does for a living. What about Potter? Weasley's sister?"

"That was really wonderful what you did for Ron and George. They were so excited that night after meeting with you ... I suppose it was the same day we reached for the same bottle in the Apothecary. They took us all out to a nice restaurant in Diagon Alley to celebrate."

He shrugged. "It was business. Anything connected with Weasley's Wizard Wheezes turns to gold; I was always going to approve their request, I just wanted to have a little fun with them first. Make them sweat."

She swatted him on the arm. "You're terrible."

"Thank you."

"Harry teaches at Hogwarts as well."

"Really?" Draco sat a little straighter. "That is surprising. I figured he would be in the business of saving things ... people, cats, blighted neighborhoods, that sort of thing."

"In a way, that's how he sees his work. He's very passionate about teaching, and the students always love his classes."

"What does he teach?"

"Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Draco groaned. "You're joking."

"I'm not. He's excellent. Got a bit of the bug during fifth year with the D.A."

"That little practice group you were in?"

"Yes. It was a wonderful group, we learned a lot from Harry. Plus, it was great doing everything behind Umbridge's back." She sounded triumphant.

Draco was intrigued, but he still hadn't learned anything of use to him. He glanced at the journal and then at her. Botany had nothing to do with Arithmancy. "What did you do before Hogwarts, then?"

"You're just full of questions today, aren't you?" she asked.

"I talk a lot when I'm bored. You just happen to be here."

She sighed. "I started out in Healer training, but it wasn't long before I realized that wasn't what I wanted to do. However, while I was at St. Mungo's, I got a part-time position in a research lab."

"At the hospital?" he said, his heart thumping a bit louder than before. This was promising.

"Yes. The grant I was hired under was designed to do research on the side effects of various potions thought to be harmless. It wasn't very interesting work, but I learned a lot."

Draco listened intently. There was a fire in her eyes that hadn't been there before, and he was completely captivated by her.

"After I quit the Healer program, I continued working in labs, under various researchers and grants, while I got my teaching credentials. Most of the grants lasted six to nine months, and then it was time for more job-hunting. I still participate in studies, as I can. Summers are very busy for me, as I try to get a lot accomplished in a short amount of time."

"I see. So research is your main passion, like Potter's is teaching?"

It was nearly imperceptible, and had he not been studying her so meticulously, he might have missed her split-second glance at his mouth when he said the word 'passion.' A wave of warmth passed through him, and he settled back into the sofa, putting a little more space between them.

Then she bit her lip and looked away. "I love teaching, nearly as much. But if I had to choose one, it would be research. Minerva has given me the use of one of the old lab rooms in the dungeon for personal work."

That caught his attention and he forgot all about her glance. "You? In the dungeon?" In his time at Hogwarts, a Muggle-born in the dungeons for any reason other than Potions class was trouble. At the least, the Muggle-born would be teased, ridiculed, and lightly hexed for venturing too far out of bounds. "How do you manage that?"

"Quite well," she said, jutting her chin out proudly.

"Do they ... treat you well?" he asked, referring to those in his former house.

"They'd better," she said. "As I'm their Head of House."

He stared at her now in incredulity. Surely he had heard wrong. "You ... you're what?"

"Head of Slytherin house, yes."

Draco shook his head in disbelief. "You're going to have to explain this to me. I'm completely at a loss for what to say."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Things at Hogwarts are very different than they were when we were in school. The four houses still exist, but Minerva has given the Sorting Hat a little ... wiggle room, for assigning students to houses. The houses are encouraged to inter-mingle, and frequently do so."

"Even Slytherin?"

"Yes, though naturally they were the most reluctant to comply. Tolerance is the big word on campus."

Draco scowled. "I've heard enough of that word to last a lifetime, thanks."

"There's nothing wrong with tolerance," she said, bristling.

"Don't get me wrong," he said quickly, shaking his head. "I've nothing against it, per se, but you've got to admit, the word has been tossed around quite liberally, of late. You can do almost anything in the name of tolerance. Including beating up another kid because they weren't being tolerant."

"Oh!" she gasped. "I read about that! What a terrible thing to happen. Completely undermines what the Ministry is trying to do."

"The Ministry can't change people's hearts and minds, though," he said.

"No, but it can at least pass laws that make things more equal," she said. "If you and I had gone to Gringotts ten years ago to apply for separate loans, one look at you and they would have approved you without question. Whereas I would have had to fill out all the paperwork, provide proof of income, residency, and who knows what other bureaucratic nonsense. Now, we both have to go through the same process."

"I am well aware of these ... changes," he said. "I deal with them on a daily basis in my work."

They looked at each other, and it occurred to Draco that they were from completely opposite backgrounds, opposite lives, opposing sides of the war. While he felt 'tolerance' was being forced down his throat, she was probably a strong advocate for it. He wasn't against the concept, just the way the Ministry was going about it. Tolerance wasn't something to be forced down the throat of the intolerant. It was something that had to be learned through life experience. Draco had long ago learned that he was in no position to say who deserved what. And he'd lived a happier life for it.

Still, it was clearly a different world they were in now, as they could sit and talk amiably about a subject they didn't quite see eye to eye on.

"What do you do?" she asked.

He was grateful for the change in subject and pleased that neither of them had resorted to name calling or curses.

"I run the family business."

She watched him, waiting for him to continue, but he wasn't going to reveal any details.

"Oh," she finally said.

She looked down at her lap, and he felt a tweak of regret. "I work, Granger. I go to meetings, I answer letters, and I keep up with the ledger, keep people happy ... nothing exciting."

"I know that much, Malfoy. What is your family business?" She paused, frowning slightly. "Or is that something you'd rather not talk about?"

Then a ding went off in his mind, and he couldn't put a logical reason behind it, but he wanted to tell her more. In general, Draco didn't discuss the details of Malfoy, Inc. He worked, hard, end of story. The business was so diverse that very few people knew all the different economic ventures in which his family's company was involved.

When the task of running the company was unceremoniously dumped into Draco's lap at the age of eighteen, he had no idea what his father did. It took three months to learn the extent of the company, and one segment in particular had been quite a shock.

Lucius had invested in Muggle telecommunications.

His father, Death Eater, Muggle-hater extraordinaire, did business with Muggles. Draco had no doubt that his father never once spoke to or saw any of the Muggles in his employ, but somehow, had managed to make things work. When Draco took over, he ventured into the Muggle world to meet with all the executives he now worked with and over the years had come to appreciate certain aspects of Muggle culture, and to validate in his mind their right to exist.

It sounded trite when he thought about it, but the admission was enormous considering his father had frequently talked of wishing the whole lot would fall into the center of the earth.

"It's all right," she said, having taken his extended silence for confirmation. "We can talk about something else."

"It's not that I have anything to hide," he said. "I simply make it a practice not to discuss details. It's terribly boring, anyway."

Hermione nodded and repositioned herself on the sofa. In doing so, she accidentally brushed his arm, causing the fine hairs to stand on end and his heart to skip. He frowned, annoyed by his reaction to her. Whenever he had thought of her in the past week, he pictured her in that white dress, the wind in her hair, the sun making it shimmer, and the serenity he found in her expression. He couldn't get the image out of his mind; it was safe to say he was attracted to her. Ridiculously so, judging from his body's reactions.

"You're really head of Slytherin?" he asked, wanting to move the conversation back in line with his agenda. Draco retracted his arm and folded both against his chest.

She smiled. "Yes, Malfoy, I really am."

"They treat you all right?"

"They do. They have to, really, or I take off points. They're all very respectful to my face, some clearly grudgingly, though I would be a fool to think none of them talked when I'm not around."

"If they're anything like the bunch I was with ... You're pretty lucky not to get any flack."

"These kids ... are different than we were. Our years at Hogwarts were spent leading up to the war. These kids, especially the younger ones, went through the war long before Hogwarts. They've grown up in the post-war era. This coming year, there won't be any students left who had been at Hogwarts when we were. Or, rather, when you were. Last year's seventh-years were first-years during what would have been my seventh year."

Draco scoffed. "If you can consider that school."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know what they taught us? In Muggle Studies especially?"

"I've heard," she said.

"Rubbish. Even I knew that. Of course, I was so busy trying not to make anyone notice me or get upset with me"

"Was it awful at school? I guess I've always thought you had it pretty easy, considering."

"Yeah, easy enough." He paused, unsure how much he should...or could...say. He never talked about that year, preferring to ignore it as much as his mind would let him. Her easy, open manner was strangely liberating.

"But I didn't like where I was," he continued, picking at a spot on the sofa. "I wanted nothing to do with the lot of them by then. I wasn't accepted fully anyway because of my failed task. I knew the other side...your side...wouldn't welcome me, either. I stuck to my studies, the library, and my room. Kept quiet. Said the right things, tried not to draw attention."

She didn't say anything, just closed her eyes as the wind blew through her hair. He was so close ... he could touch it if he really wanted, could see if it felt as soft as it looked.

"So I reckon Potter's head of Gryffindor, eh?"

"No, actually. Blaise Zabini."

Draco's eyes widened. "You're not serious! Should I go and try to get the Hufflepuff job, then?" he said, joking.

Hermione snickered. "That would be awful, Malfoy! You'd scare them to death!"

He frowned. "What? Why? I'm not scary."

"You are scary," she said, a delightful grin on her face. "Very scary."

"Yeah?" He chuckled. "Still? After everything ... I don't want to be, you know."

"Maybe you shouldn't walk around looking so sour all the time." Hermione's eyes glimmered with amusement. "You know, smile occasionally."

"If you only knew," he said, weariness constricting his chest, making him feel too old again. He rarely smiled from his heart and couldn't remember the last time a conversation or interaction had even tempted the sour expression from his face.

Hermione's grin turned to look of concern. "What do you mean?"

Draco shook his head and tried to give her a careless smile. He had no intention of ruining their conversation with talk of his troubles. "Never mind. Where's Charlie today? I was looking forward to talking with him." It wasn't entirely a lie; Charlie had been the one Weasley Draco had most enjoyed interacting with the previous week. Truthfully, he also needed to make headway on the second point on his list.

"Oh, he's not usually here. Last weekend was a fluke, really. See, usually, it's Harry, Ron, George, Katie, Bill, Dean and Ginny. We've known about Bill leaving for awhile, so Harry got Angelina to play for him. Then Katie told him that she and Angelina had a thing to do last week, so Harry asked Charlie to play, since he was in town." Hermione paused. "I guess they didn't need you this week after all."

Draco shook his head. "I appreciate the invitation, though. So Charlie spends most of his time in ... Romania, is it?"

She nodded. "He said you were, and I quote, 'decent enough.'"

"Ah," he replied, mindlessly scratching the arm that had at one time borne the Dark Mark. Now it was a scar in the rough outline of the Mark, as though the magic that had been imbedded beneath his flesh ran so deep that even though the Mark had faded with Voldemort's demise, the skin would never heal properly.

But Charlie and Hermione had discussed him after he had left. He felt a mild annoyance with the Weasley before realizing that the entire table might have talked about him, and she had only repeated Charlie's comment because he was the subject of conversation.

"I'll bet the conversation erupted after my departure," he said.

"It did, but then Molly told everyone to stop. George was undecided about you until that presentation he did, Charlie never had anything specific against you in the first place, and Ginny is inclined to give you a chance. Ron ... he's still hesitant."

"Not surprising," Draco muttered, more to himself than to her.

"You can't really blame him, can you?" she asked.

"What about you?" He met her eyes.

"Me? I ... Well, I'm all right with you being around." She held his gaze, not flinching or giving any indication she was lying.

He exhaled and turned his attention to the game. "How long do these things last, anyway? I didn't notice how long last week's game went."

"A couple of hours, usually."

Draco sighed heavily.

"If you want, I can let you know when they're done," said Hermione.

"How?" he asked, knowing he wasn't going to move off that sofa until she did.

"Have you got two Galleons?"

He looked at her incredulously. "Oh, no. Not doing that."

"What?" she said.

"You'll Charm the coins and mine will get warm when you tap yours with your wand. I want no part of that. I used that, you know."

She grinned. "I know."

He stared at her, momentarily rendered speechless, and then allowed her a strained smile. "You speak of it so flippantly."

Her expression was unreadable. "Guess we aren't to the point where we can joke about our tragic pasts together?"

Draco didn't know what to think of that. She was watching him; her eyes alight with mirth and peace. He didn't think they were at that point yet, but he was starting to like the idea of getting to it.

Not wanting to lie or reveal too much of his emotions, he ignored her question. "Tell me about your current project," he said, an amiable smile on his face.

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They talked easily. Hermione was happy to talk nearly non-stop about her research. She went into great detail, including her most recent...accidental...discovery involving the Felix Felicis Potion. When a counter-clockwise turn was added after every seventh clockwise, the reckless component of consuming too much of the potion was diminished by 35%.

"It hardly seems important," she said. "And I certainly don't condone the use of the potion in many instances, but it can have its place in specific situations."

Most importantly, he had a hunch that she was interested in developing potions to counter the effects of the Cruciatus curse. She mentioned it in passing, quickly, while going through a list of past and other current interests, but he thought he caught a slightly strangled undertone to her voice when she spoke the curse's name. He filed it away for future reference.

When two hours had passed and the game was still going, Draco considered leaving. His mind was racing with additions to his list; he had research of his own to do now. However, he had given his word to attend lunch and refused to back out. He was about to suggest that they go ahead and get a table when a cheer went up from the game. Potter was victorious once again.

"Does he ever lose?" Draco muttered.

"Nope," Hermione answered, leaning over to put on her shoes.

The two of them stood and Hermione shrunk the sofa and her journal, putting them both into a two-compartment bag that he hadn't noticed before. He had seen similar bags many times; one compartment was magicked to hold far more than the physical space allowed, and the other compartment was non-magical, for things the carrier didn't want to shrink, such as money or certain non-shrinkable purchases.

"So," Draco said, the reality of what he was about to do sinking in. "A pub?"

"Typically, we go somewhere after the games, usually the pub in the nearby village. Today's the last game, since Harry leaves for Hogwarts next week. They just play in the summer."

Hermione didn't go out to meet the approaching players, as she had done the week before. Draco suspected it was because Charlie wasn't there, and he felt an odd rumbling of discontent at the thought. Soon, excited voices could be heard, and then everyone came into view.

Ron glanced at Draco and Hermione, and then gave a slight frown before returning to his conversation with George. Katie, Dean and Angelina must have gone another way because they weren't with the red-headed bunch.

"What was the score?" Hermione asked once everyone had joined her and Draco.

"Who cares?" said George with a giant smile. "We won! More importantly, we're hungry. Let's be going, shall we?"

"Ever been to Trafford, Malfoy?" Harry asked. "It's near Manchester."

"It's got a small wizarding section, if I'm not mistaken," he said.

"Right. There's a pub there, The Bird I' th' Hand. That's where we're going. The owner is related to Arthur's second cousin's nephew. Nice bloke."

"I've never heard of it," Draco remarked, knowing that he would be required to Side-Along Apparate with someone.

"You can come with me," said Harry, letting go of Ginny's hand.

"Wonderful," Draco muttered under his breath.

Hermione heard him and smiled.

Not ten minutes later, the six of them were seated around a table in the pub, their first round of drinks before them. They looked at their menus, speaking only to point out something, or to say how much they had enjoyed a particular dish on their last visit.

Draco knew that his presence was hindering what was typically a warm, friendly meal between friends. Now they were all concerned about what to say to him and in his presence. Hermione, who was seated beside him, recommended the fish and chips. George, on his other side, told him he couldn't go wrong with the kippers. He didn't care either way and wasn't especially hungry anymore.

The waitress came and he went with Hermione's suggestion. When they no longer had their menus to hide behind, it quickly became apparent that the entire meal would be interesting, to say the least. Ron wouldn't look at him, Ginny constantly frowned at him, and George started talking to no one in particular about opening the shop in Paris.

"Ron and I went to Paris yesterday and looked around. The Place de Magie has a few empty business and we've put down a contract on two side-by-side shops, with the idea of making them into one."

"That sounds lovely, George," said Hermione. "Have you decided what you'll do about getting someone to run the shop?"

"Not yet. Though Fleur might be interested."

Ginny snickered and exchanged a look with Hermione. "You'd let her? Aren't you worried she'll be so busy making sure her hair is in place that she won't notice the customers?"

"Fleur is a very intelligent witch," said Harry.

Ginny rolled her eyes.

"She is! There's no way she would have been chosen by the Goblet of Fire if she weren't."

"She and Bill live in Paris already," continued George. "You know Fleur, she isn't ... well, she's not like mum. Doesn't like sitting around the house all day. She's excited about working at the shop. We're going to set up a small room in back where the kids can play until they're old enough to go to school."

"So it's decided then?" Hermione asked.

"Nearly," said Ron. "Gabrielle might help her out. She's just finished her schooling and Fleur wants her close by."

"Two people sounds like enough," said Harry.

"Right. We've got just two employees at a few of the shops."

"But this is Paris," said Ginny. "It's no Trafford, or even Hogsmeade. Paris is nearly as large as London. I think you'll need at least one, perhaps two more people."

The food arrived then and Ron grinned at his place. "Tuck in, all," he said and then went to work on his meal of shepherd's pie.

"Have you been to Paris ... Malfoy?" Ginny asked.

He glanced up, surprised at being addressed, then nodded. "Quite a few times. My mother goes at least once a year, and occasionally I accompany her."

"It's beautiful," Ginny continued.

Draco was aware of the fact that Harry and Ron were watching him intently, and he remembered that Hermione had said Ron was still getting used to the idea of being in the same room with him. He suspected she was being too nice; Ron didn't appear to want anything to do with him. Not that Draco could blame him.

"Quite," Draco replied. "Especially in the spring. Fall is nice as well, and will make for a pleasant backdrop for the opening of the shop." He hoped that conversation would return to the endeavor, and he could spend the rest of the meal as unnoticed as possible.

"What's your favorite part?" Ginny asked.

He bit back an impatient sigh. "Le Tour Eiffel. There's something about it that I can't quite explain."

"It was built by Muggles," said Ron, his tone accusing, as though he wanted to catch Draco in a lie or ruin his enjoyment of the monument.

"I am aware of that," he said, amused. Whenever he visited the City of Light with his mother, he would escort her around a few shops, then excuse himself and go for a walk along the river until he reached the Tower. What he did next varied. Sometimes he took a newly purchased book and sat on a bench with a good view of the monument. Other times, he took the lift up to the very top and admired the incredible sights before him. A few times he had ordered a coffee and a pastry in the café and slowly ate his snack while watching the sun set.

Ron scowled and looked away. Conversation halted for a few moments.

Then Hermione addressed Harry. "Are you ready for the new school year to start?"

"Mostly. I need to get to Diagon Alley for a few last-minute supplies, but I'll be ready to leave for Hogsmeade on Tuesday. I know you've been ready for weeks, haven't you?" He grinned at her.

"As a matter of fact," she glanced at Draco then. "I was short on one item and wasn't sure I would be able to get it on time, but a special delivery arrived just yesterday."

"Short, as in, you only had two full bottles instead of three?" said Ron, chuckling.

Hermione gave him a hard stare. "Very funny, Ron."

"So, Malfoy," said Ron. "What's it like having your dad back? Just like old times?"

Ginny smacked the back of Ron's head and Hermione kicked him under the table, but Ron continued to stare directly at Draco.

Draco thought very carefully about what he was going to say. Certainly he owed these people nothing. They had and always would believe what they wanted to believe, and he didn't think telling them otherwise would do any good. He also knew that this was some kind of test, though he didn't know how to get the right answer, or even if there was one. Naturally, his first inclination was to say something snide to rile Weasley further, but that would only turn the outing sour while accomplishing nothing other than showing the red-head exactly what he wanted to see: Draco hadn't changed.

So Draco took a long drink from his glass before speaking. "My father and mother are on holiday at present. He won't return for at least seven weeks. Perhaps at that point I will be better able to answer your question."

Harry let out a breath.

"Couldn't wait to get out of the house, I reckon," said Ron. "Can't really say as I blame him."

"That's enough, Ron," said George with an air of authority. "Malfoy hasn't done anything to you..."

"You're right. It was bad form." Ron was still glaring at Draco as though he might suddenly attack them all. "Just a matter of time, really."

Draco was nearly fed up and he considered leaving. The only thing that kept him from going was the knowledge that it was exactly what Weasley wanted. Neither he nor Ron spoke again during the meal, only sending glares at each other while the others tried to ignore them and continue eating in peace.

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After the meal, Draco had left quickly. He Apparated home, angry at himself for letting Weasley get to him. He hadn't retaliated, despite wanting to, because it wasn't worth his time or energy. Plus, it was exactly what Weasley had wanted, and Draco rarely allowed himself to react. He preferred being proactive, and a few words from him weren't going to change Weasley's mind about him, so why should he bother? If it weren't for his plan, what he needed from Hermione, he wouldn't have even gone out to Quidditch that day, no matter how much he enjoyed playing.

Still, it would have been nice to actually *play*.

Draco sighed as he removed his still fresh Quidditch gear, tossed it into the closet, and slammed the door shut. He pulled off his T-shirt on his way to the bathroom, where he turned the hot water on full force. Then he caught sight of his reflection and paused, grimacing at the scars that splayed across his chest.

The largest and most prominent was...ironically...a lightning shaped slash that began just under his right collar bone, then went across his chest to the left ribcage, cut back horizontally along the base of his ribs, before slicing downward to disappear underneath his trousers. He hadn't even known what curse Potter had used until Severus had explained it in the hospital wing. It was a Dark curse and, as such, would never disappear, nor would it heal properly.

There were scars on his back, he knew, from Amicus Carrow, who hadn't been pleased when Draco had hesitated when commanded to use the Cruciatus on a schoolmate. Amicus had struck him just once with a scourge, but it had been enough. He'd never hesitated again, though he saw the faces of the people he had hurt in his nightmares.

He also bore a scar on his left arm from the remnants of the Mark, and one on his right cheek, where Bellatrix had backhanded him, and her ring had gouged his face. He was most proud of that scar, for he had actually stood up to his aunt, refused to do something she had demanded. Bellatrix had been about to turn her wand on him, but Narcissa had intervened.

Another scar, which ran from his right groin to his left thigh, barely missing anything vital, had been another punishment from the Dark Lord. He'd been so angry at Lucius when Potter, Weasley and Granger had escaped that he had intended to end the Malfoy line forever. Draco shuddered at what had almost been.

As he stood under the steady stream of water, he thought about his scars. They were all indications of the life he had chosen and then wanted to escape, but couldn't. They weren't battle scars that he could look at and know that good had come from the slices he had incurred. The lightning scar told of his shame at being caught sodding crying in the bathroom. The scourge marks told him that he'd been too cowardly to stand up to the Carrows, reminded him of the people he could no longer look in the eye. The hidden scar showed him what lunacy was capable of, and his mauled arm served as a constant remembrance that he had willfully given his life up to obtain an elusive power that had nearly ended it.

He wondered if Weasley had any scars or blemishes that told tales of his efforts to rid the world of the madness that was the Dark Lord. He thought about the fact that Katie Bell hadn't been the only one who had nearly died because of him. Perhaps Weasley was more like Hermione than he had previously considered, and he couldn't simply call it all 'being children.' The thought, however, of apologizing to the red-haired git was nauseating. Hermione ... she was sensible, understanding, and he had known she would listen to him. Not so with Weasley, who might be almost as stuck in his ways as Draco had been.

Draco sighed and shut off the water. He dried himself and dressed in comfortable trousers and a shirt underneath a set of fine, black robes. He had been invited to the Goyleys' for dinner, but he had an entire afternoon before him that he didn't want to waste. The sooner he gained more information about Hermione, the sooner he could approach her about his problem.

From the fireplace in his room, Draco Floo-called Blaise Zabini. They had never been especially close in school and still weren't, but Draco had made sure to hold on to favors due him for when they could be used to best advantage.

It took a few moments for Blaise to appear, and he was startled when he saw Draco's face in his fire.

"Draco," he said, kneeling down in front of the hearth. "You never call."

"Not usually, no. I need a favor."

Zabini paled slightly and nodded, his eyes darting around the room. "What exactly do you want?"

"It's about Granger. I know you work together at Hogwarts."

"Hermione?" Zabini frowned. "What could you possibly want that has to do with her?"

"I need information."

"What kind of information?"

Draco told him and Zabini agreed to find what he could. Next up was a call to Marilyn Flinchberg, who was in charge of the largest lab under Malfoy direction, to inquire about space, equipment costs, and general questions as to how a research lab worked. Last call of the day was for Caleb, Draco's secretary.

"You know I don't generally bother you on the weekend," said Draco when Caleb appeared with a quill and parchment at the ready. "This is a request of a personal nature."

"Do you need an escort for the evening?" Caleb asked immediately, reaching for a small, thin black book he used for such occasions.

"No," Draco snapped. "I would like you to find me a list of any and all articles published by Hermione Granger, be she the top researcher or the woman who cleaned the cauldrons. If her name is in the article, I want to know about it. They'd be in Potions journals, most likely, but I want you to check everything."

"All right, sir. Would you like copies of the articles as well?"

"Yes. Two copies of each. Also, contact Sophia Bernard in the Office of Publications, see if there have been any submissions by Hermione Granger that have not been approved."

Caleb nodded, scribbling furiously. "Isn't Hermione Granger that friend of Harry Potter's?"

"Yes," Draco replied curtly.

"When do you want me to start?" Caleb asked.

Draco could see the man's eyes pleading that it not be that minute, and preferably not the rest of the weekend. Draco sighed. He was impatient and eager for the information, but he wasn't heartless, contrary to what some people might think.

"Take Monday off to work on this," Draco said finally.

"Do you want me to call Leslie in?"

Leslie Patterson had once been Draco's secondary assistant, the person he called whenever Caleb couldn't come in for work. On the last occasion, however, she had done more than provide work-related services, and Draco didn't want her to think he was interested in repeating the experience.

"No. I'll take care of it," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy. I'll have this to you first thing Tuesday morning."

"Good. Enjoy your weekend, Caleb."

He terminated the connection and went to his favorite armchair. His spirits were higher than he could remember them being ... ever. He was finally doing something, and he admitted that he should have tried much sooner. However he felt strangely confident that he would be successful, especially with Hermione at his side.

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Three nights later, Draco sat at his desk with his dinner plate barely touched and a glass of wine, half full. His eyes were closed as he sat in meditation, a technique he had learned a few years before to try and help him relax.

To the left of his plate sat a stack of journals, many with slips of parchment sticking out, marking certain articles. Somewhere in the stack was a letter from Blaise that listed all the journals Hermione subscribed to. As soon as Draco received it, he'd ordered back issues for the last five years and started reading, searching for anything related to asphodel and then anything related to those articles. He had a hunch as to what she was researching, based on what he knew about Hermione, but it was only a hunch. A gut feeling. However, Draco had learned to trust certain gut feelings, and this was one of them.

Sitting to the right of his plate was a stack of mail, atop which sat a colorful postcard from Pansy. She was in Fiji, staying at the luxury resort on Yasawa Island. The idyllic setting was agreeing with her, and she claimed she might never leave. Draco knew not to take her seriously, but he was glad to know she was enjoying herself.

She also swore that she was staying away from men and focusing on herself, which Draco had a very hard time believing based on her history. Pansy's *Modus Operandus* whenever she went on vacation was to find a resort and find a man, not necessarily in that order.

Draco hoped she was being sincere. He wanted her to return when she was ready with a new outlook on life and relationships with men. He wanted her to know that there were men who could see past her haute couture wardrobe and latest hairstyle, who could peer through the layers of external and see her for who she really was.

Greg came to mind, of course, but Draco wasn't sure Pansy would ever look at him differently. In their world, she had her place, he had his, and as far as she was concerned, they'd never intersect in any meaningful way.

The fire popped and Draco adjusted his position, folding his hands in his lap and taking a deep breath.

One of the articles mentioned that in ancient wizarding mythology, there was rumor of escaping the Asphodel Fields, the place where indifferent souls went after death, through volcanic activity. If one could break out of the monotony of daily life in the Fields, he could seek the base of a volcano and hope for an eruption, which would return his soul to the living world where he could try again.

The mention of asphodel, the same thing Hermione had been reading about at the match, stuck in his mind. There were volcanoes all over the world, but more specifically, in Fiji. Where Pansy was. Perhaps he could collect a few samples of volcanic ash for study, to see if there was any truth in the mythology...as was often the case. Maybe there was something about the volcanic activity, specifically, that worked with the asphodel to achieve the desired end.

Only Draco certainly couldn't leave the business to go island hopping in the South Pacific. He would have to send someone...who better than his closest friend, whom he trusted more than anyone with the task?

He would tell Greg that Pansy was there and leave it at that. Who knew what might happen if they met up in a different corner of the world?

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A/N: Thank you for reading!! The Asphodel Fields are from Greek Mythology ([go here for more information](#)), and since asphodel is used in the Draught of Living Death and is associated with the afterlife and the underworld ([reference](#)), I combined the two to create my own mythology.

Thanks as always to my wonderful betas: manda, z, pokeystar, & drcjsnider. Thanks to inadaze22 for the playlist!

Art credit: This chapter's awesome art was done by the very talented melia_eothria of LiveJournal.

Conversations with Other People

Chapter 6 of 16

School begins at Hogwarts, and Draco dabbles in match-making.

Chapter 6 - - Conversations with Other People

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The first day of term was one of the most exciting days of the year for Hermione. It was a fresh start, a new beginning, a blank slate. She would meet her new students, those third-years who chose Arithmancy as a desired course of study.

Hermione's first day was a light one, and she was grateful for it. A double period with her sixth-year students followed by an hour of planning, then lunch, followed by one hour each with her third and fourth-year students.

"Morning, Harry," said Hermione, sitting beside him at the staff table. She loved the view of the Great Hall from that vantage: seeing all the students, making new friends, getting reacquainted with old, preparing for a new year.

"Hey, Hermione," he said brightly, smiling as he chewed his kippers. Harry rarely ate the first meal at Hogwarts, preferring instead to eat with his family at their home in Ottery St. Catchpole. The first day of term, he was required to be available to any student wishing to discuss schedules or extra sessions.

"When's your first class?" She loaded her plate with a sensible selection and took a bite.

"Right after this," he replied. "You?"

"I've got until nine," she stated. "This is one of my favorite parts of the school year...handing out schedules."

"Except we have to practically shove our food down our throats," said Harry lightly, picking up his glass of orange juice. "Cheers."

Someone sat on Hermione's other side, and she turned to greet the newcomer. "Hello, Blaise," she said with a smile.

He returned the smile. "Morning, Hermione. Would you pass the rolls?"

She obliged and returned to Harry. "How's James doing? Still getting into everything?"

Harry nodded emphatically. "He's learned how to open doors and drawers. It's giving Ginny fits."

"Aren't they locked?" Hermione asked. "Magically?"

"Yeah, that's the thing. If James really wants to, he can get the lock open. Course he usually destroys the door in the process." Harry chuckled. "Takes after his mum a bit with that temper."

"Have you considered a dampening field?" Blaise interjected. "Something to temper his magical outbursts."

"Ginny's looking into it," Harry replied. "Weasleys' sells a few types of specialized shields, though I doubt they've done anything targeted for toddlers."

"They really should," said Hermione. "Especially with George's wife expecting."

Harry plucked a roll from the basket. "Knowing him, he's probably already got a line in the works."

"How does your day look, Blaise?" Hermione asked.

Blaise Zabini taught Muggle Studies and was a casual friend of Hermione's. He'd been teaching at Hogwarts two years longer than her and had voluntarily shown her and Harry the ropes when they'd joined the staff at the same time. He'd been one of the few Slytherins that had never openly harassed them in school and was likable. He was smart, funny, and had a fantastic French-African accent.

They often talked about school, their subjects, and their students, but the conversation rarely turned personal. She doubted they'd ever be very close, but she knew if she ever needed help with anything at the school, Blaise would be there for her, and she for him.

After he told her his schedule, Blaise leaned closer. "I was wondering if we could discuss a few ideas I've had for fostering good will between our houses."

Hermione hesitated, surprised by the request. It wasn't strange for him to want to talk about their houses, but the way he asked was a little ... off. "Um, sure. Maybe tonight before dinner?"

Blaise nodded. "Let's meet in your rooms. Mine are still a mess."

"Okay," she said. "That'll be great."

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"So, to review. Who can tell me the three basic principles of Arithmancy?" Hermione asked, her eyes sweeping over the class of third-year students...and first-year Arithmancy students.

A dozen pairs of eyes flicked to the chalk board, only to discover that Hermione had erased the list when they weren't paying attention. A few of them looked panicked, a few bored, and the rest began flipping through the book to find the answer.

She always enjoyed the fall term with the third-years as they began to grasp the basic concepts of Arithmancy. She looked for those students who, like she had, might develop a special interest in the subject.

"Who can give me one of them? Celeste?" She indicated the young, raven-haired Hufflepuff who had raised her hand.

"All numbers have magical properties." When the girl finished reading, she looked up from the book.

"Good. Next? Thibault?"

The sandy-haired, brown-eyed Sytherin stared at her, eyes wide.

"Page three," Hermione nudged.

He turned to the correct place and read, "Number two. Numbers are dependable even when they are irrational."

"Thank you. Why don't you go ahead and read the third principle." Hermione liked to encourage the shy students to speak, and she'd found that having them read was easier than directly asking them questions.

"Number three. When numbers are combined, the results are different than the sum of their parts." Thibault glanced at Hermione as though unsure he'd read the words correctly.

"Very good," said Hermione, walking around her desk to the board. "Rest assured, that information will be on your upcoming exam, and it is essential that you grasp the meaning of the Principles, which will begin discussing tomorrow. One week will be spent on the principles, followed by a thorough review of the numbers one through ten."

The bell rang.

Hermione smiled at her class. "See you tomorrow."

As she waited for the fourth-year students to trail in, she glanced over her notes from the sixth-year double period earlier that day. Everyone had completed his or her assignment from summer holiday, a first in her teaching experience. Invariably, one or two students came in with elaborate excuses for why they hadn't been able to get the work done. It never mattered; she always scored them with zeroes for the assignment. Perhaps word had finally got around that she meant what she said.

The fourth-year students came in and took their seats, pulled out their books, parchment, quill, and wand, ready for class.

When the bell rang fifty minutes later, Hermione could hardly believe it. They'd started with sharing stories from their summers, followed by a review of the previous year's information. Hermione asked the fourth-years the same question she'd asked the third...and they answered much quicker.

As she bid good day to the students, she couldn't help but feel that this was going to be her best year yet.

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When Hermione got to her room after class, she found Blaise standing by her door, parchment in hand. When he saw her, he pushed off, smiling. "I hope now is okay," he said.

"Sure." Wordlessly, Hermione magically unlocked her door and led Blaise inside.

A low fire was simmering in the hearth. Hermione crossed the room and opened the curtains to let the afternoon sun provide the light. "Have a seat." She indicated the seating area in front of the fireplace.

Blaise sat on the sofa beside the window, and Hermione took the chair nearest to him.

"What have you got?" she asked.

He handed her the top sheet of parchment. "I made you a copy. Last year, we discussed doing some things with our houses together, to encourage good relationships between them. I've jotted down a few ideas."

Hermione glanced down the list. "These aren't bad," she said. "I like the idea of the Shrieking Shack outing."

"Pens." Blaise chuckled slightly.

When Hermione looked up, he was busy writing on his page with a pen, to Hermione's surprise. "Where did you get that?"

He examined the pen as though seeing it for the first time. "A shop called Foyles. It's near the Leaky. Discovered it when I took the wrong direction out of the pub one day. I use them all the time." Blaise tapped the pen twice on his paper, then held it out to her. "Have a look."

Hermione smiled at him, a quirk in her lip. "I've used plenty of pens, Blaise."

"Oh. Right." He retracted his arm, unable to make eye contact with her. "Sometimes I forget you're Muggle-born."

"It's okay. Sometimes I do too." The admission was surprising at first, but the sensation didn't last but for a second. She'd been in the wizarding world for over half of her life; it should feel perfectly natural.

Blaise glanced at her, his dark, deep eyes searching hers. "I like pens. They're small, portable, don't require ink bottles...which can spill...and they're much sturdier than quills. Why haven't we adopted them into our world?"

Hermione scoffed. "Because that would mean admitting that Muggles have done something better than us. We can't have that, Blaise. It would mean the unraveling of the fabric of our existence as we know it."

He laughed. "Good point. Wouldn't want to upset the delicate balance of delusion and power-tripping in the wizarding world."

Hermione chuckled. "Too much reality might cause their heads to implode. They couldn't handle the reality."

"Who are *they*, anyway?" Blaise asked jokingly.

"Oh, you know the type. Rich, pure-blooded, hasn't set a toe into the Muggle world in his or her entire life, and neither did the generations before. Know anyone like that?" Her tones were teasing, but for a moment, she worried he would take it poorly.

Then he smiled. "A few people. They just have no idea that there's an entire world out there, not just our little corner."

"It would force them to rethink their view of the life they've lived and the traditions they carry on." Hermione shook her head, wanting to change the subject. She could feel her blood starting to boil at the thought of the injustice she'd witnessed, that still persisted. "Would you like some tea?" Hermione went to her small stove and started a fire under her kettle. Blaise said yes, so she handed him her collection of tea bags.

Back in school, she had always thought that he was one of those 'types.' He was a Slytherin, one of Malfoy's best friends in school, not openly hostile, but he certainly never tried to stop Malfoy or stand up to him.

Hermione had been surprised to discover that during the final battle, Blaise hadn't joined Voldemort and the Death Eaters but had taken a boat and crossed the lake with a few other Slytherins who wanted nothing to do with the fight. No one had noticed, since the fighting was concentrated on the other side of the castle.

He and the others had stayed on the far side of the lake until they thought it was safe to come out. Blaise had been very cooperative with the Aurors, and he hadn't been branded with the Dark Mark. After taking his N.E.W.T.s, he'd entered a training program for teaching and started at Hogwarts immediately after completion.

"Have you ever used felt-tipped pens? They're my favorite. The writing looks like it came from a quill, with none of the trouble. How about you?"

Hermione started to respond, but her fireplace chimed, indicating that someone was trying to call. "Excuse me."

Blaise nodded and turned his attention to his parchments.

After accepting the Floo call, Ginny's head appeared in green flames. Hermione smiled. "Hey, Ginny."

"Gotta make this quick. Harry was supposed to ask you...but he forgot." She rolled her eyes. "Dinner tonight? To celebrate the new term?"

"I have a house meeting," Hermione replied. "It might go long, since it's the first of the year. I'll try to get out by seven-thirty."

"That will be perfect," said Ginny. "If you're late, it's okay. Ron will be here, Luna, Neville ... a few others."

"Sounds fun, thanks, Ginny! See you tonight."

Hermione terminated the connection and returned to her sitting room. Blaise was standing at her bookshelf, running a finger along the spines.

"See anything you like?" she asked, leaning against the door frame between the two rooms.

Blaise finished the row and shrugged. "I've read a few of them. We have different tastes, apparently."

"Oh?" Hermione sat back down in her chair and watched her companion return to his seat on the sofa.

"I enjoy reading what Muggles call science fiction. Asmiov, especially." Blaise uncapped his pen, ready to take notes.

"I prefer Muggle literature," Hermione said and then amended, "Classic literature."

Blaise nodded, his eyes on the page. "I can tell."

Hermione watched the top of Blaise's head for a few seconds before shaking her head. He'd always been a little strange, and this episode only reinforced that perception. One minute they'd been laughing and joking, the next, he'd retreated somewhere in his mind.

For an instant, she wondered if he fancied her, but then quickly dismissed the idea. Blaise was just a friend; he had never given any indication that he thought of her any other way. A giggling thought reminded her that he was a bit strange, that he might not display interest the way she was used to.

"Shall we continue?" he asked, smiling at her again as though the weird moment had never happened.

"Sure." She nodded, content to leave the matter for another date...or to never revisit it.

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Draco sat at his desk with a cup of strong coffee on a bright, crisp Thursday, one week after the beginning of term at Hogwarts. Time was slowly slipping away, and he wanted to have answers before his parents returned. Besides, working with Hermione would also go much smoother if he didn't have to worry about his parents' meddling.

Although his plan was going according to schedule, everything felt as if it was moving too slow. He was typically a patient man, but once he decided to actively search for his blackmailer, he wanted to get started *now*. There were things he had to accomplish first...he knew that...but there were moments when he half considered dropping everything and going directly to Hermione with what he had.

Gathering information took time, he knew that, and there was a reason for what he was doing. Before he could investigate the blackmailing, he had to get her to work with him. In order to convince her to help him, he needed to have all the facts when he presented his case to Granger...and an incentive.

Nearly two weeks had passed since he had begun the process of learning all he could about Hermione Granger. In that time, he had at least skimmed almost every journal she subscribed to, memorized everything Blaise had sent him, and started finalizing his plans for providing the incentive. If his theory was correct...if she was trying to find a cure to long-term effects of the Cruciatus curse...then he just might have the very thing that would ensure her assistance, regardless of what he asked of her.

One of the most interesting things he had learned from Blaise's investigation was that the man seemed exceptionally fascinated with his colleague. Draco wondered if it might be a problem, but he didn't dwell on it. He would mention it to Hermione about it when he made his pitch and deal with it then if necessary.

Caleb's distinctive knock interrupted Draco's thoughts. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and admitted his personal assistant.

"Gregory Goyle here to see you, sir," Caleb informed him.

Draco nodded, putting the daily mail and the pages of notes he'd compiled into a drawer.

Greg entered with a metal case in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. "Morning, Draco," he said, dipping his head in greeting and taking a seat across the large executive desk.

"Greg. I trust you had a good trip?" Draco smiled warmly at his friend.

The other man grinned. "I did. It was very successful."

"I see," said Draco. "Do tell."

"I know you've got a meeting in a bit," Greg said, setting his coffee on the desk. "But I thought you'd want to get these first thing." He opened the metal case after using an unlocking charm and turned it so that Draco could look inside.

Draco saw four large, metal tubes held in place by thick foam. "The volcanic ash?" he asked, taking one of the containers out and opening it to examine the contents.

"Yes. All three volcanoes you wanted," Greg replied.

"Excellent." Draco replaced the container. "I can't thank you enough."

"Do you mind if I ask what they're for?" Greg asked, shutting the case and handing it to Draco. "Other than ... well, sending me to Fiji?"

Draco smirked. "Was that successful? I've been anxious to hear from you. Did you find Pansy?"

Greg shifted in his chair. "Yeah. She stayed in Suva, the capital. There's a small wizarding population, and she had a room in the best hotel. It was the first place I checked, just as you had suggested."

"Did you see her?" Draco asked.

Greg nodded. "She looked great and seemed to be having a good time."

Draco frowned. "Did you speak with her at all?"

"Oh, well, yeah. When she saw me, she insisted that we do something together, since we were both there. We had dinner."

"And?" Draco prodded, after realizing that Greg didn't plan to continue. "I sent you to Fiji on a two-fold mission. Surely I'm due a few details about how you spent your free time."

"Dinner was nice," Greg said stiffly.

"Did you see her again?" Draco asked, feeling as though he were pulling teeth to get anything out of his usually talkative friend.

"Yeah, I saw her again." Greg stopped talking and averted his eyes.

Draco decided not to press his friend. Whatever had happened was between Greg and Pansy, and despite Draco's involvement, he didn't want to cause additional pain, if, indeed, that was what held Greg's tongue. He felt a little ridiculous at his attempt at match-making. He had only wanted his friends to be happy.

"Tell me about the samples," Draco said, sipping from his now lukewarm coffee.

"They were a lot of work to get," Greg began. "Not difficult themselves, but getting to them. None of the volcanoes are on the main island of Fiji; instead, they are located on three surrounding islands. The wizarding presence in Fiji is limited, and I couldn't get details on precisely where the islands were for Apparating purposes."

"What did you do?" Draco asked.

"I ... well, I hope it's all right, I figured it would be, since you wanted this assignment done quickly." Greg looked at Draco sheepishly. "I chartered a Muggle boat. With company funds."

Draco clenched his jaw but otherwise made no indication of the news unsettling him. The boat was something he hadn't considered, but then the entire trip was outside of the budget for the month. What difference would a boat rental really make? "That's fine, Greg," Draco said, trying to reassure him with a smile. "Absolutely. You did what needed to be done."

Greg let out a long sigh of relief. "I thought you might be angry," he said. "Since I didn't ask. I wanted to, but I had to make a quick decision, and with the time zone differences, you weren't available."

"I said it's fine," Draco repeated casually. "How did it go?"

Still not quite allowing himself to fully relax, Greg continued. "Good, good. I enjoyed the boat, actually. The first two volcanoes were on islands not far from the main one, Viti Levu, and I went to those first. They took a day each to collect the samples. I've done a fair share of collections for you, but these were some of the hardest. The weather was hot and muggy, the ash was buried under dirt and plant life ... I think I should apply for hazard pay."

Draco laughed, and Greg's gaze lifted to meet his. "I'm sure that can be arranged."

"The third volcano was a bit farther away and required an overnight stay," Greg continued. "Getting to the top of those things wasn't easy, either; I had to get rid of the guy I hired and Apparate as close as possible."

Draco again removed a container from the case and opened it. This time, however, he removed one of the vials inside. "How many samples did you get?"

"Six from each volcanic area," Greg replied. "They don't know when Koro, one of the volcanoes, last erupted, but the other two were active in the 16th and 17th centuries. I think the samples from those will be more beneficial."

"There are four cylinders," Draco noted.

"Right," said Greg, excitedly. "There's a fourth volcanic island, about four hundred sixty kilometers from Fiji. It's the island of Rotuma, and the volcano is made of alkali-olivine basalt and hawaiite."

Draco blinked, his mind tripping around one of the words but unable to say exactly which one or why. "Are those names supposed to mean something to me?" he asked.

"I ... well, no," said Greg. "But it's different from the other three volcanoes. A strange bloke on the island said there were legends of weird things happening around that volcano, so I reckon I just followed my instinct. I collected soil samples from different cones on Rotuma, at different elevations. It's all marked. I don't know what you were looking for, but I think your best shot at finding something is from Rotuma."

"Thanks, Greg." Draco found the container labeled Rotuma and opened it. "I'll send these to the lab and hopefully they'll find something useful."

Greg leaned forward in his seat, resting one arm on the armrest. "So ... what are these samples for, anyway? You've never had me go on such an errand before."

Draco closed the case and put it behind his desk. "They're for a bit of research on Unforgivables, specifically the Cruciatus. I'm not quite sure where this might be useful, but I read something recently that mentioned volcanic ash and soil in an experimental remedy. I need to do a little more reading on the matter before I can speculate about what I might have." He paused. "It could be nothing."

"The Cruciatus?" Greg repeated with a slight frown.

In truth, Draco had been curious about Hermione since their last encounter, when she had mentioned potions for countering the long-term effects of the Cruciatus. Thus far, no one had been successful in alleviating the nightmares, twitches, auditory and visual hallucinations that occasionally plagued the victims of the curse. Their severity depended on the time under the curse, and Draco knew that Hermione had experienced a particularly toxic dose.

When she brushed past the subject, he suspected that she was looking for a relieving potion, for herself as well as others. Draco had his own share of lasting side effects from the curse and had requested an exhaustive list of articles on the subject. One had mentioned the potential for benefits in volcanic ash.

"Symptom relief," Draco remarked. "As I said, it could be nothing. I can't thank you enough for doing this."

"You're welcome, of course," Greg replied. "Anytime."

Draco glanced at the clock and saw that only a few minutes remained until first meeting of the day. "We'll talk again soon, Greg," he said, dismissing him.

Once the door shut behind his friend, Draco sighed. He hoped the samples might prove useful, but ever since he sent Greg on the mission to retrieve them, he had doubted that anything would come of it. The trip had been a brash attempt to get his friends ... what? Romantically involved? He wanted Pansy to see a different side of Greg, not just as 'Draco's friend.' Well, he had done what he could, and the rest was up to the fates.

ooo

A/N: A line or two from this were inspired by "Elizabethtown." Thanks to manda for the chapter title! Thank you so much for reading. I hope you liked this one! I'll be back with art for the next chapter, but do check out the music for this chapter!

Endless beta thanks go to drcjsnider, manda, z, and pokeystar. MWAH!

Winds of Change

Chapter 7 of 16

Draco approaches Hermione with his plan.

Chapter 7 - - The Winds of Change

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Fridays were one of Hermione's favorite days of the week, and this one proved to be no exception. It was a beautiful fall day, the leaves just starting to turn, and she had plans for a trip into London with Ginny and Luna that evening. Mrs. Potter needed a night out, and Hermione was more than happy to oblige.

An hour remained before her favorite class, the seventh-year students, arrived. In the two years she had taught, she had always become very close with her seventh-year N.E.W.T. group. They had frequent deep, thought-provoking discussions, not only in the classroom, and they took two trips a year together. It never failed that the class formed a tight bond, not only with each other but also with her as well. She corresponded with many of her former students and readily provided letters of recommendation for those who wished to further their education.

This year's group was proving to be an interesting one. She had four from her house, two from Gryffindor, and three from Ravenclaw. As she did every year, Hermione planned to split the students into groups for the projects they would be assigned throughout the year. However, having an odd number of students meant that she couldn't put them in groups of two. She'd decided to make teams of three and increase the workload for each assignment.

Hermione was still considering how to group the students. The groups were very important, as they would remain unchanged for the first half of the year, and the students needed to work together in order to achieve success in their work. She always tried to put different kinds of people together and liked to pair them up based on complementary work habits and proficiency. Grouping three would undoubtedly prove more difficult than pairing two.

She skimmed her list of students. The Gryffindors would be separated; there was no doubt of that. Evan Turner, a tall, thin young man with glasses and sandy blond hair, and Corey Davidson, also tall, but slightly heavier than Evan, with dark brown hair and dimples, had been inseparable since their first year of school. They worked well together; so well, in fact, that often they could anticipate what the other would say or do. They needed to learn to work with new people, to get out of their familiar study habits and be exposed to other ways of thinking.

The three students in Ravenclaw were all exceptionally bright. They had each scored an "O" on their Arithmancy O.W.L.s, and Taro Chang, Cho's youngest brother, had achieved perfect marks in the written and practical exam. Taro was very shy and mostly stuck by himself. He didn't offer many answers in class, but whenever Hermione called on him, he always had the correct one.

Ketty Mason and Karalynn Baker were the other two in Ravenclaw. They weren't best of friends, Hermione could tell, but they were polite and tolerated each other well enough during class. Karalynn reminded Hermione of herself, and she cringed whenever Karalynn eagerly raised her hand to answer every question she asked.

Though Hermione would never say her quest for knowledge was anything to be ashamed of, Hermione had realized since school that she hadn't needed to let everyone know that she worked so hard. She had wanted to impress her teachers as well, but now that she was a teacher herself, she realized that it wasn't the student who was most vocal about giving the correct answer that professors most appreciated. Rather, it was the student who struggled when new concepts were introduced, but whose face lit up in triumph when he or she grasped them at last.

Ketty was quiet and had a sharp wit. When someone spoke out of turn, or made a sly comment, she always had a rejoinder at the ready, which led that person to flush with embarrassment and mumble an apology. At first, Hermione had thought she was doing it in order to gain favor with the teacher. Over time, however, it became clear that Ketty did it for herself, to keep the classroom in order so that those who wished to learn, could. She had exercised her acerbic tongue less frequently in her sixth year than her fifth, and Hermione concluded it was because the field of students had been whittled down to only the most serious, to those who, like her, wanted to master the subject.

Hermione considered putting Ketty and Karalynn together, since they weren't usually study partners. Plus, their personalities and work ethic would make them excellent teammates.

Finally, Hermione looked at her list of Slytherin students. Samaya Black was a distant relative of Sirius's family. Her father had been Sirius's father's second cousin, and the family had lived in Belgium for most of Samaya's youth. Though they didn't possess the typical Black ideals of a desire for pure-blood dominance, she was still very spoiled and thought she was better than most. She had been Hermione's most difficult student when she had started teaching. Not only did Samaya know many of her less than savory relations but she also displayed the same arrogance and superiority complex that had once plagued Draco Malfoy.

Not long after starting at Hogwarts, during Samaya's fifth year, Hermione calmly asked the girl to explain, to the entire class of twenty, the inherent differences between those of purported pure-blood and those who were Muggle-born. Samaya had started with the typical rubbish Hermione had heard all of her life, and Hermione refuted every claim. When Samaya had nothing left to say, she had left the classroom in a huff, calling Hermione a Mudblood on her way out. Hermione had smiled patiently and given her three weeks of detention.

For her detention, Hermione had required Samaya to study genetics, using both Muggle and wizarding sources, and to research the human genome. Then Hermione had Samaya find out if anyone had ever mapped wizarding DNA; someone had. Finally, Samaya had to find any differences between the wizarding and Muggle genomes and write a two-foot essay on each. There had been none. By the end of that year, Samaya was the student who defended Hermione the strongest against those who had a

problem with her position as Head of Slytherin house.

Damian Reed and Edgar Terwilliger were the two Slytherin young men. Damian was typically thought of as the 'class clown,' who often pranked his fellow classmates and sent harmless but debilitating jinxes at students in the hallway. He was the seventh-year student most often in detention, but he was very good-natured and studious, and most of the teachers liked him. He reminded Hermione of Fred Weasley, and though she disapproved of his bolder antics, she couldn't help but adore him as well.

Edgar was the young man that all the females of Hogwarts wished would look their way. He was good-looking, friendly, and smart bordering on arrogant. Though he was a Slytherin, he had made it known in his younger years that he was not like most in his house. He was pure-blooded and certainly ambitious, and the Sorting Hat had placed him well, but he held no prejudice against those of different blood. He had grown up in Africa, where his parents moved when he was a small child. They were Healers and went to war-torn countries to offer their services. Growing up away from England, he hadn't been exposed to the prejudice found in the wizarding world.

Last on the list was Sheetal Patel. She was one of the most beautiful girls in her year, but she was as smart as she was pretty. She had a good imagination and a flair for the dramatic. Hermione thought that Evan Turner had something of a crush on the Slytherin, but had never acted upon it. As a general rule, there were few friendships and no dating across the Slytherin and Gryffindor houses.

The distance between her current and former house was something that concerned Hermione. Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff mingled well, with friendships forming easily among their students, but the old enmity still existed between them and Slytherin. Through Hermione's limited influence, her house had started mingling with Ravenclaw to some extent, but she realized something larger would be needed to bridge the gap between Slytherin and Gryffindor. If Sheetal would only notice Evan, and then the young man finally do something about his crush, perhaps that might be enough to start mending the divide.

She sighed. At least the problems of division weren't as stark as they once were. It was progress, and real, lasting change took time. Hermione knew that. Still, she was secretly hoping that Evan would make a move and that the object of his affections wouldn't spurn him. It would be a step in the right direction. She strongly debated ignoring the voice in her head that said she was interfering and put Evan and Sheetal in the same group. It wasn't a lot of interference, really; she would simply be making sure they spent a little more time together than they did at present. What came next would be out of her hands.

"Morning, Professor," said Karalynn, beaming as she took her usual seat and took out her things.

Hermione nodded and put the list of students in her desk. The remaining seventh-year students trickled in. Edgar, Damian and Sheetal entered and sat together. Next came Ketty followed shortly by Corey, then Evan, who glanced at Sheetal talking closely with Edgar and grimaced slightly. The last to enter were Taro and Samaya, the latter giving Hermione a friendly smile.

"Good morning, class," Hermione said, standing from her desk. "I trust you have had a good week?"

The general consensus was yes, and Damian and Edgar sniggered over a private joke.

"I'm glad to hear it. As you know, we are nearly through just over two weeks of the term, and the Monday after next, you will begin your term projects."

Everyone was silent, their attention focused on Hermione, each secretly running through the names of people with whom they would be happy to work.

"There will be three groups of three. Each of you will be given a series of numbers. Your assignment will be to discover the greatest magical combination that can result from these numbers. Remember to consider the special rules which apply to each number, if there are any."

Corey raised his hand and Hermione called on him. "Will you be putting us in groups today?" he asked.

"No. I'm still deciding. Monday you'll get your assigned groups, for sure. You will then be given some time in class to work in your groups on a short exercise, to get an idea of what the group dynamics will be. Friday you will be given your numbers, and then every Friday for the rest of the term will be spent out of class, working in your groups."

"Will we be able to come to you for help?" Karalynn asked.

"I will provide guidance, as always," Hermione said. "My aim is to group you in such a way that you won't need a lot of outside help. You are all very talented in different ways, and I want to see what you can do when you are challenged. I have great expectations, and I know I won't be disappointed. Now, as for your last homework assignment ..."

The double-period passed quickly, as it always seemed to with this class. Hermione was just about to call their attention from their in-class work, when the door to the room opened, admitting a small boy. He walked directly to Hermione's desk.

"Apologies for the interruption," he began. He fished a slip of parchment from his pocket and handed it to her. "From the Headmistress."

"Thank you," said Hermione, and waited until the boy left to read the note.

Professor Granger Please stop by my office on your way to lunch. ~ Minerva

She frowned at the parchment, then put it away, her mind beginning to try to figure out what Minerva might want. The bell rang, startling Hermione. The class of seventh-years watched her, waiting for their assignments.

"Hand in your work on your way out, and for Monday, I want you to list three of your strengths and weaknesses." Most of them looked confused, as the assignment had nothing to do with the subject.

Hermione stood. "I know what you're thinking, that I've gone round the bend, but I assure you, there is a purpose to this. Please put some thought into your assignment and give examples of each. That is all."

She didn't wait for her room to clear out before gathering her things and leaving. Minerva had never sent a request to see her by a student during a class. Whenever she needed to speak to Hermione, she either mentioned it at the soonest meal or if they passed each other in the hallway. In the most urgent matter up to that point, Minerva had waited outside the Arithmancy room for the session to conclude. Whatever reason Minerva had for summoning her, it wasn't dire enough to come in person, but important enough not to wait until they saw each other.

Hermione walked quickly through the familiar halls, eventually coming to the conclusion that someone in her house had gotten into serious trouble. She reached the gargoyle statue and gave the password: lemon drop. Minerva ran the school in her own way, making the position of Headmistress hers, and not simply the post which was last held by Albus Dumbledore. However, one thing she had kept the same was the use of sweets as passwords. It was her way of paying homage to the man who had run the school with great passion and dedication.

When the spiral staircase reached the landing, Hermione saw that the door was slightly ajar. She knocked and heard the usual sharp tone of Minerva McGonagall bid her enter.

By the time she reached the Headmistress's office, Hermione had decided what she thought the matter was about. When she walked into the room, she expected to see two students who had gotten into an argument, one of which was in Slytherin...hence her presence. The other student would most likely be from Gryffindor, and she expected to see its head of house, Blaise.

Instead, she was stunned to see Draco Malfoy standing in front and to the left of Minerva's desk. He was dressed in immaculate black robes, and he looked taller than when she had seen him last, at the Quidditch match a few weeks ago. His blond hair fell around his face in front, longer in the back, and his hands were clasped in front of him. She faltered for an instant, and then moved beside him.

Minerva stood when Hermione entered. "Thank you for coming, Miss Granger." She glanced warily at Draco. "You have a visitor who would like to speak with you alone."

"That's fine, Minerva," Hermione said, her mind whirring. What could he possibly want?

The Headmistress looked for a moment as though she wasn't sure about leaving the two of them alone and then headed for the door.

"Thank you," said Draco over his shoulder just before the door clicked shut.

Hermione looked at him, unable to hide her curiosity. "Malfoy. What are you doing here?"

He glanced around the room for a few moments, taking it in. "Would you believe, in all my years here, I didn't set foot in this room until Snape was Headmaster?"

The admission surprised Hermione. She had always assumed that he'd gotten into plenty of trouble. He didn't seem interested in a response, just kept looking around. When his eyes fell on the portrait of Dumbledore, his cheeks flared and he began to pace the room in front of the large window behind the desk.

"You might want to sit," he said.

Hermione frowned, her heart starting to beat faster as she considered that something might be very wrong. "Malfoy, tell me what you want this instant," she demanded. "Why are you here in the middle of the day? Whatever you have to say, surely it could have waited until after classes were finished."

He stopped and turned his head, a strained smile on his face. "Professor Granger is very different than Hermione-reading-Potions-journals-on-an-orange-sofa." She made no response, and he continued. "I had a free hour, my last until this evening."

Not entirely satisfied with his response, she asked, "Why did Minerva send for me in the middle of class?"

Draco shrugged. "I can only theorize. Perhaps she knew it wise to send for you when she knew where you were. Is there a problem?"

"It's unusual, that's all. You've simply got me worried," she explained. "Is something the matter?"

Draco sighed and drew his fingers through his hair. "I have a proposition for you," he said. His voice sounded as though there was something there, just beneath the surface, fighting to break through. She couldn't tell if it was fear, triumph, joy ... she knew so little about the man standing before her.

"What kind of proposition?" she asked.

He started pacing again. "This ... is complicated. There is a task that I need help with. For reasons I can't go into at the moment, you are the best suited to this task. It is of extreme importance to me, and so I am willing to do whatever it takes to obtain your acquiescence."

Hermione nodded slowly. His manner was intense, his eyes shining with anticipation. He seemed completely unlike the man she'd spoken with almost a month before. Although, when she thought about it, his conversation then had been tight, closed, even though she had found him easy to talk to and his behavior had been friendly. She had talked at length about herself, whereas he hadn't offered anything extraneous about himself.

"What do you need help with?" she asked.

Draco let out his breath and met her gaze. He stared at her for a few seconds before speaking. "This is where it starts to get complicated. I'm afraid I cannot explain the precise nature of the task at this time. I ... I need you to say yes before I can tell you anything."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What is the nature of the task, can you tell me that?"

He considered her question while he resumed pacing. "Problem-solving," he said finally. It was a buzzword he heard Muggles say a lot during meetings.

She raised an eyebrow. "Problem-solving? And you think I am the best one to help? Surely you have other people, friends, your parents, advisors ... you could hire someone to help, I'm sure."

Draco frowned deeply. "No. I've thought about this more than you could imagine, and it has to be you. As I said, I will make it worth your time and efforts."

Hermione regarded him thoughtfully. "I can ask for anything?"

"No, but I think you'll find my offer to be generous."

"Let's hear it," she said, taking a seat in front of the desk.

He did not sit, but moved to stand beside the window. For a few moments he said nothing, merely looked out over the school grounds. The look on his face was tortured, pained, yet hopeful, and at that moment, Hermione would have given almost anything to know what he was thinking. By reputation, she knew he had become skilled in masking his emotions, hiding behind a solid wall of indifference. For him to be displaying his inner thoughts so readily, she knew he either trusted her completely or was so distraught that he hadn't even noticed he was being so open.

"Malfoy Incorporated provides a large array of services to the general wizarding population. I doubt you know that the bottles used to hold potions ingredients are made by one of our divisions. That's just one thing we do. Similarly, we make glass equipment for laboratories; a large client happens to be this school. Beyond that, there are three research labs under my employ, two of which are relatively small and are currently only used for the brewing of potions in order to sell them."

He paused, turning slightly, but not making eye contact with her. "The third is actively engaged in the type of research that interests you. The facility is only used at half capacity at present."

Hermione's heart was now pounding in her chest. She thought she knew where he was going with this, and the idea of it was so incredible that she was barely breathing, waiting for him to finish.

"You see, Hermione, I do my research too. I know what you want most, and I offer it."

"You know what I want most?" she repeated, unnerved by his bold statement.

He smirked. "Well, at least so far as research goes."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I know that you've been published six times, not once the lead researcher. Each article has been on potions for curing ailments or alleviating symptoms. I know you've applied, and been rejected, three times for a grant to study the Cruciatus curse."

Hermione held his gaze, not blinking when he correctly detailed her research history. "Are you saying you'll get my request approved?" She wasn't sure what to make of him. At the Quidditch games, he had been relaxed and had smiled easily. The man standing before her appeared to carry an enormous weight inside. His words were careful, his actions deliberate, as though he had to measure each action for its possible consequences.

"If you agree to help me, I will provide funding for your research. How you choose to spend it will be up to you. However, if you help me and we are successful, I will give

you unhindered access to whatever equipment and personnel you desire, and unlimited resources with which to design and perform as many experiments as possible."

Hermione gasped at the enormity of his offer. He must be truly out of options to have approached her. She had already been inclined to help him, after his sincere apology and friendliness toward her, but now ... She simply couldn't refuse. The chance he was offering, the resources She would be able to pursue as many theories as she could develop, to carry out the much-needed research she believed would be beneficial to wizarding-kind.

"Think, Granger," he said, speaking before she had a chance to. "How many years would it take for you to work up to the prestige it would take to obtain funding for your ambitious experiments? I've read those reports; I know what you want to do. At this point, it could be ten, fifteen, even twenty years before you've got enough credibility behind your name to merit that kind of grant. I'm offering you the chance to skip all that."

She knew he was exactly right, but the enormity of his offer gave her pause. "Is this task dangerous? Illegal?" she asked.

He seemed to relax very slightly, encouraged that she hadn't turned him down outright. "There is the possibility of danger, though it isn't certain. I will do everything in my power to ensure that you are not harmed. And no, the task is not illegal."

"All right, I'm interested. What is this task?"

Draco frowned again. "As I've said, I want to take the proper precautions to ensure your safety. As such, I cannot tell you now."

"When can you?" she asked, an alarm going off at his avoidance of telling her the task.

"Certain things must come first."

"Like what?"

He took a deep breath and said, "Tea with me tomorrow, in Diagon Alley, followed by lunch someday next week in Hogsmeade, and finally dinner with me a week from tonight, at the location of my choosing."

Hermione thought she'd had her fill of surprises for the day. She'd been wrong. "You want me to ... go out with you?"

Draco chuckled. "I want it to look that way, yes."

"But why? I don't understand why you can't just tell me."

His gaze went hard, his eyes cold. "I have no way of knowing who might be watching me. For your safety, it needs to appear that our association is of a purely social nature, that no one suspects we are meeting regularly for any other reason."

If someone was following him, watching him, then there was a distinct possibility of danger. Probable, even, if she judged by the edge to his voice. "Let me get this straight. I have to agree, right now, to help you, even though I won't find out what the task is until after I've gone on three supposed dates with you."

"That's correct," he said stiffly.

"Is there any point at which I can back out?"

"Yes. Up until when I tell you what this is all about. Once you know the details, I'm afraid you're in."

"Will there be some kind of spell or blood-oath you'll require me to take?" She'd been partly joking, but his face remained as expressionless as it had before her comment. "I'm really going to take an oath?"

He shrugged. "I haven't decided. For my protection, I can't allow you to have all the knowledge I will impart unless you are going to assist me. You would make my life considerably more difficult if you divulge my secrets to anyone. I cannot run that risk."

"May I have time to think about it?" she asked, not holding any hope that he would say yes.

"I'm afraid not. I'm running over on time as it is; this was supposed to be a social visit to ask you to tea tomorrow, and it's been over twenty minutes now."

Her knee-jerk reaction was to say no. The thought of agreeing to help without knowing the particulars was frightening, and Hermione never did anything without having all the facts. Past that initial feeling, however, she saw his pain, his hope that she would agree. Draco had made the effort to speak with her and to apologize for his past treatment of her. Then there was the promise of a lab of her own with virtually unlimited resources.

With no time to adequately weigh the pros and cons, Hermione decided to go against her initial reaction. "Okay," she said abruptly. "I'll do it."

Draco's face relaxed into the most transforming smile she'd seen him display. The previous smiles she had seen were genuine, but they also showed signs of weariness, of being unable to fully let himself be happy about something. Now, though, she was struck by how good-looking he could be.

"Thank you, Hermione," he said, coming around the desk and stopping a few inches in front of her. For a moment, she thought he might hug her, but he merely rocked on his heels and took a step back. "We have a reservation at *Tea Leaves and Thyme* for four tomorrow afternoon."

"Pretty confident, weren't you?" she said.

"I know you are a reasonable woman, and I was sure my offer would be sufficient to ensure your assistance."

"Tomorrow, then," Hermione said, her stomach performing a small flip-flop at the thought.

He nodded, looking at her warmly. "Thank you for your time, I must be off. Would you walk me out?"

"Sure," said Hermione after a moment of hesitation.

They started for the door, but Hermione stopped. "Oh, Malfoy ..." she said, grabbing his arm lightly to get his attention. When he looked at her quizzically, she dropped it. "I ... I do have one question. Should my friends know? I mean, not about my helping you, of course, but ... about us, seeing each other? I know it's just a pretense, but I wondered how far you wanted to take it." She reddened instantly when she realized how suggestive her statement sounded.

Draco smirked, but there was no malice behind it. "The more people that know, the better. As I said, this portion of my plan is for your protection. If your friends believe we are dating, then that will be for the best."

Hermione bit her lip. "I'm not sure that will go over well with some of them."

He tilted his head slightly, a new, unreadable expression on his face. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"No," she replied, feeling her face flush again.

"Good. That would have been awkward. May we continue now?"

"Yes."

They exited the office and, after some internal debate on both their parts, weighing the pros and cons and considering the time factor, they climbed into the rotating statue together. Hermione faced Draco and as soon as the statue started moving, she regretted it. Draco was entirely too close; she could see the fine detail on the collar of his robes, and every time she took a breath, she felt light-headed. He smelled of cloves, sage, and expensive ink...Hawthorne's Inks made with neroli oil, to be precise. Hawthorne's were her favorite. She would know it anywhere.

Her eyes came to his chin and she dared not look up. She could feel him watching her auspiciously. After the seemingly long ride, they reached the bottom. Hermione rushed out, eager to put some distance between them. His nearness was intense, overpowering, and confusing. She took a deep breath, thankful that her head had cleared but missing his delightful scent.

She started walking without waiting for him, and he caught up to her, chuckling amusedly to himself.

"What's so funny?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Nothing. I take it that you were referring to Weasley earlier, correct?"

"Yes," she said with a sigh. "I'm afraid he's still rather hesitant to accept you."

"Not surprising," said Draco.

"How long do you expect this to go on?" she asked.

"I can't say. Long enough that I will make an effort to be ... civil to him, should we ever be required to interact."

"That's very mature of you, Malfoy," Hermione said, casting him a playful smile.

They descended the main staircase and passed the Great Hall, the sounds and smells of lunch wafting through its opened doors. Hermione caught movement in her peripheral vision and saw Samaya heading out of the corridor that led from the dungeons.

"Professor Granger!" she called and met Hermione and Draco just before the doors leading out of the castle.

"Samaya, what can I do for you?"

The girl looked from Hermione to Draco, and back, and then her eyes widened and darted back to Draco. "You're Draco Malfoy, aren't you?"

He took a deep breath and nodded curtly. "I am."

"We're related," said Samaya.

Draco's eyes widened and he glanced at Hermione.

"Yes, well, Samaya, this is Draco Malfoy, Draco meet Samaya Black."

If he was surprised to be presented with a distant relation who obviously knew who he was, Draco didn't show it. In fact, he barely acknowledged recognizing the girl's surname.

"Is that so?" he said.

Samaya nodded. "Your mum's cousin's father's second cousin is my grandfather."

Hermione bit back a laugh.

Draco frowned. "Fascinating."

"What did you want, Samaya?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, it can wait," the girl said, giving Hermione a knowing look. Then she turned and headed back toward the dungeons.

When she was out of sight, Draco said, "That could prove interesting."

"How so?" Hermione asked. They resumed their path and exited the castle through the large front doors.

"I wonder how close her family is with my mother's. It wouldn't do for my mother to get a letter while on holiday, saying her son has been seen in the company of a woman."

"Are you ashamed of me already?" Hermione asked teasingly.

Draco fastened tightly the clasp on his cloak before answering. "Hardly. I would tell my mother in person if I am dating someone. Though in this case, with their extended leave, I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"Especially since I'm a Muggle-born." Hermione knew she was testing him and desperately hoped he passed.

He met her gaze unflinchingly. "That is beside the point. In our circle, there is a proper procedure for courtship. It's a load of antiquated rubbish if you ask me, but my mother, at least, expects me to follow the rules to the letter."

"Surely, in your circle, that means no Muggle-borns," she said sarcastically.

Draco's jaw flexed and he eyed her critically. "As I said, it's rubbish."

"Why is your mum in Paris?" Hermione asked.

"My parents are on holiday, originally for two months, but Father just sent word they'll be extending their trip another month," he said. The bitterness in his voice surprised Hermione. "It does afford me more time to finish this business with you."

"I imagine that's what you want, then? To have this finished before they return?" She didn't know where her sudden annoyance had come from. It wasn't as though she had agreed to actually date him, and so she didn't know why she felt slighted by the idea that he wouldn't want to tell his parents about her, wouldn't want them to know, or even suspect, that he was dating a Muggle-born. It would seem as though her deep-seated feelings of resentment toward Draco could not simply be magicked away as she had hoped.

"Yes," he said tersely. "Whatever you are implying, I would rather you be frank. I don't enjoy games and riddles."

"You don't want them to know you're seeing me, real or not."

He scowled at her, then rubbed his head in exasperation. "You're being absurd, though your concern is understandable. My desire to have this matter concluded before they return home has nothing to do with you and everything to do with my father. That is all you need know at this point."

She immediately felt terrible and scolded herself. "I'm sorry, Draco. That was ... brash of me."

"Let's walk to the gate," he said, not waiting for her to agree. He walked quickly, keeping a few steps in front of her. Once they'd put a hundred feet between the castle and themselves, he spoke again, this time gently. "I have no reason to expect you to see me in a favorable light, despite my apology. I only hope that over the course of our time together, you will see me differently than you do at present."

"I already do," she rushed.

He stopped in his tracks and she nearly ran into him. Then he looked at her, his face betraying nothing, and reached for her hand.

Hermione's first instinct was to draw back, but he caught her before she could, and placed a gentle kiss on the back of her hand. "Until next time," he said, his mouth barely off her skin and his eyes boring into hers. She felt his breath on her skin, causing the fine hairs on her hand to stand on end.

Hermione was so stunned that she only managed to tell him goodbye when he was twenty paces away. She stared after him until he disappeared from sight, and then slowly walked back to the castle.

Samaya was waiting for her just inside the door. "Are you seeing him?" she asked, falling in stride beside Hermione.

"That is certainly none of your business," Hermione said, straightening her back and starting for the Great Hall. She wondered if it really mattered that Samaya thought she was seeing Draco, since people were supposed to think she was seeing him very soon.

"He certainly is handsome. Dad said he was a Death Eater, is that true?"

"Yes," Hermione said, walking quickly between the Slytherin and Hufflepuff tables toward the staff table.

"He was in Slytherin, too. Most of my family is."

Hermione nodded.

"Interesting ... Enjoy your lunch, Professor," Samaya said. With a curious smile, the girl left Hermione to join her friends at the Slytherin table.



The rest of Hermione's day passed in a blur. She tried to remember everything she had heard or read about Draco over the last seven years and even went to the library to pull up old editions of the *Prophet* to search for references to him in there. She learned little; every single article in the past five years that even so much as mentioned him was business-related. Prior to that, the articles were about the war, then his trial, Narcissa's trial, and finally Lucius's trial, conviction and imprisonment. They said nothing about who he was, about the man whose lips she could still feel on the back of her hand.

Next Hermione turned to other wizarding publications. *Witch Weekly* provided her with the most information, but she suspected much of it was pure speculation. There were numerous pictures of him...usually with a beautiful woman on his arm...but the look on his face was always the same: business only. Not one of the moving pictures showed him looking at the woman with any kind of fondness. For their part, the women seemed to understand their roles. He seemed to prefer a new woman for each event, though here and there Hermione saw him with the same woman on different occasions.

There was always intense discussion in the articles following an issue in which Draco was shown with a new witch. His love life seemed a highly popular topic, though without any sort of confirmation from him or any of the beautiful women he associated with, the conversations quickly fizzled.

The pictures were always taken at public events. There were no snapshots of him darting out of a café holding hands with a woman or stealing a kiss when he thought no one was looking. He either hadn't had many relationships over the years or he'd kept them very private. Hermione suspected the latter; after all, someone like Draco Malfoy was bound to attract the attention of the opposite sex. Knowing what little she did of him, she doubted he'd want the world privy to his personal affairs.

Largely uninterested in the hearsay presented in the gossip rag, Hermione sought other sources of information. She stumbled across an interview conducted by a business journal from three years before. When nothing else showed promise on providing her with a glimpse into the character of Malfoy, she took the journal to her quarters, brewed a cup of her favorite tea, and sat down to read the article.

Most of it was strictly business, though she could tell it barely scratched the surface of what he did. Since refusing to tell her more about what he did for his father's company, her interest in finding out had grown, and she'd hoped her research provided a clearer picture.

Hermione also found herself fascinated with the things Malfoy said. His responses were articulate, well-presented, and thorough. While he didn't go into detail about what his company did, she learned that it was highly organized and efficient, branching into a large number of business fields.

The article provided an incomplete list of the various enterprises that Malfoy Inc. dabbled in: research, which she already knew, hardware (such as glass and iron products), investments (from which George and Ron would benefit), communication (though not specified), and parchment.

Then, near the end of the interview, the questions turned away from business.

Reginald Witty: Now that we've got through the interesting bits, we've come to the dull, required section of this interview.

Draco Malfoy: (chuckling) What might that comprise?

R.W.: Is there a significant witch in your life?

D.M.: That's part of the interview?

R.W.: Well, yes. Traditionally, we like to show our readers something about the man behind the mask, so to speak.

D.M.: There are a few significant witches in my life. My mother, for one. She supports me greatly, makes sure the house-elves bring me my meals. I'm afraid I would have skipped far too many over the years if not for her.

R.W.: Of course, that's lovely. Good family support is important. Speaking of families, do you have any intention of starting one of your own in the near future? The distant future?

D.M.: (long pause) Certainly not anytime soon. Beyond that... I fancy the idea of a family.

R.W.: When was your last meaningful relationship?

D.M.: I reckon no one is really going to read this.

R.W.: (chuckling)

D.M.: I have never... I have had a limited number of meaningful relationships, as you put it.

R.W.: Why do you think that is? The demands of the job?

D.M.: The work I do certainly requires much of my time and energies. I'm not sure how my father managed. Of course, my father already had my mother, and so didn't need to expend any energy on finding a wife. If I were to enter into a relationship, I would want to devote myself to that person, to be able to give her the best of me. My present situation prevents me from being able to do that, and so I choose not to get my heart involved.

R.W.: There has been great speculation over the years of an ongoing... understanding between you and Miss Pansy Parkinson. Her position in this sphere is considerable. The joining of the Malfoy and Parkinson estates would make you nearly unstoppable.

D.M.: No comment.

The interview continued for a few more questions, but they turned away from anything personal. Hermione glanced at the clock and saw that she would have to hurry in order to make it to dinner.

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Draco returned home from work that evening after nine. He was tired, but felt optimistic because of his conversation with Hermione. She had agreed to the first part of his plan, at least.

Once he was ensconced in his office, Draco ate dinner and opened his mail. Included in the day's stack was a letter from his mother. He had received sporadic communication from his parents. He might get five letters in a week followed by nothing for two. This was the first letter in over a week.

As he read, a new wave of dread washed through him.



Draco scowled at the reminder of his parents' extended vacation and pushed away his half-eaten dinner, suddenly not hungry. He crumpled the letter in his hand and then threw it in the fire. Next he called for Chippy and had the dishes removed. He was too angry to respond just then, but he made a note to do it in the morning. Finally, he threw himself on the sofa and Summoned a bottle of Chianti.

His parents were having a wonderful time while he was stuck trying to pay for it. They obviously didn't miss him or want him there with them. No, there would be no family holiday. Merlin forbid Narcissa have to share his father with him.

Though he understood and accepted that they needed time together, he still wished his father had wanted to spend some of the time with him. Even a week would have made Draco felt appreciated more than a thousand words could.

The only good thing that had come from their prolonged absence was that he and Hermione would now have more time to uncover the blackmailer. He'd been concerned that four weeks wasn't enough. They now had eight. Though by the time Hermione was caught up, it would be down to seven.

His ire retreated at the thought of her. Seeing her that day had made him feel light, the way he always felt when he was around her of late, despite the gravity of his message to her. When she had said yes, he'd nearly hugged her. Then, when they'd ridden down the lift together, he had thought he would drown in her. He'd been perfectly positioned to feel her soft feminine curves against his hard lines, to smell her intoxicating scent. He had groaned internally, scolding his body's reactions. He already knew he was attracted to her; he didn't need the constant physical reminder whenever he was in her presence. It would certainly make working together interesting, but he had no intentions of crossing the line between business and pleasure.

Besides, she wasn't the kind of woman to accept a casual relationship. He couldn't give her much of himself, and he didn't think she would accept less than all of him. If she ever wanted him at all.

He groaned and flipped onto his side, taking one last swallow of the dry wine. Exhausted and bone-weary, Draco fell asleep on the sofa in his office. His last tangible thought was of a pretty, brown-haired girl in a white sundress, laughing at something he had said.

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Draco was awakened by a sharp, insistent knock on the office door. Blearily he opened his eyes and glanced around the room, at first not sure where he was. The light from the window told him it was the middle of the night. The knocking continued. Draco stood and stumbled to the door. Leaning one arm against the frame, he opened it a crack, ready to shank whoever had disturbed him.

A woman stood there in business robes that were a little too tight, a blouse a little too revealing and sheer, displaying her assets in a barely-there red brassiere. It was Carrie; of course, he didn't know if that was her real name.

She smiled seductively when their eyes met.

He scowled.

She cocked an eyebrow and then stood on her tiptoes to peek behind him. "Ooh, a desk? It looks solid enough."

"What are you doing here?" he growled.

"It's Friday," she said simply

"No," he said angrily.

"No?" She looked at him then, shock evident on her painted face.

He had never said no before. It was his arrangement, after all. Draco rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to work out the way he felt, the funk he'd settled in. His mind was heavy with the weight of all that had happened in the last month. He didn't want to do this, he wasn't in the mood, and those were the very thoughts that made his decision. If he was considering sending her home, he clearly needed to get his mind off everything going on around him and lose himself in sensation.

"Go to my room," he said gruffly. "I'll be there shortly."

"That's what I thought," she said, reaching up to move a strand of his fringe from off his face.

He pulled away from her and she chuckled.

"Bad week?"

"Go," he grunted.

She complied, slowly removing articles of clothing as she went, leaving a trail. He scowled at her back, and the thought occurred to him that this was the perfect opportunity to release the tension he'd felt when around Hermione. He felt an undeniable attraction to her, and being in such close quarters had been ... interesting. The last thing he needed was for his thoughts to run wild...he needed his mind empty, his thoughts cleared, so he could focus on the work to be done. Finding the blackmailer was his highest...his *only*...priority.

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A/N: Thank you for reading! I really hope you liked this one. THE FUN BEGINS! Beta thanks go to manda, z, pokeystar, and drcjsnider. Check out my profile page for links to the art and music. This chapter's art was done by the amazing melia_eothria. Music, as always, is thanks to inadaze22!

Hero in Her Skies

Chapter 8 of 16

Draco and Hermione's "First Date"

Chapter 8 - - Hero in Her Skies

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Hermione checked her watch just before tossing a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace in her quarters. Quarter to nine, right on time.

She stood and stared for a few long moments. This morning she would be telling her parents about Draco, and her nerves were on fire. It had been a while since she had shared news of this sort, and she hoped they wouldn't ask too many questions she couldn't answer.

"Granger residence," she said finally and then stepped into the swirling green flames.

After the war, Hermione had taken Ron with her to Australia to retrieve her parents. It had been nearly as difficult as the war itself, seeing them so happily oblivious and then reversing the spells she had cast. She had discussed her plan with them beforehand, and they had known what was coming, but it was still difficult. She showed them the letters they had written to themselves, explaining everything, and her parents had been stunned but accepted her explanation.

She had told them that she would be working with Harry to put an end to a wizard who had taken a page out of Hitler's book. She explained in detail what Voldemort was like, his ambitions, his methods. Hermione had insisted that her parents go into hiding not only for their protection but for hers also. There was no way to be sure they would become targets, but in order for her to be able to concentrate on helping Harry, she needed to know they would be safe.

Elizabeth and Thomas Granger had agreed, though reluctantly, after Hermione had assured them that they would retain their memories as the Grangers, but that their minds would be unable to access those memories. Instead, a new set of false memories would be implanted. Once the war was over, Hermione severed the connection in her parents' brains that led to those false memories.

After returning to England, they resumed their dental practice, and Hermione visited them every week during the school year and more frequently during the summer. Saturday morning was her time with her parents. Though they had agreed to let Hermione alter their memories, they had been, and still were, distrustful of magic. This was why she Floo'd there for her weekly visits instead of Apparating; somehow, travel by fireplace seemed less magical to them.

Hermione stepped out of the hearth and cleaned the soot from the floor and her clothes. "Dad? Mum? I'm here!"

She glanced around the room at the empty furniture and drawn windows and wondered if she had made a mistake. Were her parents out of town? She didn't remember them mentioning anything about a trip. The kitchen showed no signs of usage that morning either, and her mother never did anything without a cup of tea.

Hermione headed up the stairs and as she reached the top, her mother came out of the bedroom, pulling her robe around her and yawning.

When she saw Hermione, she stopped mid-step. "Oh! You scared me!" said Elizabeth, smiling at her daughter and going to hug her.

"Sorry, Mum." Hermione chuckled as she returned the embrace. "But it's nearly eight on Saturday morning; this is when I always come by."

"Yes, I know, we didn't set our alarms this morning. We went to an office party last night, were up late, had a few glasses of wine ... the lie-in was just what we needed."

"Oh. I was concerned when I came through and didn't see anyone."

Elizabeth smiled and put her arm around Hermione's shoulder. "Now, dear, there's nothing to worry about. Everything is fine. Let's go get breakfast started, shall we? Your father is in the shower."

They went to the kitchen, and Elizabeth started bustling around, starting the water boiling, pulling out eggs, onions, sausage and fruit. Hermione peeled a few oranges while they talked.

"How was your week?" Elizabeth asked.

"It was fine," Hermione said.

"And how are your two love-birds coming along?"

Hermione sighed and then laughed. She had told her mother about Evan and Sheetal and her theory that Evan was pining for the Slytherin girl. "It's ridiculous how much thought I've given to them. They are doing the same. Though ... I'm considering putting them in the same work group for the term."

"Should you do that? Isn't that against some kind of ... teacher-student confidentiality rule, or something?"

"I shouldn't think so, Mum. Perhaps if Evan had told me of his feelings, then yes, but as it stands, I'm going on speculation alone. Putting them together would only provide more opportunity for Evan to do something."

"Do you think he would?"

"I'm not sure," she replied, thoughtful. "I've tried to predict what would happen, but I can't know how he would act. He seems very confident, not shy around the other girls, and he's got a pleasant demeanor. Yet I've had this suspicion since the middle of last year, and he's done nothing."

Elizabeth finished chopping the onions and put them in a pan with a bit of oil. "I suppose there's no harm. They have to go in a group with someone, after all."

"I still haven't decided," Hermione admitted, putting the orange slices on a plate and then leaning on the counter to watch her mum work.

"How's Charlie?" Elizabeth asked cautiously. "I haven't seen him around much lately."

Hermione shrugged. "I saw him about a month ago. I don't think we'll be getting back together anytime soon, Mum. I know how much you like him."

"Now, Hermione, you know that I'm only concerned about your happiness. Yes, we like Charlie, but if things don't work out between you, then we accept that too." She tenderly patted Hermione's cheek.

"Morning, ladies."

Hermione and her mother both turned to the entry where Thomas was standing, smiling.

"Morning, Dad," Hermione said, going to hug him. "Late night, I heard."

He nodded and poured himself a cup of tea, then kissed his wife on the cheek as she stirred the sausage in with the onions.

"Things are going well at school," she said. Then, before she could even think about whether or not she should mention it, Hermione blurted, "And I have a date this afternoon."

Both of her parents stopped and stared at her, then looked at each other, then returned to their previous tasks.

Hermione had been nervous all morning at the thought of telling her parents about Draco. Every time she told them about the men who came into her life, they were very supportive and welcoming, but this one would be significantly different.

She had always been honest with her parents and, following the war, had made every effort to repair the still fragile bond with them. She told them everything about her life, her work, her friends, the men she dated. They had exchanged a pointed look because it had been nearly nine months since she had last been on a date.

No matter how hard she tried, Hermione couldn't get Charlie Weasley out of her heart. Even though it had been two years, part of her didn't want him out and secretly hoped that things would somehow work out between them.

After the war, she and Ron had agreed to start dating after things were settled in the wizarding world. Once Voldemort was dead, Kingsley Shacklebolt agreed to stay in office until a new Minister was elected. Arthur Weasley's name was submitted, and his entire family, including Percy, rallied behind him. It had been a way to unite them after losing Fred, gave them something to work for together.

Hermione had worked with Harry and Minerva at restoring Hogwarts, recruiting new teachers, revamping the curriculum. When Ron started Auror training and Hermione entered her Healer apprenticeship, they began their relationship. It went according to schedule for two years. He kissed her when it was appropriate, they held hands in public, and gazed into each other's eyes.

Ron was there for her when she realized she wasn't cut out for Healing. He'd held her as she made the decision to focus solely on research and had fully supported every career move she'd made.

But it wasn't enough. One day she'd woken up beside him and realized there was no spark, nothing interesting. While things were nice, pleasant even sometimes, their relationship had fallen into a rut very early on. And two years later, she was sure neither of them had it in them to get out of it.

After a few months apart, they decided they were better off as friends. Life went back to normal. Hermione had dated casually, not getting into anything serious, focusing most of her efforts on completing her certification to teach.

Then early the year following her break-up with Ron, she had been sent by her research job to Romania, to the Dragon Keep where Charlie Weasley worked, to collect samples of dragon dung for study. He offered to show her around the Keep...and help collect her samples...then the city, and soon they were inseparable. She'd moved in with him after only a few months, but they didn't tell anyone at first because Hermione had been unsure how the Weasleys would react. They had all been disappointed when she and Ron had split. She'd feared they would see her relationship with Charlie as betrayal.

The time they had spent together had been some of the best months of Hermione's life. Charlie truly complemented her, enjoyed her, cherished her, and respected her. She had been sure they would end up together. At Christmas that year, they finally told his family. The reaction had been what they'd expected, though they hadn't anticipated the degree of Ron's anger. Everyone had been shocked, to say the least, but Ron had been angrier than she had ever seen him.

He wouldn't speak to Hermione or Charlie for months, accusing both her and his brother of betraying him. It eventually came out that Ron thought a tremendous amount of Charlie, looked up to him, saw them as cut from the same cloth. He had taken the relationship as a slap to the face; if Hermione couldn't make things work with Ron, why was she able to with Charlie?

Ron had made things difficult in the Weasley family. He forced people to take sides, choose him or Charlie. Molly absolutely refused, but he was so insistent that soon, everyone else had grudgingly chosen a side. Harry, too, had been brought into the ordeal, as Hermione's friend and Ginny's fiancé. He had chosen Hermione, which angered everyone who had taken Ron's side.

Hermione and Charlie fought hard against other people's attempts to dictate their relationship and had continued seeing each other. However, the damage had been done and seeds of discord planted between them. A month before Hermione began her first year of teaching, she and Charlie had ended their relationship. Their separation had been amiable, and they'd still loved each other, but being at the focus of a giant rift in the family had been too much. It wasn't worth it, they'd both concluded.

Hermione didn't speak with Ron for a long time until Charlie begged her to forgive him. She did, and slowly things returned to a semblance of normal, with Ron finally apologizing and removing his objection to her dating his brother. She and Charlie had talked about starting something again, but it seemed the time had passed. They were in different places in life, and while he still made her heart race, it always brought back the bad memories as well. The last thing Hermione wanted was to be the cause of another wedge in the family she loved almost as dearly as her own.

Charlie was still one of her dearest friends, and if he needed a date for an event, he always called her, and she likewise. They were there for each other whenever needed, to provide a shoulder, a hug, or other comforts.

In her bones, she believed that someday, she would still wind up with Charlie. It might be many years down the road, but part of her heart belonged to him.

All the men she had dated since him fell vastly short when compared to him. Her parents knew this and seemed to accept, as she had, that one day their daughter would marry the older Weasley.

Whenever a new bloke came into the picture, they listened patiently while Hermione got excited, went on a few dates, and then inevitably would pop into their den one evening with a frown on her face. "He's not Charlie," she would say and curl up in her mother's arms.

"I know what you're thinking," Hermione said hurriedly. "But this one is ... different." That was quite an understatement. She had given a lot of thought about telling her parents the truth about what she was doing with Malfoy, but then she would remember the look on his face when he'd said "Please." She couldn't betray his confidence at this point. So they would be led to believe she was seeing him, as would all the other people in her life.

"How so?" asked Elizabeth.

"He's ... well, he's very different from anyone I've ever gone out with. I've known him most of my life, actually." He was a Death Eater; he's the one who introduced me to the hate and malevolence in the wizarding world.

"Do we know him?" asked Thomas with a frown.

"No," she replied. "But you're heard of him. It's Draco Malfoy."

"The young man who..." began Thomas.

"I know what he's done, but remember what I've told you about his life. His parents, their involvement with the Death Eaters, what he was forced to do when he was only sixteen. I saw him a few weeks ago, for the first time in years, and he seems genuinely changed. A different man."

"I certainly hope so," her father said. "One wrong move and I'll have words with him, magic or no."

Hermione laughed at the image of her father fighting with Draco. "I know, Dad. I don't think there's anything to worry about. It's just tea, I don't even know if he'll ask me out again."

"Well, if he does, be sure to bring him by the house so we can meet him," chimed Elizabeth.

"Yes, Mum," she promised, smiling as she opened a cabinet to pull out three plates.

"Do you like him?" Elizabeth asked.

Hermione thought for a moment. The quick and easy answer was yes, since she was supposedly going out with him. However, she allowed herself a moment to really consider the question and smiled at the memory of their conversation on her portable sofa. "I think there's potential," she said finally, leaving the kitchen to set the table in the adjacent dining room.

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Hermione left her parents' house at two in the afternoon. They had eaten an early lunch, and her parents had an appointment with friends. She had a few errands to run in Diagon Alley, but she would wait until after her meeting with Malfoy. With a little over two hours remaining, she didn't want to return to Hogwarts, but she didn't want to remain in their home alone.

It occurred to her that she hadn't given any thought to what she would wear to tea with Malfoy, and she groaned when she realized she would have to return to the castle in order to change. She decided to go visit Ginny and use her fireplace to get back into her room.

The Potters lived in Ottery St. Catchpole in a quaint little home off the main road through the village. Ginny had wanted to be close to her family while Harry had wanted a place to call his own, and the village near the Burrow was the ideal compromise.

Hermione knocked on the dark brown door and soon it was opened by James, Harry and Ginny's two-year-old son.

She knelt to look him in the eye. "Hello, James. Is your Mum around?"

"Right here," said Ginny, appearing in the doorway. She grabbed James' hand and then smiled at her friend. "Hermione! What brings you here? Harry isn't here; he had a meeting with Minerva."

"I know," she said, stepping into the hallway of the cozy cottage as Ginny opened the door. "That's partly why I'm here. I could use your help."

"Sure," said Ginny, picking up her son. "Have a seat in the living room. I'll just put him in the pen. Would you like something to drink? Tea?" she asked when she was out of the room.

"No, thank you," Hermione called.

She stood in the living room and smiled. Two comfy sofas sat against the two interior walls, and an old chest sat under the large front window. Pictures of their family, immediate and extended, covered the walls and other horizontal surfaces, including the hearth of the large fireplace. The colors were warm and the room was inviting.

"All right," said Ginny, returning to the room and taking a seat on one of the sofas. "What's on your mind?"

Hermione knew that with Ginny, the best way to deliver news was to say it all up front and then wait for the questions to begin. She took a deep breath and said most of the news. "I have a date in about two hours, and I don't know what to wear."

Ginny's eyes widened. "A date? Since when do you come to me for help with what to wear?"

"This ... this date is a little different than the ones I'm used to. I'm afraid I'm in uncharted territory this time."

"Who is it?" Ginny asked, moving into task-oriented mode. "I have to know that. Oh, and what does the date entail? You said it's in a couple of hours; are you meeting for tea? Where? Indoors or out?"

"Yes, it's tea. Diagon Alley, Tea Leaves and Thyme. I'm not sure about seating, but if I had to wager a guess, I would say outdoors."

"Wow, Hermione, that's the nicest tea shop in London! You've left off the name of the bloke, though, don't think I hadn't noticed," Ginny said with a pointed look.

Hermione sighed. "I know, and I'm getting to that. It's ... Malfoy."

Ginny stared at her friend and then slowly smiled. "Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

"Really?" Hermione said, incredulous. "It sure surprised me."

"Well, I caught the way he was looking at you over lunch that first time he came to Quidditch. OH!" Ginny bounced in her seat from excitement. "Wear that white sundress! He snuck looks at you every other second in that dress!"

Hermione was confused. It wasn't a real date, and Malfoy didn't have a real attraction to her, so Ginny must have been imagining things. She couldn't imagine Draco looking at her in any special way that day, as it had been before they'd begun to reconnect. Besides, she hadn't changed all that much over the years, and Draco had always made it clear in school that he had found her quite ugly. True, it was a long time ago, but she didn't think he would change so drastically.

She shook her head. "No, that can't be right, Ginny. Besides, it's too cool to wear that dress now."

"Wear a cardigan with it," Ginny said. "And if you don't believe me, watch his face when he sees you."

"I don't know ... I certainly can't wear those sandals now."

"I'll be right back." Ginny hopped off the sofa and practically ran out of the room. She returned after a few minutes with a shoebox. "Trust me. Don't argue. Magick them to fit you; they're perfect."

Hermione warily accepted the box and then opened the lid. Inside was a pair of red, open-toe pumps with what had to be a three-inch heel. "Ginny!" she exclaimed, hastily putting the lid back. "Are you serious? I can't wear those! Those are ... are ..."

"They're 'I know you want me' shoes. I know. The first time I wore them for Harry..."

"No, thank you. I don't need that information."

Ginny thrust the box back at Hermione. "Take them. They're perfect."

She wanted to exclaim that she didn't need for anything to be perfect, because Malfoy didn't really like her and it wasn't a real date. However, it occurred to her that it was supposed to look like a real date, for anyone who might be watching, and that if Malfoy questioned her, she could always claim that as the reason for her attire. She was supposed to look like she wanted him to notice her, and those red shoes would certainly do the trick.

As she took the box from Ginny, something hit her. "Why are you so okay with this? It's bloody Malfoy, remember?"

Ginny shrugged. "I know. Harry insists that I be supportive of him. I don't know why, Harry swore he wouldn't tell a soul, but I think it has to do with Lucius Malfoy. Harry was there, you know, when Lucius was released from prison."

"I read about Harry being there, but it slipped my mind," Hermione said, frowning. "Why was he there?"

"No one knows. Dad told me that Harry gave Lucius a box. That's all I know. Harry didn't even tell me that much, nor have I seen any strange boxes in all the years we've been together."

"How odd!"

"Indeed. And, you know, he was nice enough when we hung out with him those times. I felt awful about what Ron said, but that's Ron. He speaks before he thinks, and he's got such a short temper."

"You're the best, Ginny," Hermione said, shrinking the shoebox to fit in her purse. Her thoughts were whirring once again. Did Malfoy's task have anything to do with the box Harry gave Lucius? "I should get going; I've got to get back to school and get ready."

Ginny smiled. "You are most welcome. I want all the details immediately, if not sooner. Does Harry or Ron know?"

"No. I'd rather wait to tell them. This could be nothing, and I don't want anyone getting upset over it."

Ginny walked Hermione to the fireplace. "Listen to this, Hermione. Really hear me. Do not let Ron ruin this. If this thing with Malfoy is something good, something you want, don't let Ron do what he did with Charlie."

"But it's not the same," Hermione said.

"No, Malfoy isn't Ron's brother, but he has strong feelings about him nonetheless. He obviously isn't interested in listening to Harry about giving Malfoy a chance. He won't be happy about you dating him, either. Just ... if you want to be with Malfoy, be with him."

"Thank you, Ginny. I'm glad I have your support." Hermione hugged her friend. "Ron could certainly make things difficult again, couldn't he?"

Ginny nodded. "Details," she said, handing Hermione the jar of Floo powder. "Minute details. The thread count of the napkins, minute, okay?"

Hermione smiled and stepped into the fireplace. "I'll be sure to ask the waiter about that. Bye, Ginny."

Once she arrived in her quarters, she threw open her closet. The white sundress was clean, thankfully, but she stared at it, still unsure, still wary at the thought of Malfoy finding her attractive. Did she want to think about the date possibly being real, not just for show? He had been extremely charming and interested when they'd spoken during the Quidditch game he'd sat out. His smile had released tiny butterflies in her stomach, and his intelligence had impressed her. It was clear that he spent a lot of time thinking and reading, and she found that highly attractive. Under normal circumstances, these attributes were enough for her to go out with a man if he asked.

Hermione shook her head. It would be dangerous to forget the reality of the situation: this was the first of three meetings designed to establish an alibi for her while helping him solve a problem...nothing more, nothing less. Regardless of the butterflies he inspired, despite the fact that she found him attractive, that came first and foremost. Still, she would look the part.

Hermione pulled a red cardigan from the closet to match the shoes and got dressed. She pulled half of her hair up and clipped it with a red bow, then put on a string of pearls her mother had given her for her twenty-fifth birthday. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she smiled. She felt slightly over-dressed...what if he showed up in jeans?...but she certainly would give off the feeling that she was trying to impress her companion. And that was what mattered.

Before she could change her mind, Hermione grabbed her purse, threw on an outer cloak, and Floo'd to the Leaky Cauldron, requesting permission to come through. It was granted, and she quickly made her way through the pub and out the back. Two bricks up, three down, and she stepped into Diagon Alley.

Hermione glanced at her watch, which she had tossed in her purse, and saw that she had fifteen minutes before her scheduled meeting time with Malfoy. She decided to take Ginny's advice and watch his face when he first saw her. That would mean getting to their table first and watching for him, so she headed directly for the tea shop.

Tea Leave and Thyme was set back from the road, and there were twenty-two tables outside, surrounded by a short fence. An awning could be extended in poor weather, though Hermione suspected it was mostly for looks. Most of the tables were occupied when she approached the man standing at the door beside a podium.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm meeting someone here at four; he said we had a reservation."

"Name, please?"

"Malfoy." Without thinking, Hermione glanced around to see if anyone had heard her. No one was paying her any attention.

"Ah, yes. Mr. Malfoy contacted us just a few minutes ago and said he would be late, but to seat you right away. Everything has been arranged; follow me."

Hermione nodded and the maître d' led her through a short gate, and then through the maze of tables to one situated near the café, away from the main road. He pulled out the chair facing the front and she sat.

"Here is your tea menu, Miss Granger. Your waiter will be with you shortly."

She thanked him and then glanced at the menu, though she had no intention of ordering until Draco had joined her. When the waiter approached, she ordered water and asked him to return when her companion had joined her.

While she waited, Hermione took in her surroundings. The outdoor seating area was surrounded on one side by the café, another side by a tall, brick wall with vines nearly covering it, and the other two sides by the low fence. The tables were covered with white tablecloths, and at her place was a beautiful set of china with a pattern of tiny yellow flowers. When she glanced at what would be Draco's place, she saw an entirely different set of china. His plate, teacup and saucer had scalloped edges with a silver band for accent.

By the time four came and went, the entire outdoor seating area was full. Hermione found herself growing nervous as the minutes passed. Would they be watched during their meal? Or had Malfoy simply wanted them to be seen by enough people that the person of interest would hear about it?

At precisely quarter after four, Draco appeared at the podium. Hermione was grateful for her unobstructed view and a few moments to take him in. He looked dashing, dressed in a dark grey suit, a white shirt with pale blue and green stripes with the top button undone, and a contrasting, patterned tie. His hair looked strategically tousled, which surprised her. She had expected it to be impeccable, but found him even more attractive than before. He wasn't above looking a little disheveled when he went out in public, and it made him more approachable, more ... real.

He spoke to the maître d', who then pointed to where Hermione was sitting. She had been sure to sit so that he would see the dress, her body angled away from the table, one leg crossed over the other. Her heart was pounding as Draco followed the man's line and his eyes met hers. She gave him a small wave and he continued staring, his eyes burning through hers, oblivious to the maître d', who had been talking to him the entire time.

Their gaze broke as Draco's attention was finally won by the short man, and Hermione feared her heart would jump out of her body. Ginny had been right! He certainly seemed affected by seeing her. Whether or not the dress was the cause remained to be seen.

Hermione watched as Draco made his way through the tables toward her, an over cloak tossed casually over one arm, his other hand in his pocket. When he reached their table, he smiled, in apparent control of his reactions. She didn't feel the same intensity from his gaze as she had moments before.

"I'm sorry I was late," he said, sitting down. "My meeting ran over. Thank you for waiting."

"It was no problem," she said, feeling oddly disappointed that his eyes had lost their fire.

"Have you ordered?" he asked, picking up his menu.

"No, I was waiting for you."

"You didn't have to do that," he said, glancing at her.

"My tea would already be cold if I hadn't."

The waiter came over then and took their orders. Hermione selected an exotic herbal tea to begin while Draco chose Earl Grey.

"I'm surprised at your order," she said, folding her hands in her lap. "Out of all the choices, unusual teas from all over the world, you choose a home-grown variety."

He shrugged. "I know what I like."

Hermione wasn't sure what to say to that and bit her lip, trying to think of something interesting to talk about. She couldn't believe she was nervous about a fake date! "What was your meeting about?"

Draco raised an eyebrow and smiled bemusedly. "Do you really want to know?"

"We are supposed to be getting to know each other, aren't we?" she teased, straightening in her chair and trying to force her thoughts into project-mode.

"You're right," he agreed.

The waiter returned with their tea, food and accoutrements, and then left without a word.

Hermione's eyes widened at the three-tiered display, and she looked at Draco. "I thought we had yet to order?"

"When I arrived, I requested two of everything they offered in the Full Tea. This way we don't have to pour over the tedious menu for twenty minutes, trying to decide what we want."

She looked back at the food and laughed. "I still can't decide what I want!"

On the bottom plate was a colorful array of savories, some she recognized, some she didn't. The second plate was nearly spilling over with a variety of scones: lemon, poppy seed, raspberry and plain. The third tier was a beautiful assortment of fresh fruit.

On an additional plate was a selection of sweets, including small helpings of tarts and cakes. Lemon curd, strawberry, blackberry and apricot jam, clotted cream, milk and sugar completed the array.

Draco said nothing, so she glanced at him. His eyes were once again on fire, and she shivered in the cool, autumn air, but blamed the intensity of his stare.

She was suddenly very aware of herself, and of him. Everything blurred and all she could do was stare back with wonder.

Just as she began to feel like she might burn up under his scrutiny, he broke the moment by turning his attention to the offerings as though nothing had happened. He quickly selected three sandwiches and a scone. As he applied a generous helping of lemon curd, he said, in an offhand manner without looking at her, "You look stunning this afternoon, Hermione."

She had been about to reach for a raspberry scone when he spoke, and she froze, her hand mid-air. He finished spreading the curd on his scone and ate it very deliberately, glancing around at the other patrons before finally meeting her stunned gaze.

"The raspberry is an excellent choice," he said, smirking.

Hermione blinked, then narrowed her eyes at him and reached for a poppy seed scone. He chuckled, his voice deep and smooth.

"My meeting was the monthly Budget Committee meeting. I sat for nearly five hours listening to old wizards drone on and on about numbers. Some were higher than last month, some lower, and they had detailed action plans for how to make those lower numbers go up for next month."

"Sounds terribly exciting," she teased, brushing aside the remnants of delightful tremors and focusing on their conversation.

"Oh, it was." He chuckled lightly. "It was scheduled to end at three, but one of the branches of the company had a major set-back this month, and the manager of that branch went into excruciating detail about what had happened, what had been done to solve the problem, and what would be done to ensure it didn't happen again."

"You weren't aware of this set-back before today? That seems ... irresponsible of that manager."

Draco's expression flicked from surprise to bemusement. "Indeed. As it happens, I was aware of the problem, but I still require my managers to give a full accounting, not just to me but to each other. Still, that was the cause for the meeting running late, and you'd said you wished to know. I thought it would be irresponsible of me to withhold this piece of information."

"Oh," she said, feeling heat creep into her cheeks at the amusement in his voice. "Yes, well..."

"Are you truly interested in the way I run my business?" he asked, his voice curious.

"I ... well ... honestly, yes," she said, confidently meeting his eyes. "I read an article about you in *Magical Business*, where you described some of the changes you made from the way your father ran things, and it was fascinating. I found myself wondering about your reasons, your motives behind the changes, because it sounded as though your father had a much more dictatorial method, whereas you have opted for surrounding yourself with wise and experienced people and gaining as much information from them as possible before making decisions. Which, in my opinion, is a very good approach."

She bit her lip, worried that she was rambling.

His eyes were shining, all teasing amusement gone, as he poured himself another cup of tea. "Fascinating," he whispered. Then, in a full voice, queried, "Did you seek out this journal? Or are you one of the unlucky few who subscribe to it?"

"You're not the only one who is thorough with research," she quipped, a cheeky smirk ghosting her lips.

This time he gave her a full, warm smile, which sent a cascade of butterflies colliding through her stomach.

"I wouldn't expect anything less of you." Draco carefully selected a grape from the fruit plate. Just before popping it into his mouth, he said, "And that's precisely why I've come to you."

The reality of the situation crashed through her; they were out together in order to be seen. There was no ulterior reason. Again, she felt disappointed. There were many things she found she wanted to know about the man sitting across from her, but there was a line between them. She wasn't sure where it was, if it was solid or flexible, thick or dotted. He had just reminded her of the line, so she must have gotten too close to it.

Hermione glanced around the café and the street, looking to see if someone was obviously staring. To her surprise, quite a few people seemed interested. When she turned back to Draco, he was watching her.

"Are we ... do you think that the person or persons this whole thing is for are here? Watching?"

He scowled, then sighed. "Most likely not. Precautions."

"Then why are so many people interested?"

"In all of your excellent research, surely you deduced that I do not generally go out on dates with beautiful and extraordinary women. The fact that I am out with you ... and probably more that you are out with me, is bound to send old witches into gossip fits."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. "On the contrary, I saw plenty of evidence suggesting otherwise."

"Business functions do not count. Etiquette requires I take a partner, and I do. They are not dates, and I make that quite clear to the women involved," he explained.

"They are certainly beautiful. I suppose my being seen with you will prove an interesting conundrum to those gossipmongers."

Draco looked at her with narrowed eyes. "If you're fishing for something, it won't work."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hermione said honestly.

"I've already said twice what I think of you. If you want to hear it again, I suggest you replay this afternoon in a Pensieve."

She reddened, feeling anger rising with the embarrassment. "I'm certainly not hunting for compliments, Malfoy. All I meant was that when compared with all of them, I clearly fall very short, and it will be noticed."

He held her gaze, his expression impassive, for a few heated moments. Then he smiled, though it was clearly forced. "We're here to get to know each other. I will give you two things without making you work for them. One, I don't give out compliments lightly. Two, I don't make a habit of lying. I have found that not only is it bad for business, but it can come back to bite me in the arse."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a hand to stop her.

"Here's a bit of advice that will, if taken to heart, make this easier. Don't presume to understand me or my motives. Whatever you think you know about me, whatever you have deduced based on who I was as a child, please let go of it. Get to know me, who I am right now. Then, if you still wish, you may make asinine insinuations about me, so long as they are based on fact."

She stared at him and then bit her lip. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'll give you a couple freebies to even things out. I don't take compliments well, especially if they are about my

appearance. I meant what I said a few weeks ago. You are an intimidating man, and my natural reaction is to lash out when I feel cornered or out of my element. Which I certainly feel around you," she added quietly.

His features softened, and he ran a hand through his hair, leaving it more disheveled than before. "We have a lot of history behind us. It takes effort to remember that you aren't the girl you were at thirteen. But I've decided it's worth that effort."

Hermione smiled, genuinely touched. "Thank you."

Draco exhaled. "We've done a number to the food. Would you like anything else?"

As Hermione considered the question, the world around her, which had seemed to fade away while they were talking, reappeared, and the sights, sounds and smells of the café and the street came rushing back to assault her senses. People were talking, carts were being rolled along the cobblestone street, door chimes were sounding, dishes clinking.

"No, I'm finished," she said, dabbing her lips with the napkin. Ginny's comment from earlier in the day came to mind, and she stared at her napkin, smiling to herself. In vain, she searched for a tag that might give the threat-count.

"What are you doing?" Draco asked.

"Looking for something. Never mind. Have you told anyone? About us, I mean?" she asked, thinking he should know that she had told people.

"No," he said curtly.

"I have. I hope that's all right."

His eyes were speculative as they searched her face. Then he shrugged and poured himself another cup of tea. "They'd find out sooner or later." He took a sip from his drink and frowned, then signaled. Their waiter appeared beside the table almost instantly.

"How can I help you, Mr. Malfoy?" he asked.

"I would like coffee, please," said Draco. "Strong." He looked at Hermione. "Anything for you?"

"No, thank you."

The waiter left and returned quickly with the requested item. Draco poured a cup, took a swallow, and nodded approvingly. "Much better. Who have you told?"

"Ginny and my parents."

His gaze darted to hers, alarm evident on his face. "Your parents?"

"Yes," she said boldly. "They said to bring you by, if things progress. Why?"

Draco shook his head, chuckling. "I hadn't considered that I would meet your parents as part of this. Though, now that you mention it, it makes perfect sense. I'm surprised you haven't told Potter and Weasley too."

"I'm still working on getting to that," she admitted. "They won't take it as well as Ginny. At least, Ron won't for sure."

"I'm concerned about that, to be honest. I don't want him making this hard for you."

She smiled, surprised that he was concerned about her. "He'll behave. I'll probably bring you round the Burrow as well, at some point. Depending on how long this goes."

"That inevitability I had considered. I've nothing against spending time with your friends."

"Likewise," she said, though the thought made her uneasy. She didn't know who his friends were and couldn't begin to speculate what spending time with them would entail.

An amused smile played on his lips. "I'll keep that in mind." Draco finished his cup of coffee and set his napkin on his plate. "Shall we make this a proper date? Care for a stroll along the alley? Give more people a chance to see us together?"

"Oh! Well, I suppose that would be all right."

He stood and gathered his cloak, then held a hand out to her. She stared at it for a brief moment before accepting it, and then he pulled her up. She thought he would let her hand go, but he only repositioned his hand to grasp hers tighter as he led her out of the café.

The contact was intense; she couldn't believe the reactions it caused inside her. Not only was her heart thumping in her chest, but the butterflies had discovered gun powder and cannonballs.

They walked at a leisurely pace, talking mainly about what they saw around them. Hermione completed her errands, and even though she was used to people paying her attention, she had forgotten what it was like to be openly gawked at. A couple of people nearly fell over things, they were so blatantly staring. Hermione was happy when they reached the empty end of the street.

"That was brutal!" she exclaimed, pulling her hand from his and then clenching and re-clenching her fists.

Draco stuffed his hands in his pockets and nodded. "That's far more attention than I'm used to, as well."

"Did you see that woman nearly spill her cauldron?" An amused grin crept across her face.

He chuckled. "What about the man who walked right into a pole? I nearly laughed out loud at that."

"Oh! Me too!" she said, feeling her frazzled nerves unwind just a bit. "I had to bite my lip."

"I think you squeezed my hand a bit there as well."

"Did it hurt? I'm sorry, I didn't even realize."

"No," he said, his voice soft and smooth. "It didn't hurt."

Hermione's breath hitched, and she realized she wouldn't mind if he kissed her. Then she remembered for what felt like the hundredth time that day that they weren't on a real date, and he wasn't really interested in her. Despite his compliments, despite the way he looked at her, she was sure it was all part of the act. Even if what Ginny had said was true, he had probably been planning this the entire time. He had probably wanted someone to see him look at her that way. He was simply very, very good at acting.

"I should get going," Hermione said.

"Yeah," he said, glancing back down the street. "When would be a good time to have lunch next week?"

"Oh, that's right. Let me think ... Wednesday I've got a large open block around lunchtime. Does that work for you?"

"It will have to. I'll rearrange what I must. What do you say to the Three Broomsticks, at noon?"

"Perfect," she said.

"Excellent." He turned to look at her then, fire once again in his eyes. "Thank you for this."

"I'm not just doing it for you," she asserted, reminding both him and herself of the fact.

"Don't think I'll forget that fact," he said. "I should probably mention that I saw one or two people with cameras, so your friends might find out sooner than you would like."

Hermione groaned. "That means I'll have to tell them tonight if I don't want them to read about it in the paper. Why must you be so mysterious and rich and striking that everyone wants to know your business?"

Draco appeared taken aback at first by her compliment. Then he smiled lazily at her. "You've only yourself to blame," he replied, taking her hand and kissing it as he had the day before. "Au revoir, Hermione."

She watched him throw his cloak around his shoulders and Disapparate, then cursed him for leaving her breathless two days in a row.



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A/N: Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed this week's installment. See you next week! Title taken from "The Blower's Daughter" by Damian Rice. This song was originally in the playlist for this chapter until I discovered "First Date" while searching for a title. The name "Evan" for the Gryffindor boy was inspired by manda's son. MWAH!

Art credit: The lovely manip for this chapter was done by the fabulous watertart_11. Music credit goes to inadaze22.

Beta thanks: I have an awesome group of betas who complement each other well and always give me something to think about. They help me make this story better, and I am endlessly thankful to each of them. So, thank yous are due to manda, z, pokeystar, and drcjsnider.

Hold Your Breath, Little Lungs

Chapter 9 of 16

Hermione and Draco tell their friends; they go on date #2.

Chapter 9 - - Hold your breath, little lungs

- - -

Hermione gathered her courage as she stood on the porch outside the Potters' house. She had written to Ginny immediately following her date with Draco, asking her to invite Ron over under the guise of celebrating her birthday, which was the following day. She had to tell her friends the truth before they found out from the *Daily Prophet* or, worse, from someone who had seen them together earlier that afternoon.

Steeling herself, Hermione knocked.

Harry opened the door and beamed. "Hey, Hermione. Happy early twenty-fifth!" He wrapped her in a crushing hug. "Come in, come in. It was a nice surprise, having the four of us for dinner," he said as he led her to the kitchen.

"Yeah," she said, hoping she sounded as excited as he did.

"Hermione's here," he announced.

Ginny gave her a significant look, and Ron grinned.

"Hi, all," she greeted, taking off her coat and setting it with her purse on a chair.

"Dinner will be ready in a bit," said Ginny. "Why don't you three go and talk in the living room? Harry, take the bottle of wine I put in the fridge. Ron, here are some appetizers. James is in bed already, so don't be too loud."

"Sure thing," said Harry, kissing Ginny on the head.

Hermione followed the men out, sending Ginny a silent 'thank you' and 'help' all rolled into one look.

Harry poured the wine for the three of them, and then he and Ron took a small sip. Hermione finished her entire serving in three gulps. Ron gaped at her.

"All right, Hermione?" he asked.

"I have news," she said, wanting to get the confession...and the outrage to follow...over with. She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. "I'm seeing someone."

Ron frowned. "That's a good thing, right?. Why are you nervous, Hermione?"

She glanced at Harry, who was looking at her intently, though without the puzzled element that Ron was sporting. As she held his gaze, his eyes narrowed slightly, then widened. "Harry," she began.

"Really?" he asked, his tone incredulous and surprised.

"What are you thinking?" She didn't want to presume she knew what conclusion he'd reached, even though the look in his eyes confirmed that he was thinking about Draco.

"What are you two on about?" said Ron, frustrated.

Hermione stared intently at Harry for a few more seconds until he sighed resignedly and looked away with a shrug. Then she turned to Ron. "It's Malfoy. I've started seeing him. We met today for tea."

Ron's face went from frustration to anger and disgust. "Ugh, Hermione! How could you possibly like him?"

"He's not the same person he was," she argued, the answer long prepared. "He's changed a lot, and if you'd give him a chance, you would at least see that. I'm not asking for you to be friends, but I'll probably bring him around sometime. Just ... be civil, and don't start anything, or bring up the past, or accuse him of things."

Ron shook his head and looked at Harry. "You knew?"

"No," said Harry. "There was just something about the way she was acting. The way he looked at her at the last Quidditch game. I guessed."

"And you're all right with it?" Ron asked, incredulous.

Harry hesitated before answering. "Honestly ... I'm not exactly thrilled, but I have tried to be friendly to Malfoy. I don't think he has a lot of people in his life he can count on, if any. Just be careful, Hermione. I want to say that I trust him, but I can't. We're a long way from that."

Hermione sent Harry a grateful look, relieved that Harry was at least listening and somewhat open.

Ron stood and started pacing the room, still angry. "But it's Malfoy! He was such an enormous git in school! He's a ... a Death Eater, a bloody sniveling coward! Remember him?"

"Ron," Harry cautioned.

"That's who he was, Ron, not who he is." Hermione crossed her arms, mentally preparing for a fight. "Please, just accept this, and don't make this harder on me."

He stopped where he was and met Hermione's pleading gaze. His face softened and he went to her side. "Oh, Hermione. I don't want to be difficult. I made a right mess of things once, and ... well, I won't do it again. I ... I trust you, and I'll be civil, and I'll try to understand."

"Oh, Ron!" She threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. "Thank you," she whispered. When she pulled away, Ron was looking at her funny. "What?"

"How long have you two been ... together?" He said the words as though they tasted like dragon dung.

"Well, we just went on our first date today, and..."

"No details without me!" called Ginny from the kitchen. "You lot come on in here, dinner is ready."

Hermione told them as much as she could without giving anything away about the true nature of her association with Draco and without providing Harry and Ron with too much information. They didn't want to hear her describe, as she later did for Ginny, the way Draco had looked at her when he first saw her (at which point, Ginny exclaimed, "I told you so!"), or the way it felt when he smiled at her. Still, Hermione didn't go into too much detail, even with Ginny, because she wanted to keep a few things for herself and because while talking about it, she felt herself getting caught up as though it was the beginning of a real relationship.

When she lay in bed that night, trying to go to sleep, she realized that her heart was already involved. It had happened so quickly she hadn't even noticed; otherwise she would have tried to fight it. Draco was wonderful company and stimulating conversation, but he ignited a fire in her that was unlike anything she'd ever felt before. It was similar to what she'd felt for Charlie when they were their happiest, but yet completely different. She couldn't pinpoint the reason for this occurrence with Draco, and it was unsettling.

Fortunately, Hermione still had the option of backing out of their agreement. He had said that up to when he told her about the task, she could walk away. If she got in too deep, if she feared she would get her heart entangled or broken, she would end their association before he told her anything.

She hoped that she would be able to work with him, since he had seemed desperate and was convinced that she was the only person who could help him.

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Hermione received many well-wishes on her birthday, both from students and teachers. Her parents sent her a new set of inks...Hawthorne, her favorite...and Hagrid baked an inedible cake for her. George sent her a trick card, a prototype for a line of joke greeting cards, that was stuck shut and made fun of her for being too weak to pry open two pages of parchment.

Most surprising, however, was the heavy package she received just before dinner. It was sharply wrapped in dark blue paper and white ribbon. Puzzled, she opened the accompanying card.



Excited and stunned, Hermione carefully removed the paper to reveal *Turlington's Complete Guide to Flora, Fifteenth Edition*, a four-volume set of books considered to be the definitive resource on plant-based potions ingredients. It had been on her wish list for years, but was too expensive for her salary.

At first, she was thrilled, then reluctant to accept the gift. It was far too much for their situation...it was too much even if they were truly dating. She would have to discuss the matter with him when they met for lunch later in the week ... but it certainly couldn't hurt to peek through the books until then.

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Monday afternoon, at ten minutes to two, Hermione sat in her classroom going over the list of groups she had formed. She had decided to put Evan with Sheetal after having tea with Draco. At the thought of what might have been possible, were their circumstances different, Hermione felt strongly that she should help Evan out in the only way she could. If nothing materialized, then perhaps it wasn't meant to be.

Samaya Black entered the classroom first and after depositing her bag on her desk, approached Hermione's desk.

"Afternoon, Professor," she said, a smug look on her face.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Hello, Samaya."

Then the Slytherin placed something on the desk and Hermione's eyes widened. She hastily picked up the most recent edition of *Witch Weekly*, staring in slight horror at the picture on the front. She was holding hands with Draco, walking down Diagon Alley. The Draco in the picture would lean over and whisper in her ear, and her picture self would laugh. As they walked, her arm brushed against his, and she remembered the feeling she'd gotten as though he was right there, and it had just happened again.

Hermione shut her eyes tight, hoping against hope that the image before her would disappear when she opened them. It didn't, and she watched the image repeat.

"Merlin, he's so handsome," said Samaya, who had moved around Hermione's desk to stare at the rag over her shoulder. "He's not that much older than me," she said.

"You are related," Hermione said disapprovingly, placing the magazine face down on her desk.

"Distantly." Samaya laughed. "Keep it. You should read the article."

The rest of the class filtered into the room then, taking their usual seats with their friends. Samaya sat down, a pleased look on her face. Hermione could tell that all of her students had seen the magazine. The girls were whispering to each other and glancing toward their teacher while the boys were staring at her. Evan, especially, was giving her a hard, appraising look.

"Well, it's Monday," Hermione began, leaning on the front of her desk. "How did you enjoy your weekend?"

Six hands shot into the air, and Hermione called on Ketty first.

"Is it true you went on a date with the wizarding world's most eligible bachelor?"

Hermione felt her face flush and indicated Karalynn, who also had her hand raised.

"Did he kiss you?" she asked.

Flustered, Hermione ignored both questions. "Does anyone want to tell me about their weekend?" No one said a word and a few people shook their head. "Fine. We'll just move on with the lesson then, shall we?"

As she rounded her desk to get her notes, no one made a move to retrieve their books. Half the class started whispering, and Hermione thought she saw a few of them with copies of *Witch Weekly* tucked in their packs. Samaya simply grinned.

"All right." She flicked her wand and it beeped loudly. When everyone was facing forward again, Hermione sighed. "You aren't going to pay attention to anything I say today, are you?"

"No, ma'am," said Samaya with a smirk.

"If we talk about this, get it out in the air, will you promise to work extra hard the rest of the period?"

They nodded enthusiastically, and a few of the boys slumped in their chairs, getting more comfortable.

Hermione rarely discussed her personal life with her students, but her seventh-year class was different. It always had been, though she'd never had anything quite so interesting to share with them. She tried to treat them like adults, since most of them already were by wizarding standards. It made for a very pleasant classroom experience for everyone.

She sat on the front of her desk and looked at her students, all gazing at her, their attention rapt. "To answer your question, Ketty, yes, I went on a date with Draco Malfoy."

"Yeah!" cried Corey, pumping his fist. "Way to go, Professor Granger!"

Hermione couldn't help but crack a smile.

"Did he kiss you?" Karalynn repeated, leaning forward on her desk, a dreamy look on her face. "He's so good-looking."

Ketty, Sheetal and Samaya agreed wholeheartedly.

"No. It was only our first date."

"Will there be others?" Samaya asked without waiting to be called on.

"It's safe to say there will be," Hermione answered. An odd mixture of feelings flitted through her heart, and she was again reminded that she needed to be very careful to protect it from harm. Draco had been so charming and open on their date that she found herself constantly forgetting that it wasn't real.

Then Evan tentatively raised his hand and Hermione gave him leave to speak. "Malfoy ... he was in Slytherin, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was," she replied.

"And you were in Gryffindor." At Hermione's affirmative nod, he continued. "Do ... do you think that will work all right?"

Hermione was infinitely pleased that this subject had been broached, and by a student, too. She hadn't needed to bring it up. Here was an excellent chance to discuss inter-house cooperation and the ridiculous stigma that existed on the subject of dating between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

"That's an interesting question, Evan. Draco and I are from the two houses of Hogwarts which have a reputation for enmity."

"No one's ever been in a relationship between those houses," said Sheetal. "What makes you think you and Draco Malfoy have a chance?"

Hermione considered the question carefully before responding. "Draco and I, as you know, come from a different time than you. We went through the war, we both fought, on different sides. You all know his story, I'm sure, but don't be hasty. The boy he was at sixteen is not the man he is today. He went through a lot of difficult things in his life, and he is truly a better person for it. I'm willing to give him a chance because I believe, in the end, he's worth it."

"Still, there's the house difference," said Corey.

"Yes, well." Hermione sighed. "Draco and I are no longer in school, and houses don't mean a whole lot to us. They are still of great importance to all of you, and I understand that. While we were here, we never would have considered each other, and I don't think that's right when based solely on house allegiance.

"The dissidence between Slytherin and Gryffindor stems back to the founders themselves. While Slytherin wanted to allow only those of pure blood into the school, Gryffindor and the others disagreed. It's really a shame that the two houses haven't tried to get along more in the past. I believe great things could be accomplished if all the houses worked together."

"Is it true what Sheetal said? That there's never been a relationship between a Slytherin and a Gryffindor?" asked Ketty.

Hermione smiled. "Think about it. This school was founded about a thousand years ago. For a millennium, students have walked these halls. Do you really think it's likely that in all that time, not *one* Slytherin student was willing to risk his or her reputation to be with someone in Gryffindor?"

The students processed the information, whispering amongst themselves.

"Your generation," Hermione said, waving her wand over the room in general, "is in the best position to stand for change. To send a message to generations to come that old prejudices don't fit here anymore, that you are more interested in what makes a person than in a title given to them by an old hat."

Corey clapped heartily at the conclusion of Hermione's impassioned speech, and Samaya, Damian and Edgar joined him. "Nicely put, Professor," Corey said. "Right, so who wants to volunteer?"

The rest of the class, except Evan, laughed.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I'm not suggesting anyone volunteer. It's not a chore or an assignment. Merely something to think about. After all, you can't help who you're attracted to. The last thing I'll say on this topic is this. I should hope that house orientation would not prevent someone from pursuing a relationship, romantic or otherwise. Now, let's get to the subject at hand. Group assignments."

All eyes were on her as Hermione picked up the list from her desk. "When I call your names, I want you to move and sit with your new group. We'll do an exercise today that will incorporate your weekend homework."

Everyone gathered their things into manageable piles, ready to move seats.

"Group one: Corey, Damian, and Karalynn." The sound of scraping chairs followed as the three students moved to one corner of the room. "Group two: Evan, Sheetal, and Tom." Hermione refused to watch the reactions of her students, though with this particular group, she was immensely curious. "Finally, group three: Edgar, Ketty, and Samaya."

Hermione watched the final group form, and noted that Evan did not opt for a seat beside Sheetal. "Good, thank you. Now, I want you to spend the rest of the class period developing roles for each of you. Use your strengths and weaknesses to guide you. You can choose whatever roles you wish. An example might be a Lead Researcher or Note-Taker. It all depends on the dynamics within your group."

While her students then settled into their new seats and pulled out their homework, she continued. "I know this is Arithmancy, but you will benefit from learning to work in a group, especially one where you are not familiar with your team members. More often than not, in your professional lives, you will be required to work as part of a group or team. Very few people go through life working by themselves. You may begin. I want your strengths and weaknesses, as well as your group's role list at the end of class."

There were no questions, so Hermione returned to her desk. As her students talked quietly, she couldn't help but glance at the magazine, still face down on her desk. Only eight minutes passed before she gave up and pulled it open, her curiosity raging.

It would appear that the wizarding world's most eligible and elusive bachelor has found happiness, writes Eliza Gribbert, featured columnist. He was seen in Diagon Alley on Saturday with none other than Hermione Granger, war heroine and longtime rival of the Malfoy heir.

The couple and we can positively announce this illustrious duo as a couple took afternoon tea at the renowned Tea Leaves and Lilies. Miss Granger wore a white sundress, red cardigan, and matching red heels. Her bag was designed by Florean's Greengrass, available for purchase at fine shops in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade.

Following a lengthy meal, where the couple was espied exchanging smiles, laughs, and longing looks, Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy took a stroll down Diagon Alley, while Miss Granger completed a few errands.

"They came into my shop," reports Arnold Riggley, manager of Florean's and Florets. "She wanted to browse the shelves, and he followed. Very attentive, that Mr. Malfoy. Couldn't take his eyes off her the entire time."

Hermione stared at the words on the page. *Draco couldn't take his eyes off her?* Well, he was certainly doing a very convincing job, then. People would have no doubts as to their relationship after reading the article. As she read, it continued to describe their entire walk, every store they went into, every purchase she made. Eliza Gribbert had interviewed everyone who'd waited on them, and they all made similar remarks about Draco's 'attentiveness.'

Unwittingly, hope flared in her chest, and then she was forced to quash it. None of it was real, after all. Draco was an excellent actor, something else she hadn't known about him. The realization oddly disappointed her.

When the bell rang, Hermione returned the magazine to Samaya.

"I think he's even better looking in person than in pictures," she remarked, stuffing the rag into her pack. "Don't you?"

Hermione sighed, not wanting to express her true feelings on the matter, but realizing that she needed to do her own bit of convincing. "I agree," she said truthfully. "But it's not an everyday kind of attractiveness. He's got such strong lines and hard eyes sometimes."

Samaya grinned. "Still. You think he's gorgeous, admit it."

"His looks have never been called into question," Hermione said, gathering the stack of parchments her students had handed in. "But yes, I do." She winked at her student and left the room, grateful for the end of the day.

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Draco had been in his office for five minutes on Wednesday morning when the door slammed, rattling on its hinges, and startled him. He glanced up, ready to rip into whoever had dared intrude on his morning in such a fashion, to see Pansy standing just inside the door, her arms crossed and a familiar item rolled in her hand.

"Morning, Pansy," Draco said, his anger evaporated. He poured himself a cup of coffee. "Can I get you anything? If I had known you were coming, I would have called for pastries."

Pansy marched to his desk and tossed the item down. It landed face up, and Draco was greeted once again with the picture of him and Hermione in Diagon Alley, hands linked.

"Explain," she demanded, taking a seat across from him.

It was obvious she wouldn't be leaving until she was answered to her satisfaction, and he had a meeting in fifty-five minutes that couldn't be moved. He hoped there was enough time to talk to her and still get his morning routine out of the way.

He shrugged. "What can I say?"

"Granger? Are you serious, Draco?" Pansy looked at him, frowning severely.

"What took you so long to come by? The issue was published on Sunday."

"I came back from my trip to Rome, *early* I might add, so I could hear from your own mouth that this is just ... rubbish. I tried to ignore it, but I couldn't. Please, Draco. Tell me this isn't true."

"It's true." Part of him delighted in the anticipation of how Pansy would further react. Already she'd bested his imagination's attempts to portray this eventuality.

Pansy groaned and closed her eyes as though he had just told her he had been diagnosed with a terminal disease. "What is the matter with you?" she asked, shaking her head. "Granger. Of all the ... plain, mundane, *boring* women in the world If you'd told me you wanted to meet someone completely dull, I could have sent dozens of witches your way."

Illusion or not, Draco didn't like the way Pansy was talking. "Careful, Pansy. Hermione is a very lovely woman. She's interesting, intelligent and..."

"Muggle-born," Pansy said flatly. "What will your parents say?"

He sneered. He knew exactly what they would say, since he had a letter from his mother tucked into an inner pocket of his suit jacket. "I don't care what they say."

Pansy's eyes were so wide Draco thought they might pop out at any moment.

"You don't Merlin, Draco. How did this happen? Granger?"

"You know I went to Quidditch one Saturday, at Potter's invitation. Well, Hermione was there. We spoke, and it was as though I'd never met her before, never hated her or called her awful names. I found her to be ... well, breathtaking is the only word for it." Draco made a mental note to watch himself. He'd been attracted to Hermione before this whole thing started, and if he wasn't careful, he was liable to cross the line and forget that she was only spending time with him because he had recruited her help.

Pansy made a face. "But, it's Granger! She's the annoying know-it-all from school, how can you stand to be around her?"

"She's different," Draco said, glancing again at the magazine cover. He didn't think he would ever tire of looking at it or, specifically, her. When he had seen her that day, sitting at their table in the white dress, he had been frozen in amazement. Then when their eyes met, everything else faded away around him, leaving only the two of them. He hadn't been sure he would be able to get through the lunch date without giving himself away; by the end, he was certain that he had. Draco hadn't been ready for their time together to be over, so he had suggested the walk.

It had been too easy to pretend, to hold her hand, to whisper in her ear. Being with her had felt like the most natural thing in the world, as though he belonged by her side.

Draco was in deep trouble, and he knew it.

"Thank Merlin I got over you before this happened," Pansy said, examining her manicure. "Otherwise I think it might have killed me."

"Stop being so dramatic," Draco scolded. "It's not really that big a deal."

"No?" said Pansy quizzically. "I beg to differ, Mr. Malfoy. You: successful, rich, pure-blood. Her: famous, plain, Mudblood."

"Don't call her that," Draco barked, leaning forward and scowling at his friend. "If you ever use that word in my hearing again, we are no longer friends. Do you understand?"

Pansy watched him, unfazed. "You really do like her, don't you? Part of me thought it was some kind of act, though what you might stand to gain, I couldn't possibly guess. Fine, Draco. You like her, then it's fine with me."

He rolled his eyes and he settled back into his chair. "I certainly don't need your permission."

"True, but you could use my support. I'm not sure how many will stand by you through this. Have you considered how this could impact your standing? Your reputation? Your contacts and business relationships?"

"I'm not concerned about that," he said, despite the niggling feelings of doubt her words had planted inside him. Finding the blackmailer was his top priority, and he would take whatever penalties were incurred as a result of his methods, even if it meant losing a few clients along the way. "If people don't like my choices, they can speak with me directly," he said quietly.

Pansy bit her lip. "This is just so sudden, Draco. You haven't dated anyone in years, and then you show up *with* her looking for all the world head over heels in love with her?"

He sighed. "Do I have your support or not, Pansy? I'm going to continue seeing her either way."

"Yes, of course," she huffed. "Does this mean I have to be nice to her?"

Draco laughed at that. "That's exactly what it means. Was there anything else?"

Pansy sniffed and fidgeted with the hem of her skirt.

"What is it?" Draco asked, preparing himself for something ridiculous.

"Have you ... kissed her?"

The look on Pansy's face, one of mortified fascination, nearly made him laugh again, but then he considered her question. A kiss would certainly be expected at some point to make their relationship appear legitimate. The sensation he experienced...like a hundred cannons shot off in rapid succession and then left to bounce around his gut and chest...at merely holding her hand had nearly undone him.

If he kissed her He swallowed hard at the thought. Why did his body insist on reacting to her as though he had never been with a woman?

"Okay," said Pansy. "I don't want to know."

Draco reddened, embarrassed that the direction of his inner musings had been so obvious. "No, we haven't kissed."

"Obviously, that won't last long," Pansy said, smirking.

"Was there anything else you needed? I have a meeting to prepare for."

She glanced over his head, as though finding something out the window very interesting. "Oh, no. Nothing more about Granger, anyway."

"What is it?" he asked, noting with concern that only twenty-four minutes remained until his meeting. He generally needed at least twenty-eight for his morning schedule, but that was pushing it.

"Have you seen Greg lately?"

Draco blinked, surprised at the question. "No, not since he returned from Fiji. He's been very busy with those samples. Why?"

"No reason," Pansy said, standing and smoothing down her skirt. "Simply curious is all. Good luck with Granger, Draco. If she hurts you, I'll rip her hair out and strangle her with it."

"Thanks," Draco said, uneasy about the dangerous tone in Pansy's voice. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"Of course. Bye, Draco. You can keep the magazine," she said with a wink.

Pansy turned and left the room, leaving Draco alone. He picked up the weekly and stared at Hermione. All thoughts of work had been driven from his mind when Pansy mentioned his kissing Hermione, and that wouldn't do. He tossed the magazine into a drawer and forced himself to focus. His meeting was next, it would last until he left to meet Hermione for lunch, and he refused to be distracted.

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Hermione wrapped her cloak around her as she exited the castle. The heavy doors closed behind her with a thud, and she walked down the front steps toward the gate. Beyond that, she would Apparate to Hogsmeade and make her way to the *Three Broomsticks*.

As she walked towards her destination, Hermione thought about her decision. The groups she had made were working out very well...at least, no one had yet come to her asking to be switched or complaining about a team member. However, that morning had only been their second day of working together and the groups hadn't even been given their assignments yet. No doubt trouble would arise at some point. It always did.

As Hermione neared the gates, she felt the nervous butterflies pick up their intensity. She scolded herself, trying to remember that it wasn't real, none of it was real.

When she had thought about what to wear for her lunch date that day, her first thought was to impress. She relished the look on his face when he'd seen her the week before. However, she'd quickly remembered that she wasn't out to impress him, just to make people think she was dating him. With that thought in mind, she didn't change, deciding to wear her school robes. After all, she had classes that afternoon, and it would be a bother to change again.

Hermione sighed as she shut the gate behind her, then Disapparated before she could think anymore.

The traditional Apparition spot in Hogsmeade was at the end of the main road farthest from Hogwarts. Her destination was just a few hundred feet away, and with her heart racing, Hermione started toward the pub.

She took a deep breath once she reached the *Three Broomsticks* and then pushed open the door. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust from the bright outdoors to the dim interior.

Hermione shrugged out of her cloak and looked around, her eyes landing on Draco's long form sitting a few tables away. He was bent over the paper, a cup of coffee at his place and his legs extended as far as they could reach under the table.

"Afternoon, love," said Rosmerta from the bar with a smile. "What brings you around? It's not even the weekend."

Hermione returned the smile. "I'm meeting someone for lunch."

"Ah, lovely," said the barmaid, winking. "Be it that blond bloke in the corner, by chance? He's been looking up every other second, expectant, and he's staring at you now."

Hermione felt her cheeks flush and nodded, annoyed at her reaction. "Thank you, Rosmerta." She went to the table where Draco was sitting and slid onto the bench across from him.

A few seconds of awkward silence passed before Draco said, "Hello."

"Hi," Hermione replied with a slight smile.

Rosmerta came then to take their orders, and since both Draco and Hermione had been there many times, they knew what they wanted without opening a menu. Draco chose the fish and chips with a beer while Hermione opted for a chicken sandwich and butterbeer.

"Coming right out," said Rosmerta, winking at Draco.

Hermione raised a questioning eyebrow.

"We've got a special relationship," Draco explained. "Ever since I ... well, after she kicked me out on my arse...literally...and refused to let me into the place, I apologized for my actions years ago. Took some work, but she finally forgave me."

"After you paid off the huge debt I owed, allowing me to keep this place," Rosmerta said, depositing their drinks. "You're still a cheeky little prat sometimes."

Draco grinned and raised his glass to her. "Naturally."

"Don't let him get away with anything, Hermione," the older woman warned playfully before leaving them alone.

Hermione couldn't help the jealous thoughts that suffused her mind. She didn't like to think what lengths he might have gone to in an attempt to earn the buxom woman's forgiveness.

She took a dainty sip of her drink and then said, without looking at him, "You know, Ron used to have the biggest crush on her in school."

Draco chuckled. "What bloke didn't? She serves alcohol, for Merlin's sake, looking like that."

"Lovely," Hermione bit out through clenched teeth. She had heard plenty from Ron and Harry discussing her many fine attributes.

He chuckled again and took a sip of his beer. "Course, she's old enough to be my mum, which isn't something I go for. Blaise, on the other hand He likes older women, did you know that?"

Hermione nearly spat out her drink. "What? No!"

Draco smirked. "Ask him about Rosie sometime."

"I'd rather not, thank you," she replied, relieved that her fears had been allayed.

"How did Potter and Weasley take the news?" Draco asked.

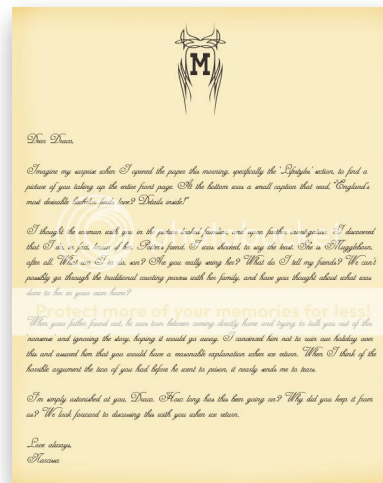
"Better than I expected, actually. Harry was quiet and then grudgingly accepting. At first, I thought Ron was going to have a fit and make a big scene and then not talk to me for weeks until Harry or Ginny convinced him he was being ridiculous. But we were able to avoid that this time."

He raised an eyebrow. "This time?"

Hermione shook her head, no amusement on her face, and he got the message. "How about you? Did you tell anyone?"

"No." He smiled ruefully and reached into his coat. "Doesn't mean no one found out, of course." He pulled a letter from an envelope, unfolded it, and set it before Hermione.

She glanced over the letter, saw that it was from Narcissa, and pulled it closer to read.



Hermione's gut was churning by the time she finished the short missive, and not in a good way. Very carefully, she folded the letter and returned it to Draco.

Draco was watching her with a concerned expression. "You all right?"

"Oh, fine," she said lightly. "I hardly expected anything else from Lucius Malfoy." When she spoke his name, her tone was frigid.

Draco stowed the letter back in his pocket and then reached his hand across the table to cover hers. "Don't let it get to you. I'm not concerned about them."

Hermione was so stunned by his comforting action and the strong feelings of elation and giddiness that accompanied it, that she could only stare at their hands for a few seconds before speaking. "They're your parents. They disapprove of ... us."

He shrugged. "I don't care. They don't control me, and I certainly don't hold to their antiquated views."

When he began lightly rubbing his thumb across the top of her hand, she nearly pulled her hand away from his. The sensations were so intense that she found it difficult to think.

"I'm lower than dirt in their eyes, Draco. I'm not too proud to admit that your father frightens me."

"I would never let him hurt you. He ... he wouldn't, anyway." Draco pulled his hand away then as Rosmerta returned with their food. Once she was gone, he continued. "My father may not approve, but I'm my own man, and I don't care what he says. I can see whomever I wish, and that includes you."

She smiled sadly. "That's lovely for you to say, but this isn't real. Do you want to risk alienating your parents for a fake relationship?"

He met her eyes, his surprisingly fierce. "Doesn't change anything. I won't let them tell me who I can and cannot date. Now, please don't think about it anymore. Put it out of your mind. They aren't even in the country, so there's nothing to worry about."

Hermione nodded, her thoughts troubled. She hadn't expected acceptance from his parents, but it still stung, just like it did every time she was faced with the inequalities in the wizarding world.

"Pansy took it better than I had expected," he said, taking a bite of his meal.

"Pansy knows?"

He smiled. "Everyone knows. She stormed into my office this morning, demanding I explain what she saw and read in *Witch Weekly*. I did, and to my surprise, she was

accepting. She gave me her support, and promised that she would be nice to you."

"Ha!" Hermione said. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"If I have to be nice to your friends, it means you have to be nice to mine," said Draco, a friendly glint in his eyes.

"I know that!" she said. "I have every intention of being nice to her. I never said otherwise." Hermione glanced around the pub and saw that it was only half-full. "Do you think people will know about our date?" she whispered.

He smirked, and nodded his head toward the window.

Hermione followed his motion and saw people standing around outside the window beside their table. Some had cameras, some extendable ears. When they saw her look at them, the group snapped to attention and started taking pictures. Draco leaned over and gave a small wave, and then they both scooted away from the window.

"Incredible," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Have they nothing better to do?"

Draco chuckled. "That's what they *do* for a living. Follow people around."

"Think it will always be like this?" she asked, imagining what it would be like to try and have a relationship with thousands of people watching.

"Probably. Of course, we don't have to be so deliberately public. Once people get used to the idea of us, we can be more discreet."

"It's all you, you know," she said teasingly. "I don't draw that much attention."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I disagree. You're in that weekly as much as I am." She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off, smiling. "I checked. It's the two of us together that draws them out in such numbers."

"Wow. Imagine if" She trailed off, letting the rest of her sentence float in the hot air between them. Their eyes met and an entire conversation passed between their hearts of which neither was aware.

After a moment of silence, Hermione remembered his gift. "Oh! Draco! Thank you so much for the books you sent."

His eyes flashed with mirth. "You didn't have them then?"

"No, and they're wonderful, but...as much as I hate to say this...I can't accept them."

Draco frowned. "I ... don't understand."

"It's simply too much," she explained. "Far too much for where we are in this."

"Do you like the gift?" he asked patiently, as though he had anticipated her objections to it.

"Of course, it's amazing; I've wanted the set for years."

"Will you use it?" he intoned.

"Yes, absolutely..."

"Then keep it. I have no use for them, and I certainly can't return them." He met her gaze. "They'll sit in my library and collect dust. I thought of you, I know you'll put them to good use. What more could I ask for?"

Hermione found it very tempting to accept the gift, and his rationalization wasn't helping her resolve. "But ... this isn't even It's too much."

"There are some things in life that can't be priced," he responded carefully. "Your assistance is invaluable. I want you to keep the gift."

She heard the unspoken 'please' in his eyes, and it echoed in her mind. "You really insist?"

"I do. My mind is made up; I cannot be swayed." He smiled. "I can be quite stubborn when I choose to be. This isn't the point you want to push, I assure you."

"Then I can't thank you enough. I can't wait to explore them."

They continued to talk easily as they ate, though Hermione wasn't terribly hungry after reading Narcissa's letter. She managed to eat enough to ensure that she wouldn't be hungry for a couple of hours at least.

When they'd both finished, Rosmerta sauntered over. "You two need anything else? Refills?"

"I'll take a single shot of whatever you bring me," said Draco in a slightly strangled tone.

"Nothing for me," Hermione said, looking at him with wide eyes.

Draco sat rigidly and said nothing until the shot had been delivered and consumed in one gulp. "When we leave here, I'll walk you to the edge of town. Hogwarts, if you prefer. I expect we'll be followed." He took a deep breath and said in a low voice, "Do I have your permission to kiss you?"

Hermione gasped and her heart started pounding. "What?"

"I thought ... it might be an appropriate gesture at this point."

His question had momentarily dislodged Hermione's thoughts from reality, and she forgot that they were pretending. At his clinical statement, the truth came back. "Oh. Right. Um, all right, but just on the cheek."

"Cheek. Got it."

Hermione's first thought was that it had to look natural. How was that possible, now that they had effectively planned their first kiss? She wouldn't have minded him kissing her spontaneously, so long as it wasn't too heavy. Displays of affection were a natural part of relationships.

"Shall we go, then?" Draco asked, counting through some coins in his hand.

"Sure."

He stood and left the appropriate payment on the table, then helped Hermione into her cloak. Once they were standing outside the pub, they were surrounded by the reporters who had been spying on them earlier. They started asking questions, but Draco told them in no uncertain terms to bugger off. Then he took Hermione's hand and led her quickly toward the edge of town.

The group of reporters kept their distance, but Hermione knew they were watching.

"Hogwarts?" Draco asked, lacing his fingers with hers.

"The end of the road should do," she said, not sure if she could handle the long walk to the school with a gaggle of gossips trailing behind.

"As you wish," he said.

They made small talk, mostly about the wares in the shop windows, until they reached the point from which Hermione would Disapparate. Her nerves were twisted inside her, and her heart was pounding in anticipation of what was to come.



She stopped walking and turned around to face him.

"I had a nice time," Draco said.

Hermione nearly laughed; instead, she smiled at him incredulously. It was good, because it loosened some of her nerves.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm sorry. It just struck me as humorous, I guess. There's no need to say something like that, you know. That's what a bloke might say on a real date."

He nodded, his features momentarily betraying hurt before he covered them again. "Of course. But I did have a good time." His voice was smooth as silk.

"Me too," Hermione said.

Then Draco laughed and stepped closer. She thought her heart would burst through her skin at any moment. He was so close now that she could smell him, and again she picked up the scent of her favorite inks. He was peering into her eyes, a lazy smile on his face, as he reached up with his free hand and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. As he brought his hand down, he lightly brushed her cheek.

Hermione felt weak in the knees, and all he had done was touch her face. Her breath was shaky when she inhaled, and she silently cursed, knowing he had noticed.

Draco's hand paused on her chin and then he closed the distance, his lips dancing on her cheek and his essence filling her senses. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his skin against hers. All too soon he pulled back.

Something raged in his eyes and all she could do was stare. Then he moved toward her again and kissed her forehead, this time letting his lips linger. His chest was flush against hers, and she had to fight the impulse to wrap her arms around him and tilt her chin up to capture his mouth with hers.

He stepped back, his eyes still swirling with raw emotion until he looked away from her gaze. When he turned back, the mask was in place again.

"I'll see you Friday," he said. He gave her hand one final squeeze and then let go.

"Friday," Hermione said with a nervous smile. Sweet Merlin, she had one more date to get through! At the rate she was going, she would never make it without falling to pieces.

"I had considered somewhere Muggle, but then that would defeat the purpose of going out," he said.

"That's true," she said, her breathing returning to normal. "Must give the people what they want."

Draco smirked. "And right now, they want us. Have a good day, Hermione."

She nodded and took a few steps away, then Disapparated. She appeared just outside the gates to the school and paused to take several deep breaths, trying to steady her nerves before she had to face the rest of her day.

When she was ready, Hermione entered the castle grounds and took her time walking the path to the front doors. Two thoughts plagued her mind. There was simply no way around it: she was falling for him. Curse him and his good looks, sharp wit, and charming personality! When they were together, it was becoming more and more difficult to remember that he was only acting. In addition, she had no idea which pieces of his behavior were real and which were a performance for the benefit of those who might be watching. Had she seen even a glimpse of the real Draco Malfoy, or was his entire display a farce?

Draco had told her that she could back out at any time up to the point where he told her why he needed her help. It had been a comforting thought, knowing that if she found she couldn't work with him, or tolerate him, or if he was rude and demeaning toward her, that she could end their association before it began. She had never imagined she would consider using his escape clause to avoid being hurt. She knew he was only being so agreeable because he needed something from her. Even those looks he had given her could be explained away as simple surface attraction. The letter from his parents had very clearly showed why they could never really work as a couple. If this was a real relationship, he would probably cave to his parents' desires eventually.

Hermione reached the front door before she realized it and entered with a sigh. She glanced at the large clock in the entryway and saw that she had an hour before her next class.

"Hey, Hermione!"

She smiled at the friendly voice and peered through the crowd for her friend. When her eyes landed on his unruly black hair, she waved. "Hi, Harry!"

"Where are you coming from?" he asked. "And where are you going?"

"A nap," she said, chuckling. "Or at least a bit of silence in my room. And I just came from lunch. Want to walk with me?"

He nodded and fell in step beside her. "Yeah? Ginny didn't mention meeting you today," Harry said bemusedly.

"N-no, not Ginny."

Harry frowned, then realization dawned. "Oh! You met him, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Are you okay? You seem a little ... off."

Hermione smiled. "I'm fine, Harry. Just a bit ... confused."

"Why? What did he do?" Harry replied, bristling.

"You don't want to know," Hermione said, opening the door to her quarters and letting them both in.

Harry shut the door. "Sure I do."

"He kissed me," she said, flinging herself onto a soft, comfy armchair and starting a low fire.

"You're right; I didn't want to know that." Harry sat in another chair. "Why is that confusing though? Was it ... not good?"

"No, it was great."

"Then"

She laughed. "I don't know. Never mind. I suppose ... it was surprising to be so affected by it."

"Right," he drawled uncomfortably. "You need to talk to Ginny about that."

"What I need is some rest," Hermione said, yawning.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. See you later, Hermione."

"Bye, Harry."

After he closed the door softly, she crawled into bed, fully clothed, hoping that sleep would sort everything out.

ooo

A/N: Thank you so much for reading! Hope you enjoyed! The title for this chapter comes from the song "Love Me Honestly" by Brighten. Eternal thanks to my betas, manda, drcjsnider, and pokeystar. You know how much I appreciate you (I hope)!

Art Credit: This chapter's lovely art was done by articule of LJ. Isn't it lovely? Music was done, as always, by inadaze22.

The Game is Afoot

Chapter 10 of 16

Draco tells Hermione everything.

Chapter 10 - - The Game Is Afoot

- - -

Friday arrived much too quickly. Hermione still had not come to a decision about Draco, though not for lack of opportunity to think. Wednesday night was her usual patrol night, and she'd spent the entire evening going round and round in her mind, debating and weighing the pros and cons. That had been the largest block of free time spent in fruitless musing.

Many smaller blocks had gone by the wayside as well. Her lunch period Thursday had been spent in conversation with Blaise about possibly getting their fourth-year students together for a joint venture to the Shrieking Shack on the first trip to Hogsmeade. She'd wiled away that evening with the most recent edition of *The Journal of the Dark Arts*, which had arrived by owl post that morning. After her weekly house meeting, she had spent a few hours with students in her house, answering questions, and speaking with the Prefects.

Friday afternoon she sat at her desk, absently tapping her quill and waiting for her students to filter in. She didn't notice Samaya enter first, as usual, and stop in front of the desk.

"Morning," Samaya said.

Hermione jumped, startled, and while Samaya chuckled, she needlessly straightened the things on her desk. "Good morning," she replied.

"Distracted?" the girl asked, taking in the front row near Hermione.

"Why would you ask that?"

"Oh, no reason." Samaya pulled something out of her bag and tossed it onto Hermione's desk. "The *Prophet*. Not as exciting as *Witch Weekly*, but since that's only published once a week, this is the best we get."

Hermione hesitantly slid the paper closer so she could get a better look.

"Page fourteen, top left column," Samaya instructed, sitting back in her seat to watch.

It was an article about her lunch date with Draco. At least this time, there were no pictures. There were, however, a few sentences dedicated to the kiss. Hermione's insides did a somersault when she read it; the mere mention of it sent her heart racing. At least her discomfort wasn't for naught; someone had seen the kiss and wrote about it, as was the plan. The piece also mentioned that they had dinner plans for that evening, at an undisclosed location.

Hermione read through the article twice, her nerves inexplicably calming as she did. It was all a stunt to fool the media and whoever was watching Draco. She had to get through the dinner date, and then they could move on to more important things.

Samaya looked disappointed as Hermione calmly folded the paper and returned it.

"It's amazing what the *Prophet* finds newsworthy these days," she commented flippantly as the rest of the class began to enter and take their seats.

"You're nervous about tonight, aren't you?" Samaya pushed.

Hermione smiled. "Actually, I'm feeling much better now. Thank you for your concern." She raised her voice to address the room. "Good morning, class. As you know, today you will be receiving your group assignments." Hermione tapped the board with her wand, and a list of instructions appeared. "Copy this list carefully, as you will need to complete each item in order to receive full credit."

Quills scratched furiously as she continued. "I was pleased with your work on Wednesday, and I accept the roles you have created within your groups. Those who have been designated as the emissary to speak with me, I will be available at this time, on every Friday, in this room. You are also welcome to ask me questions in class and whenever you see me around the school."

She returned to her desk and picked up the three pieces of parchment on which were written the groups' assignments. After a few minutes, everyone was finished copying the instructions.

Hermione handed one slip to one member in each group. "I suggest you all write your numbers down. I won't be giving them out again, should you lose this parchment. You have your assignments; you may either stay in the room and strategize or leave to begin your work. I will remain until the end of the period."

Corey's hand shot into the air. "Professor, these numbers aren't evenly distributable among the three of us."

Hermione gave a slight nod. "That's right. I trust that you will work out the division of labor, so that each of you does your equal part." She paused. "That reminds me. If anyone ever feels as though he or she is being treated unfairly by the other group members...by being given too little or too much work...please don't hesitate to call it to my attention. You will receive group as well as individual grades for these assignments. Any more questions?"

No one spoke up.

"Excellent. Then good luck. I will see you on Monday."

As suspected, all three groups left. Though she hoped they were headed to the library, she wouldn't have bet on it.

ooo

Hermione stared into her closet, her nerves once again raging. She had less than an hour to get ready, and she still had no idea what to wear. Draco hadn't said where they would be dining, only that she should be at the Leaky Cauldron at seven-thirty. Knowing him, they would be eating somewhere nice, and she had only a handful of dresses to suit the occasion.

She didn't have the luxury of Ginny's help, as she knew the Potters had plans that evening at the Burrow. After a few more minutes of staring, Hermione narrowed the choices to two: a fitted, shimmery black dress she had worn to a function with Charlie, during which he couldn't peel his eyes off her, or an elegant, mid-thigh blue dress that flattered her in all the right places.

Though she wasn't trying to send Draco the same message with the black dress that she had Charlie, the idea was still intriguing. A scenario flashed through her mind where she wore the black with the intent of seducing Draco. If she failed, she could simply back out of their agreement. If she succeeded ... what then? At this point in her life, she wanted more than a one-off, and judging from Draco's history, he wasn't in the same place as she was.

Hermione grabbed the blue dress before she could think along that path any further.

ooo

At twenty past seven, Hermione arrived in the Leaky Cauldron. She had paired an ivory wrap with the blue dress and donned a pair of soft, leather sandals. The dress had thin straps, and the bottom twelve inches was a blue, silvery fabric, lighter than the rest of the dress. As an afterthought, she realized it would complement his eyes.

Hermione glanced around the crowded room, hoping that Draco had arrived early so that they could leave and she could avoid the stares directed at her. She didn't find him, and so tried to blend in. After a moment, someone gently grabbed her elbow, and the smell of Hawthorne's Inks filled her senses. She relaxed immediately and turned to the man who had mysteriously appeared by her side.

Draco's face was surprisingly warm as he smiled and indicated the back door of the pub. His hand slid down her arm, and he smoothly clasped her hand in his, leading the way through the crowd. He made it look so easy, so natural.

When they were through the back and walking down the cobbled street, he didn't release her hand.

"You are exquisite this evening," he murmured, leaning his head nearer to hers.

Hermione blushed and avoided his gaze, confusion sweeping through her. He had done it again, complimented her unnecessarily. It was almost too much; she wasn't sure her heart could survive his pseudo-charms.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Gordon Ramsey," he replied. "Do you know of it?"

"Only that it's supposed to be the best restaurant in Diagon Alley," she said, her suspicions about a nice restaurant not only confirmed, but vastly underestimated.

He smiled. "It is. The chef, Mr. Ramsey, is a Squib, but many argue that he's magical in the kitchen. His restaurant in London is one of only three in all of the United Kingdom to earn three stars in the Michelin Red Book."

Hermione was only somewhat familiar with the system, but she guessed, from the way Draco spoke, that it was a very big deal. "Wow."

"He opened his small Diagon Alley restaurant a few years ago, and my company invested in it. It's very hard to get a table, but I managed to secure one for us."

He spoke as though he had gotten extremely lucky in getting the table, but she suspected there had been no trouble at all, since he had invested in the restaurant from the beginning. His modesty was ... surprising and also a little endearing.

The experience at the restaurant did not go as Hermione had pictured immediately upon hearing where they were eating. She had expected the maître d' to make a fuss over Draco, with grand overtures, and usher them directly to a table that had been especially reserved for them, already set, a bottle of their finest champagne in a bucket of ice. She had even anticipated an appearance by the chef himself, who would speak with Draco as an equal, even thank him for his continued patronage of the restaurant.

None of those things happened. The maître d' treated Draco the same way he had treated the people who had arrived ahead of them, sparing him no special glance or word. Their table wasn't special in any way; in fact, it was sandwiched between two other tables on one wall that was barely big enough for two tables to fit comfortably, much less three. No bottle of champagne awaited them, and Draco was told that their best bottle was unavailable that evening. He chose another and the waiter left.

Hermione took in the room that comprised half of the restaurant's seating space. Nine tables sat in a square around a small dance floor, which was surprising considering how cramped the tables were. Surely the floor could have been scrapped, allowing the patrons more room during their dining experience. The room was dim, lit by candles in sconces on the wall and in five elaborate chandeliers. The walls were creamy yellow in color, with dark, paneled wainscoting rising three feet from the black and white tiles floor.

The table linens were dark maroon, the china had a gold, filigreed edge, and the flatware was gold-plated. Soft music from a string quartet drifted in from the other room. The ambiance was incredibly romantic.



When Hermione returned her attention to her companion, she found him watching her.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"It's beautiful," she said, letting her eyes drift along the walls, on which were sepia pictures of vineyards and country towns in the wine regions of Provence, France. Then she met his eyes once more. "And a bit ... claustrophobic, honestly."

Draco chuckled, his eyes glinting in the soft candlelight.

As he perused the menu, Hermione took the time to admire him. He wore a simple but luxurious set of black dress robes with fine stitching and details. His hair, the same length it had been in school, appeared to be impossibly soft, and it looked as though he had asked someone to cut it to make it look strategically unkempt. The result was incredibly sexy.

"Have you looked at the menu?" he asked, drawing her from her musings.

"No," she admitted, pinking slightly, taking hers from the edge of the table and opening it. She hoped he hadn't caught her staring.

"I was thinking we should do the Menu."

Hermione found the page that listed the items served in the Menu, and her eyes widened. "Seven courses? Merlin, I won't be able to eat that much!"

"You get very small portions," he said, amused.

She didn't want to mention it, but the price of the Menu, more so than the seven courses, made her hesitant. Twenty-four Galleons for a meal! Granted, it would probably be the most amazing food she had eaten in her life, but this wasn't real. He didn't need to spend so much for appearance-sake.

"I'm going to look at the A La Carte," she said.

"Hermione."

Draco's voice had taken on that smooth, velvety texture that she suspected he used to make women bend to his will. She hated that it worked on her. She looked at him, ready to resist his attempt to talk her into the Menu.

He started to speak, to argue his point for a long, drawn-out evening in her company...carefully worded, of course...but thought against it upon seeing her fretted expression. "As you wish," he said, and returned to his menu.

She stared at him for a few seconds, stunned.

"I'll be getting the Menu; it's not every day I get to eat somewhere like this, and I intend to take full advantage."

"Oh." Confused, Hermione stared at the menu. Her assumptions, this time about his standard of living, had once again gotten in her way. If he truly didn't eat in three-star restaurants on a regular basis, and he was taking her to one, it was important; it meant something. The only reason she could fathom for why he didn't eat in such establishments was that he didn't want to. Only that theory didn't quite work, however, because he seemed eager now.

"I'm ready to order," she said.

Draco got the waiter's attention. "I'll have the Cornish lamb and lobster Menu," he said.

"And to start?" the waiter asked.

"The Pressed foie gras and confit, please."

"For the lady?"

Hermione smiled, hoping her nervousness didn't show through. "The duck and the Loire Valley foie gras menu. To start, the scallops."

The waiter took their menus with a brisk nod and left.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Excellent selection."

She tried to shrug daintily. "Carpe diem ... or noctem, as the case may be."

Everything was delicious. From the first bite of scallop, to the main courses, it was like eating art. She'd never had such an exquisite meal, and she doubted she would again.

Draco was the perfect date. He was funny, attentive, complimentary, he asked thoughtful and absorbing questions, and truly seemed interested in what she had to say. He touched her at the right moments...a brush of his hand on hers, light fingers on her arm ... He even brushed his knee against hers underneath the table. Hermione was constantly forced to remind herself that it wasn't real; he wasn't truly interested in her. It pained her to think how easy it was for him to pretend, to make it convincing. She was nearly convinced he was in love with her, and she knew it wasn't true!

It was nearly ten when dessert arrived, Caramelised Tarte Tatin of apples with vanilla ice cream, which they would share. Draco smiled at her and took his spoon, getting some of everything on it and offering it to her.

"Ladies first," he murmured, his tone silky smooth.

For some reason unknown to her, Hermione's eyes filled with tears. He was too good to be true...because he wasn't real. It was all an act, beautifully orchestrated and performed by a very talented actor. She wasn't able to separate her heart from what she was doing, and she decided she must turn him away, refuse his offer, refuse to help him. She couldn't stand the heartbreak she knew would come with helping him, couldn't watch it approach, waiting for it to crush her.

"Dance with me," he said suddenly, putting the spoon away and holding out his hand. His face was strangely blank, void of the suffusion of emotions it had held moments before.

Hermione stared warily at his hand.

"Please," he said.

The word drew her eyes to his, and she agreed, thinking it would be a perfect yet bittersweet ending to their unusual situation.

Draco led her onto the small dance floor and pulled her close, the perfect, courtly distance between them. Not too intimate, as this was only their third date, but not too far, which might suggest a lack of desire for intimacy. She nearly laughed.

"What were you thinking?" he asked, his eyes demanding. "Just now."

She bit her lip and tore away from his piercing gaze.

"Hermione, I want to know."

His severe tone was like a bucket of cold water thrown in her face. He was back; Draco, the man she wasn't feigning a relationship with, had made his first appearance of the night. She felt oddly reassured.

"I'm a bit confused," she began slowly. "About you."

"I am happy to answer any question you have."

"All this time, I've been under an impression of you. It occurred to me that I am entirely mistaken."

He frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

She smiled sadly. "All of this, from the very first time I saw you, at the pitch, has been planned. Every word you've said to me, every phrase carefully crafted, so that I would find you agreeable enough to consider working with you."

Draco stiffened, a shadow passing over his features. "That isn't true."

She gasped and stopped, tears filling her eyes again. "Your apology!" she breathed, her hand flying to her mouth.

"No," he said, gently but firmly pulling her back into their dance. "I swear to you, that was not orchestrated. Not for this. I meant *mean*...every word I said that day." He reached his hand out to turn her chin to look at him. "I want you to believe me. Will you?"

"I ... I don't know," she admitted.

He closed his eyes as though resigned. When they opened again, he smiled, and pulled her close, crossing that perfect distance line, to speak softly in her ear. "You're the most enchanting woman I know, Hermione Granger."

Hermione's heart was pounding, her breathing ragged, as she inhaled his scent.

"Will you ... let me explain?" he whispered so softly she barely heard it. "Come home with me?" he then asked, a little louder, but still for her ears only.

She swallowed hard, her body screaming *yes, please*, for an entirely different reason than the one in her head that insisted she listen to his explanation.

Draco pulled back, their faces so close she thought he would kiss her. Instead he gazed into her eyes, fire boiling in his. "This is it," he whispered.

Her choice. She could go with him, learn his secret, and be bound to work with him until the task was complete, or stay, end her association with him, and return to the life she had been quite happy with before he had reentered it. One was safe, the other almost guaranteed to cause her pain. However, being hurt wasn't absolutely certain, and she quickly convinced herself that she could prevent it from happening. That brief shimmer of hope flickered inside her and won out.

"All right," she said, unsure of her voice.

Relief flooded Draco's face, much the way it had the week before in McGonagall's office when Hermione agreed to the dates. He smiled and kissed her forehead, holding her close against him.

"Thank you," he breathed against her skin.

It sent a pleasant shiver down her spine.

He let her go and they returned to their table, where they waited for the bill. When it arrived, Draco barely paid it any mind and counted out the correct number of Galleons. Within moments, he had her wrap in one hand and her hand in his other. He led her out of the restaurant and onto a side alley.

"We have to Side-Along," he said matter-of-factly.

Hermione nodded, a feeling of unease growing rapidly inside her. Draco motioned for her to step closer, but she hesitated. "Wait."

"What's wrong?" His eyes were full of concern and worried impatience, as though if he didn't get her compliance that night, all would be lost.

"Th-the Manor," she stuttered. "I just ... it's only ... I feel Is there somewhere else we could go?"

Draco frowned, a questioning expression on his face. "Why ...?" He trailed off then, understanding dawning in his eyes. "Oh, bugger. I didn't even...I'm so sorry. We won't go anywhere near that room, I swear to you. We'll be in my wing of the Manor, and it's almost like an independent flat."

Hermione shivered, and Draco drew her wrap tighter across her shoulders. Then he lightly ran his hands up and down her arms, which did nothing for the chill and only made her shiver more.

Malfoy Manor was the last place she ever thought she'd set foot into again. It had never occurred to her that through working with Draco she might have to return to the place where she had been tortured by his aunt while he watched.

"Do you think we'll be there often?" she asked.

"It would be easiest, for quite a few reasons," he replied softly. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable, though. For tonight, I don't see any alternative. What I have to show you is there, I'm afraid."

She allowed herself one more moment of pure terror before pushing it out of her mind. She had conquered every fear she'd ever faced, fought Death Eaters on more than one occasion, and eaten something cooked by Ron Weasley. The memory of what had happened to her in the Manor was only that...a memory. It couldn't hurt her, and she refused to let it control her now, seven years after the perpetrator had died.

"All right. Let's go."

"Are you sure?" he pressed.

"Yes." She gave him a tiny smile. "Now hurry before I change my mind."

Draco nodded and pulled her into an embrace, wrapping his arms firmly around her. "I have found that it is less disorienting this way."

She was certain that it wouldn't be true in this instance, and not because of the Apparition.

When her feet hit solid ground again, Hermione looked around. The first object her eyes fell upon was an enormous bed, covered in cream, silk linens. A quick glance at the rest of the room persuaded her that they had arrived in his bedroom. She pushed forcefully against his chest and he released her.

"What is this?" she asked, accusation in her voice. "Why are we here?"

For a moment, he looked baffled. "Why are we where? You agreed to come to the Manor with me."

"Your bedroom!" she cried, gesturing wildly in the direction of the bed.

He frowned. "This is the only room in the Manor into which I can directly Apparate."

She felt slightly foolish for the direction her thoughts had taken...or rather, that she had let him know. "That's very convenient, isn't it?" she snapped, back-pedaling for something to say.

His lips slowly formed a smirk. "Did you think this was an attempt to get you into bed with me?"

Hermione stuck her chin up. "A little, yes."

He chuckled and began removing his robes and tie. Underneath, he had worn a plain, black button-down shirt and trousers. "Would it have worked?"

"No," she replied indignantly, not sure of the truth of her statement.

"You did agree to come home with me," he said, hanging his robes in a wardrobe. At her frustrated expression, he shook his head. "I'm joking, Hermione."

"Well, honestly," she huffed. "What else would I have thought?"

Draco shoved his hands in his pockets and tossed his head to get the fringe out of his eyes. Hermione was thankful he wasn't watching her, as her eyes glazed over for an instant.

"I can see your point," he conceded. "Unfortunately, such pleasantries are not responsible for me bringing you to my home. As you may recall, we're here to discuss the venture I would appreciate your help with. Would you come with me?" He walked to the door and opened it, then paused to wait for her.

"Where are we going?" she asked nervously as he led her through the Manor. Her eyes were darting everywhere, from the luxurious carpets to the rich tapestries, the priceless artwork and intricately carved moldings.

"My office. We don't have to go to the ground floor for anything." He sighed. No one, except for himself and his house-elf, had set foot in his office in the seven years he had been head of Malfoy Inc. That would change tonight. It was fitting, because many other things about his life were about to change as well.

Draco's bedroom was on the second floor of the massive Manor, in the east wing. The office was on the first floor, in the northern part. It had a balcony which sat above the large veranda on the ground floor. When they reached the door, Draco hesitated for only an instant before opening it, admitting Hermione.

She stepped onto a thick, soft rug and was immediately hit with the smell of aged parchment. Old books surrounded her in floor to ceiling bookcases. She took a deep breath and smiled. "It's amazing," she said, her eyes wandering from title to title.

Draco walked around her and went to the desk. "It's all my father's," he said, rummaging through drawers and starting a pile on the desktop. "Except for one shelf that I use."

"Why?" she asked. "You've been in charge for seven years; why not make it your own space?"

He paused in his search and looked at her heavily. "Because, I never wanted ..." Draco indicated the room in general with an air of defeat. "This. Not that I'm complaining. It just ... isn't the life I would choose for myself."

As he dragged a hand through his hair, she was amazed at the transformation he had undergone in mere moments. He now seemed older, wearied, as though burdened

with a heavy load. It was a stark contrast to the man she'd been to dinner with, who had seemed light, almost care-free. That had been part of the act as well, she realized.

"I'm afraid I don't really understand," she offered quietly.

"I know." Draco came out from around the desk and offered her a seat on the sofa, which she accepted. He remained standing, leaning against the bookcase facing Hermione and crossing one leg over the other. "My father was in prison for seven years," he began. "And for seven years ... someone ..." Draco shifted his legs. "Someone has been ... blackmailing me."

Hermione could tell it had been a difficult thing for him to say. She waited for him to speak again.

"You have to understand my situation. I was thrust into this position, the head of a multi-million Galleon company, with no training, no idea of what my father actually did. It should have been years before I was required to even consider taking over the business. Instead, it was dropped into my lap overnight. To say I was overwhelmed is a gross understatement."

He started to pace, concentration worrying his brow. "Then, just a few weeks into my new life, I received a letter. My father was extremely fortunate to receive only seven years." Their eyes met. "We both know he deserved more. This ... *person* promised to turn over evidence that would keep my father in prison for life, if I didn't meet his demands."

Draco couldn't figure out what to do with his hands, so he picked a paperweight off the desk and shifted it from hand to hand as he talked. "I didn't want my father in prison for his life, because I didn't want to run Malfoy, Inc. for the rest of mine. I wasn't ready to give up all my hopes and aspirations, and honestly, the work was a struggle at first. Business doesn't come naturally to me. I can do it effectively now, after much practice, but it was quite difficult in the beginning."

"What about your mother?" Hermione asked. "Did she help you?"

He shook his head. "No, she never had any part in the company, and I'm sure I got my lack of business prowess from her."

"Why didn't you seek help?"

"I couldn't tell anyone about the blackmailing, as I'm sure you can imagine. There was also a curse on the information in the blackmail letters that prevented me from telling anyone in my family. I was alone, scared, still ... still a bloody kid." Anger tinged his voice.

"This may sound absurd," Hermione began slowly, "but did you ever try to find this person before? Or thwart him or her?"

Draco sniffed. "Yes. I had to try. The first letter terrified me, and I looked for this person everywhere I went. I paid him...or her...as required and dreaded what would happen next. By the fourth letter, I felt bold. I put a newly developed tracking charm that wasn't available to the public on the money and waited. Three days later, I received a note from the blackmailer congratulating my attempt, assuring me he'd expected it, calling me a child. He also included a lock of my mother's hair and promise he'd send her blood the next time I tried something."

Hermione gasped. "How did he get it?"

"I don't know," Draco ground out. "When I find him...or her...I intend to ask. I didn't try anything again."

"I don't blame you." She sent him a sympathetic look. "You couldn't risk your mother's life."

"No. And besides, I thought I could manage for seven years, until I could turn it back over to Lucius."

"So what happened? He's out now."

Draco scowled, but it wasn't directed at her. "I'm getting to that. The blackmailer's demands were exorbitant. Ridiculous. It's far more than this huge house runs on in a year. I have no idea what he is doing with the money, but ..." He took a ragged breath. "It crippled me. Malfoy, Inc. makes a generous profit, but much of it must be reinvested, or has already been allocated elsewhere. I haven't been able to do the things I have wanted to do."

"What kinds of things?" Hermione asked, her mind wandering to extravagant parties and holidays.

"In the wizarding world, money talks. I had hoped to help restore my family's name, to start pulling us out of the social mire."

"How?" she asked, scolding herself for jumping to such a terrible conclusion about him. Surely, by now, she should know that all of the presumptive attributes she had assigned him were false.

"The most effective thing I can do is, ironically, donate large sums of money to worthy causes. Which I have wanted to do, whenever the occasion has presented itself, but I haven't been able to because I have to watch the bottom line."

He gave up with the paperweight and clasped his hands behind his back. Once he had started talking, it seemed as though he might never stop. The rush of release he felt by expressing all of the frustrations that had been building in him for years was cathartic. Vaguely, it registered in his mind that he was thankful he trusted her, because he wasn't going to stop talking until he'd come to the end.

"That's the thing," he continued. "There's a lot of money coming in, but he demands too much. It has been slowly depleting the savings and it can't keep going like this, it can't ... I have to keep the books, which takes up whatever free time I manage to salvage from everyday business concerns. I keep the ledger because if anyone else did, they would run to the nearest reporter and blab about the financial state of my family. There's no one I can trust to do it well and to be discreet."

Draco glanced at Hermione. She wore an expression of deep concern.

"You mentioned my mother. As I said, I am unable to tell her anything, which means I must keep her under the impression that things are as they have always been. I can't tell her that we can't really afford her twenty thousand Galleon shopping sprees to Paris."

Hermione gasped. "Twenty thousand?"

He scoffed. "Easily. Fortunately, she only goes once or twice a year. But that means I have to find that money somewhere, to make up for her spending. I work all day, and come home and pore over the books, looking for a few spare Sickles here, even extra Knuts!" Draco clenched and unclenched his fists now as he paced.

"I've had to stretch myself thin, work extra hard, form new contacts and build partnerships in order to keep us above water. It's like being at the front of a landslide, or an avalanche. I know it's eventually going to overtake me and swallow me whole, but all I can do is keep running."

"I know there's something you haven't told me yet," Hermione said. "And I want to know what all of this has to do with what we talked about at the restaurant."

Draco let out his breath. "Right. See, it was supposed to end with my father's release. It was perfectly planned. Once he was out, there was no blackmail material. If the blackmailer tried, I would simply send my father into hiding somewhere. Once I turned everything over to him, including this ring..." He showed Hermione the signet ring on his right hand. "...then I could tell him anything. The handing over of power in a household would supersede the curse in the letter."

"I was living for that day. The weeks that led up to it were relaxing while at the same time stressful. After his release ... he asked me to continue in his stead for another two months while he and my mother went on holiday. I couldn't say no; what was two more months when I'd been doing it seven years?"

Hermione nodded.

"The first day I went to play Quidditch was probably the best day of my life." He smiled sadly. "Which isn't really saying much. I mean, there were good days I had as a kid, but when I think back, I see how small my world was. After Quidditch, every day that passed seemed brighter than the one before it. Then came the day I saw you in Diagon Alley."

Draco went around the desk and leaned on the back of the chair. "I started the day in meetings, and on my lunch break, tried to get a few errands completed. That's when I ran into you. After that Saturday, I decided that if I got the chance, I would apologize to you. After our conversation, I had a meeting with the Weasleys, followed by more meetings, and a late night as usual."

He picked something off the desk and, on his way back to the bookshelf, handed it to her. "I came home to this."

Hermione carefully removed the letter and read through it. "Oh, no," she whispered halfway through. "Your mother ..."

"Had an affair," he said gruffly. "Several. I'll spare you the evidence."

"I'm so sorry! That's a terrible truth to learn. May I ask with whom? It might be important."

Draco grunted and couldn't meet her eyes. "For one, Snape. My uncle, Rabastan was another." The disgust in his voice was almost palpable.

Hermione didn't know what to say.

"I cannot keep living like this," Draco said. "I ... I didn't know what to do, who to turn to"

"I don't understand, though. I thought you couldn't tell anyone. Why me?" Hermione asked.

He gave her a pained smile. "The curse that was put on the letter...or rather, the information contained within...is a very Dark curse. Dark magic. I looked it up, researched every word. The original word used for 'anyone,' as in, 'you cannot tell anyone,' referred to those who share my blood, and, as was the belief at the time the spell was written, those of 'worthy blood.' Which meant..."

"Let me guess," she said sharply. "No one of Muggle heritage."

"Correct."

Hermione scowled and glared at Draco, for no other reason than he was the only animate object in the room. "You can only tell Muggle-borns."

"Don't be upset. Consider it an oversight of the narrow-minded. Now I am free to seek your help," he said, hoping she would know he had meant no disrespect. "More importantly, I hope you believe me when I say that my apology that day was sincere."

"But the Saturday after? When you didn't play?"

He shifted conspicuously. "I ... had an agenda that day. I needed you to find me something other than repulsive so that you would consider helping me. Though ... I had a good time talking with you. I meant everything I said, everything I've said since the first time I saw you again."

She couldn't believe that; it was too much. "So I'm-I'm exquisite, and beautiful, and interesting," she said bitterly. "You really think that."

"Yes," he said simply.

Hermione still had trouble accepting him at his word, and she didn't want to press the issue. "So ... my job is to help you figure out who the blackmailer is. Because I'm Muggle-born."

"No," he said, frustrated. "Because you're ... you. You're smart, resourceful, methodical. I'm simply lucky that you *are* Muggle-born because it means I can ask for help from the best." He wasn't used to giving such lavish praise, to anyone, but not only did she deserve it for agreeing to help him, but it was true. He'd thought about his options, and couldn't have found a better person to help him if he'd been able to select from every witch and wizard in England. Maybe the world.

"I'm sorry," she said with a sigh. "I shouldn't jump down your throat. It's instinct, I'm afraid."

"One that I helped ingrain in you. I truly am sorry."

"I know," she said, smiling at him anew. "Let's move on. We've got a blackmailer to identify. I'm guessing you have a plan for what comes after that?"

"A vague one. It depends largely on the identity of the individual."

She nodded. "Let me think a moment."

Draco watched as she sat on the sofa, her expression changing only slightly as she thought. It was rather fascinating, and he found himself wishing he could tap into her mind, to know what she was thinking.

After a few minutes, she spoke. "I think we'll need a room where we can work. With a large wall, on which we can write...magically...that won't be disturbed between meetings."

"I've got a closet attached to my bedroom that I can magically expand to suit your needs."

"Everything related to this blackmailer should be kept in the room. I want access to anything you have of his, any theories you started and then abandoned, all the research you've done. There should also be a fireplace that I can use to come here...I'm assuming we'll be working here?"

"Yes," he agreed hesitantly. "If that's what you want. I can't let you remove anything from the grounds, however."

"I'm sure it will be fine." Hermione smiled bravely. "So long as I stay in your part of the house. Now, we'll need comfortable seating, quills, ink, parchment ...". She nodded, then stood.

"Where are you going?" Draco asked.

"Your closet, right?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "You want to start tonight? Now?"

"Why not? Get a start on it while it's fresh in my mind. All right with you?"

"Um, sure. I've got all the letters, if you'd like to read them." Draco retrieved a locked box from inside his desk.

"Yes, please."

While Draco worked on expanding his closet and setting up the room, Hermione sat on the window seat, wrapped in a warm blanket, carefully reading through the blackmailer's letters. After twenty minutes, Draco returned to his bedroom in an undershirt, his button-down discarded, breathing heavily.

Hermione looked up when he sat on the bed. "Finished?"

"Yes. It's rather exhausting, increasing the area of a room." He flopped onto his back and she nearly lost sight of him due to the large, fluffy coverlet. "How are the letters coming?"

"I'm on my second read-through. Nothing jumps out at me ... well, that's not true. Nothing that's immediately useful, at least."

"Oh?" He rolled over on his stomach and rested his chin on his arms.

"I'm going to start by talking to Bill Weasley," she said, setting the letters back in the box and drawing her knees to her chest. "He works at Gringotts. I'll ask him about the procedure for large deposits. Whoever this guy is, he probably started making regular deposits of an immense sum of money. I'm sure there are protocols for such things."

"That's true," said Draco. "I've spoken with a few goblins who work at the bank, but they haven't been too forthcoming."

"I think Bill is our best bet for that kind of information," Hermione said. "I think you should spend time this week thinking of everyone who has a motive to blackmail you."

Draco groaned. "You think I haven't done that a hundred times already?"

"I'm sure you have," Hermione stated. "But I haven't seen the fruits of your efforts. I would like for you to make a card on each person, complete with details of your relationship and any reasons why that person might want to harm you in some way. Don't make assumptions about people you've already ruled out. We have to look at this from an unbiased perspective."

"You realize that would include Potter and Weasley," he teased. "They've never liked me, never..."

"Fine," Hermione snapped. "Make cards for them. I can easily rule them out when we get together again."

Draco hesitated, not wanting their evening to end sorely. "It was a joke. I know they aren't responsible."

"How do you know?" She gave him a pointed look.

He sat up on the bed, crossing his legs beneath him. Hermione tried to remain focused on his face, but every now and then, her gaze would drift to his toned chest.

"Potter wouldn't be working at Hogwarts if he had that kind of money," Draco began. "Come to think of it, Potter probably *has* that kind of money, he just doesn't use it. Weasley ... now don't take offense to this ... probably couldn't pull this off, alone, for this long."

Hermione slowly smiled. "As much as I love Ron, I think you're right. Whoever this blackmailer is, he, or she, is highly intelligent and knows how to stay undetected. Ron wouldn't know a thing about a Muggle bank, and immediately after the war, he didn't have the time to concoct such a scheme as this, much less execute it." She frowned. "And Harry had even less time, for that matter."

"Great. We've officially ruled out the two least likely people. Excellent work tonight." His smile belied the sarcasm in his voice. "Speaking of future meetings, when are you available?"

"Friday nights are good for me," she said.

"For me, as well," he said, surprised that she would so willingly give up the prime weekend evening.

Hermione yawned, and there was a knock on the door. She looked at Draco, who seemed surprised.

He got off the bed and went to the door.

"Master!" said Chippy in his squeaky voice.

"What is it?" Draco whispered, closing the door behind him completely.

"You has a guest, Master. She is being in the drawing room."

Carrie. He closed his eyes in exasperation. He hadn't thought he and Hermione would still be together at midnight, so he hadn't written to Carrie to reschedule.

"Thank you, Chippy," Draco sighed. The house-elf nodded and disappeared with a *crack*! Draco made his way through the house, down to the ground floor, and into the parlor.

Carrie was waiting, nearly naked in scanty lingerie, stretched languidly on his mother's favorite sofa, carefully positioned for maximum impact. She patted the spot beside her, smiling seductively. "Draco," she purred. "I've missed you."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "We can't do this tonight," he said, strangely impatient, even though her presence was his fault.

She pouted, showcasing her full lips. "Why not, love? It's Friday, is it not? I came on the right night ..."

"I am unavailable at the moment."

Her eyes narrowed in thought, then comprehension dawned. She smiled and sat up, not bothering to cover herself. "Ah! You have secured another source of pleasurable company." Then she stood and sashayed over to him, stopping just in front of him.

Despite not being available, he couldn't help but be affected. She noticed and leaned up to nip his bottom lip. Draco let out a sharp breath, then took her firmly by the shoulders.

"Tonight will not work," he said firmly.

She smirked and backed away. "Whatever you say; you're the boss." Carrie took her time in gathering her clothes and putting them on, doing her best to make him squirm.

"Can we reschedule for tomorrow?" he asked when she had completed dressing.

"Tomorrow? No, love. Friday is our night. I have other responsibilities, you know." She grabbed her purse and stood just inside the door. "I did come all this way, may I point out."

Draco sighed and removed his money bag from his pocket, counted the correct sum, and handed it to her.

"Always a pleasure," she murmured lasciviously, tucking her payment in her robes. "See you next week."

She was nearly to the front door when he remembered. "Carrie, wait!" he called, without really thinking, rushing after her.

"Yes?" she drawled.

"About that. I need to change our night, for the foreseeable future, to Saturday." A small voice inside his head was suggesting that maybe, just maybe, he should end their association altogether, but he ignored it.

Carrie's eyes widened and trailed up the stairs, in the direction of his bedroom. "Have you got a girl? She must be something if she doesn't mind ... sharing you."

He scowled. "It's not like that. It's just business, but Friday nights are best for her to meet."

"Any 'business' that consistently keeps you occupied past midnight is no longer *just* business. I assure you, I would know." She grinned again. "However, I am willing to accommodate you. I'll have to check my calendar, but I think Saturday nights will work. Same time?"

Draco nodded, the voice making itself more prominent. Still, he refused to heed it, and bade Carrie goodnight. As he walked back to his room, he finally allowed himself to give ear to the niggling worm. He realized he felt ... almost ashamed, in light of Hermione's presence in his life. In his mind, she was a light, a purely good being. And he was paying a woman for sex on a weekly basis. If Hermione ever found out, she would probably despise him, think him a horrible man. Possibly want nothing more to do with him, and that was the last thing he wanted.

He replayed their dinner in his mind, and more than anything, he marveled at how easy it had been to be with her, how much he had enjoyed the time with her. She was beautiful, in a way that spoke directly to his heart, lodged itself deep inside of him. Sure, he wanted her, but that didn't really say anything important. Any man could want almost any woman, given the proper motivation.

But Hermione ... she reached him in a deeper place, where they connected on a different plane, one that he hadn't explored in a very long time. He couldn't possibly hope that she felt the same, especially in so short a time.

Draco stopped outside his door, collecting himself. His blood had cooled, but not entirely, and he chuckled at the realization that his response to Carrie was due, in large part, to Hermione. His blood had already been on fire when he went to speak with Carrie, and he now realized it might even be necessary to continue seeing her. It simply wouldn't do to allow himself to be constantly distracted by Hermione.

Draco forced his thoughts onto mundane things...turnips, leaves, clouds...in order to calm himself before seeing Hermione again.

Finally he felt in control and pushed open the door. Hermione was pacing inside, frowning, and biting her lip.

"What's wrong?" he asked immediately.

She jumped at his voice, startled. "Oh!"

"Sorry," he said.

"No, it's all right," she assured him, gathering her shawl and purse. "I need to go. I've got an early breakfast with my parents tomorrow. Next Friday, right?"

"Yes," he nodded, disappointed that she was leaving. Not that he had expected anything else; he had simply gotten used to her company and would miss it.

"What time? I saw the fireplace; may I just ... come through? I wouldn't want to interrupt anything ..."

"What? No." The idea horrified him; however, the idea that she had thought it horrified him more. "Yes, just come through."

Hermione nodded and looked around the room. He might have been seeing things, but he thought she might have been trying to find an escape route; her eyes had a tinge of panic in them. "I'm finished with classes at three; I can come anytime after that."

"I won't be off work until around six. Why don't you come at seven?"

She smiled. "All right. Seven it is. Don't forget your assignment."

"No, I won't."

"Um, how should I leave?" Hermione asked. "I doubt the Floo connection between your closet and my room will work. It has to be set up by the Ministry."

"I'll get right on that," Draco said, opening the door he hadn't moved away from. "Front door, I suppose. Or you can Floo into Hogsmeade from the main fireplace downstairs. Only"

"What?"

"It's on the ground floor, I'm afraid. The fireplace and the door. I'd be happy to walk with you, if you would help."

Hermione hesitantly agreed, then followed him through the door. Draco wanted to ask her why she was agitated when he'd returned, but thought she might not want him to have noticed anything amiss.

They walked in silence to the Traveling Room. Hermione's heart pounded as they neared the drawing room. The edges of her vision started to cloud, and her breathing became shallow. She stared at the door as it got closer, panic welling in her chest and...

Draco put his arm around her shoulder and led her across the hallway. She was so surprised that they passed the room without incident. Hermione got another twenty feet before she started shaking and sank to her knees. She'd felt another attack coming on, but Draco's interruption had halted it.

He knelt beside her and rubbed her back; his scent was all around her. She breathed deeply until she felt the episode pass.

Fortunately, Draco would probably write it off as extreme panic brought on by being near the room where she'd experienced something horrible during the war.

After a few long moments, Hermione smiled. "Thanks."

"You all right?" The concern in his eyes was genuine.

"Yes." She nodded and stood, looking over his shoulder at the door to the drawing room. It wasn't so ominous from the other side of it, she thought. "I'm fine. I'll be fine. Let's go."

Draco kept a protective hand by her elbow as they walked the rest of the way. By the time they reached the Traveling Room, Hermione felt almost completely better. She bade him a good night, which he reciprocated, and then took a handful of Floo powder. She was about to toss it in, but she paused and turned to him.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" He leaned against the doorframe.

"With ... us. This thing. We continue to pretend we're together, right?"

"Oh." He hadn't given much thought to the after, as he was focused on getting her to agree to help him. Draco rubbed his forehead. "Yes. We don't have to go into public as much, just keep a presence there, so that people will still believe we're together."

"Okay," she said, turning back to the fireplace.

"Hermione?" Draco's nerves were suddenly on fire.

"Hmm?"

"I ... I had a good time."

Their eyes met and he had the sudden impulse to kiss her. She looked lost and confused, though he had no idea why.

"Me too," she said softly, looking down at her hands in front of her. "Goodnight, Draco." Without waiting for a response, she tossed the powder into the fireplace and disappeared in the swirling green flames.

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End Notes: Thank you for reading!! I hope you enjoyed this chapter. The chapter title comes from Henry IV by William Shakespeare.

Credits: Merci beaucoup to my wonderful betas: Manda, drocsnider, and pokestar! The art for this chapter was a commission by Hannah Clark. Playlist as always by inadaze22. :)

Hermione's dress was inspired by the Gibraltar's Gleam Dress at anthropologie[dot]com.

In France, at least, restaurants are rated on a 3-star system. Achieving a three-star rating is a very big deal. You can get more information at the [website](#) and at [Wikipedia](#).

The ground floor of Malfoy Manor is the lowest level, then the first floor, then the second.

Food Selections (for Buzzy!):

DRACO

Starter - Pressed foie gras and confit label Anglaise chicken with Perigord truffle crouton, confit celery

Salad Spinach with goat cheese

Soup Cauliflower soup

Sorbet Raspberry

Poultry Cannon of Cornish lamb with confit shoulder, ratatouille and thyme jus

Fish Ravioli of lobster, langoustine and salmon with tomato chutney and vinaigrette

Cheese Course

Dessert Caramelised Tarte Tatin of apples with vanilla ice cream (*for two*)

Hermione:

Starter - Pan fried Scottish sea scallops with a millefeuille of potato, parmesan velouté and truffle smarties

Salad House

Soup Roast vine tomato soup with ash rolled goat's cheese

Sorbet Raspberry

Poultry Roasted Barbary duck breast with creamed Savoy cabbage, chesnuts and Madeira sauce

Fish Roasted Loire Valley foie gras with braised carrots and almond foam

Cheese Course

Dessert Caramelised Tarte Tatin of apples with vanilla ice cream(*for two*)

Chimes at Midnight

Chapter 11 of 16

Draco and Hermione start planning.

Chapter 11 - - Chimes at Midnight

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"How was your week?" Elizabeth Granger asked her daughter as the two of them stood in the kitchen, preparing breakfast.

Hermione hands were in water up to her elbows, scrubbing a pot. "Lovely," she said, much the way she usually said it. Then images from the week, all staring Draco, flashed through her mind and she smiled. "Really good."

"Yeah?" said Elizabeth. "I want to hear about your date last week with ... what was his name again? Unusual ... Draco! That's it."

Hermione continued scrubbing. "I'll just end up telling the story twice, so let's wait until Dad is here. Where is he, anyway?"

"He had to run out for a few things."

"On a Saturday morning?" Hermione asked.

"When you need something, you need it," her mother replied. "He'll be back soon."

Hermione finished the pot and dried it, then handed it to her mother.

"Thank you, dear." Elizabeth took it and put it away. "Tell me what's going on with school, then."

"I gave out the first big assignment yesterday. Oh, I haven't told you this yet." Hermione began slicing a melon. "I decided to put my Gryffindor and Slytherin in the same group."

"The boy and girl you suspect like each other?" Elizabeth asked.

"Right. At least, I suspect the boy likes the girl. After seeing how well Draco and I got on, I decided it couldn't hurt to put them in closer proximity. If nothing happens, that's fine, too."

Elizabeth stirred a pan filled with onions and peppers. "How did they take it?"

Hermione shrugged. "Fine. I haven't had any complaints so far. But it's only been a week."

The front door opened then, and Thomas Granger entered with a bag in one hand and a bottle of champagne and a loaf of fresh bread in the other. He set the bag by the stairs and went into the kitchen.

"Hello, ladies," he said, kissing Hermione on the forehead and his wife on the lips. He handed the bread to Hermione and put the bottle on the table. "The food smells great. Let me run my purchases upstairs and I'll be right back."

Thomas returned after a few minutes, as Hermione was setting the table.

Elizabeth removed the orange juice from the refrigerator and set it on the table beside a bottle of champagne. She prepared a mimosa for herself and, as she did each week, asked if either Hermione or Thomas would like one. As usual, Thomas declined; however, Hermione accepted, to the amusement of both her parents.

"We're going to hear about her date," Elizabeth remarked while preparing Hermione's drink.

Hermione rolled her eyes, nervous about what she would say. Certainly, there would be no need to lie. All three dates that week had been incredible, and she had thoroughly enjoyed herself. Talking about them, however, might make it more difficult to remember they were for show, might cement them in her mind as the real thing. She didn't want to get too caught up in the typical new-love euphoria, but as she was supposed to pretend their relationship was genuine, she had to discuss it.

The trouble was, she found it a little too easy to become swept up in thinking and talking about Draco...and thinking too much often got her in trouble. When Draco had left her the night before to meet his guest, she'd looked around his room and realized she knew nothing about him beyond what he'd carefully revealed. When the thought had occurred to her that he was accustomed to female companionship, she'd suddenly wanted to leave immediately. The room seemed too small, too warm, and even though he'd only been gone a few minutes, it had been far too long.

"Excellent," said Thomas cheerfully.

Elizabeth set the bowl of fruit on the table and sat down beside her husband. "Go on, then," she pressed, giving her daughter an expectant look.

Hermione chuckled. "Have you been waiting so patiently all week for my report?"

Her parents exchanged a look and then Thomas spoke. "There was something about the way you spoke about it last week that has had us curious."

"Oh." Hermione took a sip from her drink. Normally she stuck with plain juice, but this morning she wanted a little extra something to help her nerves. "Well, I'm sure it was nothing."

"How did the date go?" Elizabeth asked.

Her voice betrayed only mild interest, but Hermione knew her mother better; she was quite anxious to hear the details. Hermione sighed. "It went really well."

"Yeah?" Her mother smiled.

"Yeah. We had a lovely time at tea, and then he went with me while I ran a few errands." Hermione took another sip.

"That's wonderful to hear, my dear," Elizabeth said.

"Do you have plans to see him again?" her father asked.

"Well," Hermione said slowly. "Actually, I saw him for lunch on Wednesday and last night for dinner." Her parents' eyes widened simultaneously. "And yes, I do plan to see him again."

Thomas cleared his throat. "It would be safe to say you like him, then."

Here it was, the part that was too easy, the lie she didn't have to tell. "Yes, I do like him." The words were so simple, but their implication complex. That she liked him at all was a problem, but after last night, she feared she could easily fall in love with him if she let herself. Him! Of all people!

At least she didn't have possession of her whole heart to unwittingly devote to the matter.

"Tell us about him, Hermione," her mother pressed. "What's he like? What does he do?"

More of the truth. "He's ... very charming," she began, still hesitant. She needed to think negatively about him to counteract the positive things she said. Yes, he was charming, but it had almost been too perfect. No man could always react so well to everything she said or did.

"Well, I'm sold," her father said, smiling.

"Now, Thomas," Elizabeth scolded lightly. "Let Hermione tell us the way she wants to."

"He's funny too; he makes me laugh," Hermione continued. She searched her mind for something bad about this trait, but couldn't find one. "He's very intelligent. Surprisingly so. He doesn't flaunt it, but it's obvious from the way he talks." Nope, nothing wrong with that, either.

"What does he do?" Thomas asked.

"That's such a father question," Hermione teased. "It's another way of asking, 'Can this bloke take care of you? Is he good enough for my daughter?'"

He grinned. "I see nothing wrong with such questions. What's the answer?"

The latter made her nervous; she didn't have an answer to it. She hoped her answer to the first would sufficiently distract them.

"Draco is definitely able to take care of me," she said, finishing her mimosa. Her glass hadn't rested on the table for five seconds before her mother picked it up and prepared her a fresh drink. Hermione continued. "To make the story simple, he comes from a wealthy family, and he is currently running his family's business."

"What is the family business?" Thomas asked with a frown. "Nothing like 'Sanitation Engineer,' right?"

Hermione laughed nervously. The image of Draco collecting rubbish bins was funny enough, but it was clear her father had been watching too many mob movies lately. "No, Dad, he's not in the mafia." Still, with Draco's family, it wasn't that bad a guess.

"Good to know." He visibly relaxed and looked at her, still waiting for an answer.

"Honestly ... I don't know what the family business is." At her father's disapproving expression, she added, "But I do know it involves investment. His company is investing in Ron's brother's shop. I'm sure I've mentioned it before. They're expanding into Europe, and Malfoy, Inc. will be a part of it."

"That certainly sounds better," Thomas said.

"The company is huge, from what I gather. I also know Draco has a few research firms under his control. Two are small, from what he said, but one is a respectable size."

"You like research, don't you, dear?" Elizabeth asked.

Hermione was happy at the direction of the conversation. "Yes, very much."

"Is he attractive?" her mother asked.

"Mum!" Hermione blushed and took a large gulp from her drink.

Elizabeth laughed. "It's a very important question, Hermione. There has to be a connection between you that goes beyond your heart and mind."

Again, this would be no lie. "Yes, Mum, I find him attractive," she mumbled. "Very much."

"Well. Since you'll be seeing him again, I think you should bring him for breakfast sometime," said Thomas. "Soon."

"Dad! It's only been a week!" Hermione cried, her chest clenching at the thought.

"Fine, then. Give it a few more, and then we'd like to meet him."

"It's only fair," Elizabeth added. "We like to meet all the men you date seriously. It's important to us that we establish a good relationship with the man our daughter is dating, for all dates have the potential to lead to more."

Hermione smiled weakly. *But this is different!* she wanted to shout. *It's not real!* "Of course," she said instead.

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Usually, Hermione looked forward to big Sunday meals at the Burrow. It was such a contrast to her quiet Saturday breakfasts with her parents. There was always someone unexpected at the meal...friends, co-workers, family of the Weasleys... not enough seating, and mounds of food. Someone would inevitably get hurt; the children would fight. Hermione always had a great time, but a part of her was secretly thankful that when she went home, none of the Weasleys went with her. Being part of such a large family could be exhausting at times.

Hermione knocked on the door of the Burrow, her arms full of baked goods. It was her assigned role to bring bread for the meal, and with the guest list flexible, she always tried to bring more than enough.

"Hey, Hermione!" said Harry, opening the door. "Come on in." He looked past her, a puzzled frown crossing his face.

"There you are, Hermione, dear," said Molly, sweeping into the room and taking the load out of her arms. "I'll set these to slicing on the table in the dining room."

"Great," she said with a warm smile.

"Where's...?" Harry began, only to be interrupted by Ron's loud arrival in the room.

"Oi! Hermione's here!" he called and wrapped his long arms around her and squeezed her, lifting her off the floor.

"Nice to see you too, Ron. It's only been a week, you realize."

He set her down, his huge grin lopsided. "I know. I guess I'm happy to see you. You look the same ... no outward signs that you're dating that rodent."

"Ron!" she cried. "You're to be nice, remember?"

"What?" He shrugged. "He isn't here; I can say whatever I want."

"Yeah, where is he?" Harry asked.

"Draco?" Hermione quickly ran through all the conversations she had with Harry, Ginny and Ron over the last week. "Was he invited?"

"Well, yeah," said Harry. "Ron was supposed to mention it."

When Harry and Hermione turned to their friend, he was staring hard at something on the wall. Harry cleared his throat, and Ron looked at him. "What? Oh, that. Oops. Ah well, more's the pity. Maybe next time." He practically skipped out of the room, either in an attempt to get out of reach of Hermione's wand or in excitement over Draco's absence.

"I'm glad you came," Harry said, walking to the door and going through it.

Hermione followed, and they headed for the outer path around the garden. "Who's here today?" she asked.

"Let's see ... Ginny, myself and James, Ron, Molly and Arthur, Bill, Fleur, Violet, and Manech, you, Percy and Penelope, George and his recent girlfriend ... Pam, I think her name is ... Oh, and two of Arthur's assistants, plus Fleur's sister Gabrielle and her husband. Don't remember his name."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know how Molly does it. She makes it look so easy! Never gets flustered when Arthur invites someone from work, or George brings six friends with him."

"It certainly gets a little chaotic at times," Harry said.

"That's a slight understatement! I don't know how you handle it so well. I am glad for these monthly meals, but I couldn't be in the middle of it, all the time."

"You nearly were," Harry pointed out. "Twice."

"No," Hermione said, waving a finger. "I would not have let myself be dragged into every Weasley drama. I would have stayed neutral and pleasant."

"Just like the time when George was dating two women at the same time, right?" Harry asked with a grin.

"That was an exception! I had a very strong opinion about that issue," Hermione said sternly.

"You have a very strong opinion on *most* things." He chuckled. "I doubt you could remain on the outside for too long."

She sighed. "Maybe you're right. I reckon it's a good thing it never worked out with Ron or Charlie."

Harry stopped walking. When she noticed and turned around, he was eyeing her strangely. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, catching up to her.

"It isn't nothing, Harry Potter. What?"

"I've just never heard you say that about Charlie. You either don't talk about him, or you go on about how one day, things will be righted, and you and he can..."

"Stop," Hermione whispered, pain etched on her face. She hadn't thought about Charlie, about their future or lack thereof, in a couple of weeks, and the realization surprised her. She was used to thinking about him almost daily, and since she and Draco had started their faux-relationship, Charlie had only crossed her mind once, when she'd tried to decide which dress she would wear to dinner with Draco.

Harry was speaking, but Hermione wasn't listening. She started back to the house without a word to her friend.

"Hey, I'm sorry!" he called, falling into step beside her once again. "Really. It was nice to hear you talk like it was okay again. That's all."

"It's all right, Harry. I'm not mad." Was it okay though, like Harry had said? Why hadn't her thoughts been filled with Charlie all week? She had dated since breaking up with him, but always her thoughts would return to him. The fact that they hadn't, even though the relationship with Draco wasn't real, frightened her, and she was more convinced than ever that she had to be careful.

After the meal, Hermione found Bill playing with his son.

"Hey," he said, smiling at her as she approached.

"Hi, Manech," she said, grinning at the toddler. He grinned back at her and continued walking, his hands clenched around his father's fingers. "Bill, would you mind if I asked you a few questions?"

"Not at all," he said, swinging his long in the air. "What can I help you with?"

"I have a few questions about the banking system, and I would rather you not asked me why I'm inquiring."

Bill looked at her suspiciously, one eyebrow raised. "Are you in some kind of trouble, Hermione?"

"Oh! No!" she reassured, chuckling. "I'm just curious about the procedures. In particular, opening accounts with a large initial deposit. How does that work?"

"All right." He let Manech swing his arm as they walked. "The client makes an appointment, papers are signed, and the client accompanies his or her money to the vault assigned."

"Is it possible to get an account opened without a personal meeting?" she asked. "Say, by using a proxy, or corresponding via letter?"

He shook his head. "No. For most accounts, especially the larger ones, we must see the clients in person. Usually the client wants to put additional wards on his assigned vault because he is too paranoid to let the money out of his sight to trust it to anyone else. Even goblins."

"I see." She paused and Bill swung Manech in a circle a few times, the boy laughing wildly. "Are there other banks, besides Gringotts, in the wizarding world?"

"A few," he replied. "They're smaller, less reputable. People use them when they don't want to have to answer too many questions. Gringotts has the goblins, and most of the wizarding world trusts them to run the bank efficiently and correctly, even if they don't exactly trust them." He chuckled. "That doesn't make much sense, does it?"

"No," Hermione said. "It does, if you understand the nature of goblins. They can be trusted to be meticulous in keeping records and figures, but you wouldn't want to leave them alone in your home."

Bill grinned. "Precisely."

"Can you give me a list of the other, less reputable wizarding banks in Europe?"

"Hermione," he said sternly. "I know you don't want to answer any questions, but..."

"I'm just asking for information, Bill. I promise I'm not in any kind of trouble, nor have I come into a large sum of illicit money recently." She gave him her most innocent smile.

He stared at her pensively, clearly not convinced. Then he shrugged. "There aren't many because of the nature of the clientele. People who go to these banks aren't the most trustworthy people. These banks take a gamble by accepting high-risk clients, and they generally work by taking a large percentage of the initial deposit, to cover expenses they might incur as a result of granting the account. If there are subsequent deposits, they again take a large percentage. The clients accept it, because the banks don't ask who they are, what they've done, where they got the money. Gringotts is painstaking in its research."

"That's good though," she said.

"Yes, it is. It's one reason Gringotts has been so successful over the centuries. Goblins are so obsessive that they want to know everything they can about their clients."

"So these other banks ..." she prompted.

He gave her a patient look. "As I said, there aren't many. There's one in Paris, one in Finland, two in Poland, one in the Ukraine, and four in Switzerland."

"Thank you, Bill," she said. "As for Gringotts, there are locations in every country, right?"

"Yeah," he replied. "In the big cities that have a sizeable wizarding population. Paris, Rome, Barcelona, Madrid, Berlin, Prague ... the list is quite long."

"I really appreciate this," Hermione said.

They had reached the house, and Fleur came to Bill's side with Violet on her hip. "Bill, we must be going," she said, her English much improved from when she and Bill had first met.

"Sure thing," he said and then turned back to Hermione. "You are welcome. Any time. Just ... be smart. Not that I have to tell you that." He grinned and led his family into the house.

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"Do you see this?" Pansy asked, holding the magazine up to his face. "Do you see your eyes?"

Annoyed, he pushed her arm away. "What do you want me to say? I like her."

She sat and examined the pictures again. "Those aren't 'I like you' eyes. You look like you're in love with her already! Merlin, it's been what, three dates? A week?"

He scowled. "I'm not in love with her."

"Well, you could have fooled me. When are you seeing her again?" Pansy asked.

"Tomorrow night," he said with a sigh. He really didn't like the way the week felt interminable without any contact from Hermione; it wasn't a good sign.

Pansy raised an eyebrow. "What are you planning?"

"I'm not sure yet," he replied. "I think I'll invite her over to the Manor and cook for her."

"You can cook?" Pansy gasped dramatically.

He tried to keep scowling, but he couldn't help but chuckle. "I can prepare one thing. I learned while on a business outing. I've made it a few times since."

"Well," said Pansy haughtily. "You know that's code for sex, don't you?"

Draco nearly dropped his fork at the unexpected turn in conversation. "What?"

"You invite a woman over to your home, prepare her a gourmet meal ... How else do you think the evening is going to end?" She smirked at his expression. "Although ... are you sure Granger's a four-date kind of woman?"

He didn't need to be thinking about this right now. It was definitely not a good path for his thoughts to be on. "Maybe I'm not a four-date bloke."

Pansy laughed so hard she nearly choked on the bite she'd just taken. After drinking half her glass of wine, she looked at him, her eyes still alight with mirth. "Merlin, that's the truth. You're positively a first-date bloke. Though, it begs the question, have you even been on four dates with the same woman?"

Draco's scowl deepened, which he hadn't thought possible. "And you wonder why we don't get together more often," he growled, the sarcasm dripping from his voice.

"You are certainly a 'shag her and move on' kind of man." Her smile turned a bit sour. "Relationship sex is different than a one-off, Draco."

"How silly of me!" he quipped. "After all, you *are* the expert on relationship sex."

She glowered at him. "I have been in far more relationships than you. At least I know something about it."

"Month-long shag-fests don't count, Pansy," he bit out.

Her face turned red as she stared daggers at him. "You would know," she spat.

They glared at each other for a few moments, and then Draco sighed. "I'm sorry. You struck a raw nerve, and I attacked you." He watched his hand as he turned his spoon on its long axis. "The truth is ..." He was beginning to realize it was the truth, beyond the fake relationship. "I want more than just getting her into bed. I want ... the rest, too. And I've no idea how to accomplish it."

Pansy's anger dissipated. "I'm sorry too. But I do know that there's a difference, and you should take care with her. She won't be like all the others."

Draco chuckled wryly. "You have no idea."

"I have a little bit of one," Pansy said. "It's Granger. I don't know what you see in her."

"She makes me happy," he stated simply, and he meant it. "In a way I've never been happy before."

"Merlin knows it's about time," Pansy remarked, rummaging through her purse and taking out a cigarette and her wand.

Draco watched her light up and take a long drag. "I hate that you do that."

"I know. I'm quitting. It's harder than you'd think, you know." She looked at the thin, white stick between her fingers. "I get these headaches, and want one, and when I smoke it, the headache goes away."

"It's called addiction, Pansy. Your body is chemically dependent on those things," Draco took the bill the waiter had inconspicuously placed on their table and started counting his half. "Your part is two Galleons."

She tossed the coins on the table and remained in her seat. "You and Granger. I never would have guessed."

"Me either. What about you and Mr. Fiji?" Draco asked.

Pansy frowned. "Who?"

He chuckled. "Never mind. I've got to go...meeting in twenty minutes."

"You work too much," Pansy scolded, putting her cigarette out on the ashtray. "Granger won't stand for it. She ... well, any woman, deserves better than that."

Draco shrugged on his cloak and helped Pansy into hers. "I'll keep that in mind, thank you."

"She'd better not hurt you."

"I know. You'll cause her physical pain. We've been over this."

Outside the café, Pansy stopped him and turned to face him. "I'm serious. I've never seen you like this. You're still you, of course, but it's as though there's a weight that's been lifted off your shoulders. You *are* happy, and if she's the reason, then I hope she continues to be the reason. I've watched you, too closely, for the past seven years. Year after year, you seemed to withdraw into yourself a little more, despite gaining knowledge and business prowess. When you thought no one was watching, I would see it."

He was touched by the genuine concern in her eyes and voice.

"Don't worry, most people wouldn't have noticed. You are a very good actor, Draco." Then she smiled, indicating that the serious part of the conversation was over. "Maybe you should consider trying out for one of those Muggle films."

"Thanks for that. If my need is ever dire, I will head directly to a casting agency."

"See you when I see you," she sing-songed. Then she smirked. "Have fun tomorrow night."

With those parting words, she kissed his cheek and left him standing in the street, in mental agony over the path his mind unabashedly wandered and the images it conjured.

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Hermione was in her classroom on Friday from eleven until noon, just as she had told her seventh-year students she would be. She didn't expect anyone to come to her with questions so early in the year, and so she was surprised when Evan Turner sat down in the seat across from her desk.

"Evan," she greeted, putting away the issue of *Witch Weekly* that contained the pictures from her dinner date with Draco. "How can I help you?"

He didn't look at her and scratched at something nonexistent on the desk. "I don't have a question about the assignment," he told her. "I ... I'm having trouble working with Sheetal."

"Oh!" Hermione tried to hide her surprise. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Our group has met twice since last Friday, and ... well The thing is, Professor, I kind of fancy her."

His voice was so low at this point that it took a moment for his words to sink in. "I see," she said, inwardly cheering that her observations had been correct. "I take it she doesn't reciprocate your feelings and is making things uncomfortable." Hermione didn't think a little roundabout prying would cause any harm. She had learned a thing or two from being the head of Slytherin House.

Panic flashed on Evan's face at Hermione's words. "No! I mean, I don't know. I ... haven't exactly asked."

"All right. Why are you having trouble working with her then?" she asked.

"Being around her ... it's a little ... distracting."

Hermione smiled in understanding. "I see. I'm sorry, Evan. I'm not going to change the groups around."

"No, no!" Evan said hastily. "I don't want to switch, I just thought you might be able to tell me what to do about it."

"Have you considered telling her how you feel?" Hermione asked.

"Um ... a little," he muttered.

"Why haven't you?"

"There are a few reasons," he admitted. "One being her house. But after your speech last week, that one doesn't seem so important anymore."

"In my experience, it's good to confess your feelings. Either way, you can move ahead instead of being stuck in the limbo of not knowing." Hermione folded her hands. "If she returns your feelings, you can move forward together; if not, you can see about moving on."

Evan pondered her words for a few minutes. "Hogsmeade is coming up in a few weeks."

"Oh, you're right. I had forgotten." The trip was scheduled for the third Saturday in October, and she had agreed to Blaise's suggestion about the Shrieking Shack. She'd have to discuss it with him again soon.

"Maybe I'll ask her to meet me for lunch," he said uncertainly.

"That's a good idea!" Hermione encouraged. "Lunch can lead to an afternoon stroll."

He looked terrified at the thought of spending so much time alone with Sheetal, but Hermione knew that once he got used to it, he would be glad he did.

"Thanks, Professor," Evan said, standing.

"You're very welcome," she said with a smile. "Have a good weekend!"

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At five minutes to seven that night, Hermione stood before her fireplace, going over the notes she had made that week about the various banks Bill had mentioned. She was nervous, and she found herself looking forward to seeing Draco again. However, she planned to go in with her guard up. She would think about Charlie and would only discuss the task at hand. Somehow, she had managed to convince herself that her plan to protect her heart would work.

At precisely seven, she stepped into the green flames after announcing her destination, "Draco's closet," as he had instructed.

He was sitting on the sofa, and he looked up from his book when she exited the fireplace. "Good evening," he greeted formally.

"Hi," she replied, her heart skipping upon taking him in.

"Dinner should be here soon," he said, closing the book and removing his reading glasses. "I told Chippy to deliver it around seven-thirty. If you'd like it sooner, that can be arranged."

"No, that's fine," she reassured, removing her cloak. "I hadn't expected dinner."

Draco frowned and took the garment from her. "I should have mentioned it. I apologize."

Good, she thought. He was behaving very professionally. It would help her in her resolve, though it did sting a bit. With a small smile, she said, "It's all right."

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked, going to a bar she hadn't noticed the last time.

"Water, for now, thank you."

While he prepared something for himself, she glanced around the closet-turned-room. It looked more ... cozy was the only word she could think of, though it didn't adequately describe it. He had added touches to make it appear lived in: paintings on the walls, drapes on the new windows, books on shelves. Hermione moved to sit on the sofa and noticed a small box on the coffee table, open, with cards organized by color. She smiled to herself and forgot all about her plan to think of Charlie.

"Here you are," said Draco, handing her a goblet of water. He sat on the other end of the sofa and nodded at the box. "That's my assignment. I hope it earns me an Outstanding."

She smiled and reached for the collection of all the people in Draco's life, personal and professional, but stopped short. "Before we start working, there's something I would like to get out of the way," she said, turning to face him.

"Go on," he said, taking a sip from his short glass.

"My ... parents want to meet you," she said in a rush. "I'm sorry, but this is supposed to look real, and I've told them about you, and they've invited you to breakfast some Saturday."

Draco nodded slowly, once. "All right."

"I see them every week for Saturday breakfast, and I'm very close with them."

"There's no need to apologize, Hermione. Their request shouldn't have come as a surprise." He paused. Merlin, he felt out of place around her! As though he was in someone else's skin, trying to pretend he was that other person. It had taken no small amount of reserve to not smile at her when he saw her.

"I'm afraid I don't have much...any, to be honest...experience with meeting the parents."

"That's fine, it's just breakfast. They know all about ... magic, and this world, but it makes them nervous. You can talk about it, but don't do magic around them."

"Understood." Draco finished his glass, refilled it halfway, and drank all of that. It reminded Hermione of what he had done on their lunch date in Hogsmeade, right before he asked if he could kiss her. "Breakfast with your parents. I can do that."

He stood then and started pacing. "I have ... a subject of my own I would like to get out of the way."

"Okay," she said warily.

"I had lunch with Pansy yesterday, and when she asked me what we would be doing tonight, I told her I wanted to invite you over and cook for you." His eyes met hers. "You know, as a cover, since we hadn't planned on going out anywhere."

"Right," Hermione said, her nerves on fire.

"She" He exhaled sharply and ran a hand through his hair. "She said that it was code for sex."

A jolt of adrenaline shot through her, leaving her slightly numb in its wake. "What?"

He pressed on, pacing quickly and not looking at her. "That inviting you here, like that, would, in most cases, lead to ... that. Now, I know this isn't real, but it got me thinking that, at some point, the issue would have to be addressed. I will respect your wishes in this matter, we'll go at your pace, and if you would prefer to go out tonight, it's fine with me."

She hadn't even thought about kissing until he brought it up, and this had been the farthest thing from her mind. Now that she was forced to think about it, however, she couldn't help but stare at him while he paced. He was wearing a pair of dark, fitted jeans and a black, button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to just below his elbows. She felt underdressed in a plain grey skirt and red cardigan.

Draco stopped behind the sofa and leaned down, gripping the back so hard his knuckles turned white. "If we don't go out, know that Pansy, at least, will assume"

Hermione swallowed hard. The very idea The room was suddenly too warm. "This ... issue was inevitable," she began, staring at her water but not drinking any, not wanting him to know how desperately she needed to cool down. "I think the sooner we put it past us, the better. We'll stay in."

His head whipped up, a stunned expression on his face. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said resolutely. "I'm certain."

"Okay," he said, releasing his death grip on the back of the sofa. "I'm glad that's settled."

"At least there won't be pictures," she muttered, thinking of the lengths to which someone had gone to get the shots of the two of them at dinner.

Draco's face turned red and his eyes went wide.

Hermione laughed. "Let's get to work before this gets awkward, shall we?"

"Don't you mean, more awkward?" he mumbled, coming around the sofa to sit once more.

"I suppose I do," she said, pulling her notes from her bag. He was right, though; the tension was thicker and more cumbersome. Hermione was eager to escape it so she began by telling him about her conversation with Bill.

When she finished, he pulled his box of cards closer. "I'm not sure what that accomplishes. The blackmailer probably didn't go to Gringotts with my money, if they ask too many questions. He probably went to one of those other banks, if he even went to a bank at all. Who knows, maybe he's stuck it all in a jar under his bed."

"You've been referring to the blackmailer as a he. Are there no women in that box?" she inquired, mostly teasing, but partly serious.

"There are. It's easier to say he all the time," he replied.

"Ah, makes sense." She smiled and then returned to her notes. "I looked into the other banks. All records are confidential, of course, but, for a fee, certain information can be ... obtained."

Draco sighed. "Because they are less than upstanding institutions."

Hermione nodded fervently. "I was amazed at the level of corruption. With very little effort on my part, I was offered a look at one bank's records from seven years ago, in exchange for a large fee."

"How large?" he asked.

"Draco! I don't want to do that," she reproved. "I want to puzzle this person out without breaking any laws."

He looked at her thoughtfully, held her gaze. "I don't care how we find him."

"If you want my help, you will care," she returned immediately, as though she had known what he would say before he said it.

Draco scowled. "This is my life in the balance, not yours. We will do things my way. I am willing to listen to alternatives, but if a man is willing to accept a bribe, then I am willing to pay."

"Two wrongs don't make a right, Malfoy."

"Yeah?" He was angry now. "Well he's the one blackmailing me. I want my life back, and there are very few things I am unwilling to do in order to achieve that end."

Hermione broke away from his eyes and stared at her notes. She saw his position, but wasn't sure if she could go along with it.

He spoke again before she could respond. "I appreciate you getting the information. What I do with it is no reflection on you."

"But if I know what you're going to do, and I don't try to stop you, I am as guilty as you are," she explained quietly.

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose and took several deep breaths. "We don't need to have this conversation right now. It might not come to bribes. Please continue with what you found."

Still troubled, she didn't respond immediately. "Though there are four of these banks in Switzerland, all of them require the proper documentation. I doubt the blackmailer would have gone there. That leaves five."

"Good," Draco said. "I will contact them this week, if you'll leave me the information."

She handed him the list. "That's all I was able to do this week."

"It's very helpful, thank you. I had inquired at the bank in Diagon Alley, but the goblins aren't too keen on sharing their procedures. I'm glad you had another contact."

Hermione smiled. "I'm sure Bill suspected my questions were related to you."

"Yeah? How?" he asked.

"It's common knowledge now that we're dating, and suddenly I'm inquiring about large bank accounts? Sounds a little suspicious."

Draco smiled then, and her heart jumped. "You're just using me for my money, is that it?"

"Oh dear, you've figured me out," she laughed. "Guess you'll be breaking up with me now."

"Maybe I'm using you," he said with a smirk. "For ... your" He faltered.

"My what?" she prodded. "Advice on hair care?"

Draco laughed, clutching his sides, and Hermione started laughing with him. She was amazed at how good-looking he was when he laughed or smiled, and enjoyed being the cause of it.

"It wasn't ... that funny," he gasped, trying to catch his breath. "I've been under so much stress lately, but you have helped to decrease it. Drastically. I haven't laughed like that in" His smile faded as he tried to remember feeling so free and light. He couldn't.

A loud *pop!* announced the arrival of Chippy. "Dinner is ready, Master," he squeaked.

Draco recovered himself. "Excellent. We'll be dining in here."

Chippy bowed low and disappeared.

Draco took out his wand and raised the coffee table to a more suitable height for dining, then Summoned two chairs from one corner of the room. The food appeared on the table as he and Hermione sat down. They ate in pensive silence for the first fifteen minutes.

Then Hermione spoke. "Where do we go from here?"

"I've been thinking about what happens after we find this person. Do you have access to Veritas serum at Hogwarts?" he asked.

"I'm not sure if Horace keeps any in stock. I'll ask him."

"If not, try Blaise," Draco suggested. "If memory serves, he likes to be prepared for all eventualities. If he doesn't have any, we should consider brewing it ourselves."

"I can start tomorrow, if you'd like," she offered. "I'll pick up the ingredients I don't have at the Apothecary."

"No, I'll brew it here. I don't want there to be any chance that it be tainted by whoever might come across it at the school." He looked around the room. "That corner there should be adequate. We can keep an eye on it that way. I should have all the ingredients here already, so there's no need to make a trip to Diagon Alley."

Hermione nodded. "I'm trying to think of what I can do over the next week."

Draco shrugged. "Something might come up when we go over the cards I made. If not, that's all right."

"I can contact some of those banks for you," she offered.

He stared at her a long moment, as if he was deciding, then he blinked and looked away, his jaw flexing. "We'll see."

After dinner, Draco showed her every card he had made and said something about each person. The green cards were people he didn't suspect, but he had done as she had asked and made a card for everyone he could think of. The stack included Greg and his parents.

"What, I don't get a card?" Hermione joked.

"I think I've ruled you out," he said, smiling sideways at her. "You aren't likely to use Dark Magic, like the curse put on the letters."

"Ah. That's true."

The tan cards were people he didn't think had the resources to pull off the blackmail so spectacularly for so many years.

"Eventually, they would make a mistake," he argued. "They can't be ruled out, but I don't think it's them."

Yellow cards were dedicated to those Draco didn't know as well, including business associates, or people with whom he was barely acquainted. Finally, light grey cards contained the names of people he thought most likely to be the blackmailer. The set included any witch or wizard who had, at some point, used the Dark Arts on a regular basis and anyone who had a strong reason to dislike Draco or his family.

"The thing is," he said in frustration. "If I think long enough, I can convince myself that anyone is capable, and has enough motive, to want to hurt me. However, I'm almost certain that the spell he used limits the field to the grey set of cards."

Hermione flipped through the stack and saw a lot of familiar names. Rabastan and Rodolphus LeStrange, Theodore Nott and his parents, Bradford and Athena Nott, Gregory Goyle's father, Joel, Blaise Zabini and his mother, even Pansy and her mother, Hyacinth. It had to have been the hardest list to compile, second-guessing the people he knew best: his friends and family.

"Do you have a gut feeling?" she asked him quietly.

Draco peered at her through his fringe. "Over the years, I have suspected a lot of people. It did me no good, only made me anxious and even less trusting than I am now. I started to see the blackmailer in everyone I came in contact with, so I forced myself to stop looking for him in people's eyes, faces, and words." He sighed. "No, no gut feeling."

"I can't believe Pansy is on a grey card," Hermione said, reading through the information Draco had written.

"She's been in love with me for years. A few months ago, she came to me with a proposition. Marry her, and I would gain control over the Parkinson estate. Suspicion ran rampant through my mind. Had she been blackmailing all these years, biding her time until she knew my situation was desperate, and then making me an offer that would alleviate the strain?"

"I see." Hermione stared at the card, a ripple of jealousy passing through her. "She's in love with you. You had lunch with her yesterday."

Draco turned his head to look at her reading Pansy's card. Had her tone contained jealousy? Could it possibly have caused the slight hitch to her voice he had heard? Surely not!

She felt him staring, and when their eyes met, he had a very strange expression on his face. "What?" she asked.

When he spoke, his voice was equally strange. "Pansy is an old friend."

"I know," Hermione said, going to the next card.

He decided he must have heard wrong. "I can't believe how long we've been sitting here," he said as she read.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Eleven-thirty." Draco stood to stretch his legs. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"Do you have butterbeer?" she asked, glancing up.

"Sure." He handed her a bottle as he started to walk slow circles around the room, his expression pensive.

It took Hermione ten more minutes to finish the cards. She yawned as she returned the grey set to the box. "Wow. I'm tired. I should get going."

Draco returned to the sofa and took the box off the table, placing it on a bookshelf. "I'll contact the banks early in the week and hopefully learn something."

Hermione stood and gathered her things. "I think I'll have a look at that spell, see if anything jumps out at me."

"Here." He pulled a book off the shelf. "I found it on page 427. It's a starting point."

"Thanks." She smiled as she accepted it.

Draco walked with her to the large fireplace.

Hermione clutched a handful of Floo powder, but paused before throwing it into the crackling flames. "I'd like to ... settle one more thing."

"Sure," he said, leaning against the wall.

"So we, um, slept together tonight."

Confusion, desire, amusement and understanding flashed through his eyes. "I ... reckon we did," he said, chuckling lightly and scratching his head.

"Was it ... good?" she asked.

"Course," he exclaimed promptly, as though offended at the suggestion it could be anything but. "Bloody fantastic. We both were."

Hermione smiled. "I thought so. What did we have for dinner?"

"The only thing I know how to prepare: fettuccine alfredo. It's quite good, I assure you."

"Sounds delicious," she said.

"Maybe I'll actually cook it some time."

"That sounds nice. Night, Draco."

"Good night, Hermione."

She hesitated again before engaging the Floo Network.

He answered her unspoken question. "We went one round...amazing...you stayed the night, but left in the morning to go back to Hogwarts in time to meet your parents for breakfast."

This time, her smile made his breath hitch.

"Lovely. See you soon, Draco." She released the handful of powder, stepped into the flames and announced her destination, then disappeared.

ooo

A/N: Thanks for reading! Beta thanks go to Manda, pokeystar, & drcjsnider. Artwork for this chapter was done by melia_eothria. Music is thanks to inadaze22. :)

What the Heart Wants

Chapter 12 of 16

Draco gets another letter, and Hermione gets a surprising Floo-call

Chapter 12 - - What the Heart Wants

- - -



Draco arrived at his office one hour earlier than his usual eight o'clock. He wanted to get a head start on his day in order to leave time to contact the banks on the list Hermione had given him. He brewed himself a cup of coffee while he read his mail with his feet propped up on his personal assistant's desk.

Caleb wasn't due until seven-thirty, at which time he would normally start a pot of coffee, sort the mail, order Draco's favorite pastry, and start his fire.

Draco finished the mail and retreated to his office before anyone else arrived. He rearranged his morning schedule and sent notices to anyone who would be affected. At promptly nine, he shut himself in the office with strict instructions to Caleb that he not be disturbed, no matter what.

The bank in Paris was already open, but Draco hadn't wanted to seem too eager by Flooing first thing. At five after nine, ten-oh-five in Paris, Draco initiated the Floo network, and requested to speak with the manager of Banque de Français de Magique, in Paris, France.

A sharp, edgy man appeared after a few minutes.

"Bonjour," Draco began. "Parlez-vous Anglais?"

"Oui," the man said.

"I would like to speak to the manager of the bank, Christophe Peronnet."

"I am Christophe." The man sounded bored and didn't appear to have recognized Draco.

"I am interested in obtaining information from you."

Peronnet's expression became interested. "One moment," he said. "Let me secure zis line." He disappeared from view and Draco saw the connection shimmer. "Is better. Information, you say. Is not easy to obtain."

"I will be as specific as possible," Draco said. "I want a list of the names of every person who has made a deposit of greater than fifty thousand Galleons over the last seven years."

Peronnet's eyes widened, and Draco imagined that he was tallying the cost in his head.

"Zis is asking much," Peronnet said with a frown. "Why do you seek zhesse names?"

Draco frowned in disapproval. "It was my understanding that people come to you when they don't want to answer a long list of questions."

The Frenchman nodded slowly. "Understood. You just want the names? No numbers, or balances?"

"Just the number of deposits. I don't need exact figures. If ... Arthur Weasley deposited fifty thousand Galleons to your bank three times, that is all the information I want."

Peronnet thought for a moment, and Draco saw a manipulative glint in his eyes when he spoke again. "I can have this for you in three weeks for one hundred Galleons."

Draco didn't even blink. "How much to get the information tomorrow?"

"Five hundred," the man responded, also without pause.

"Done. If the information isn't ready twenty-four hours from now, you won't get the full amount. Every hour it is late, I deduct one hundred Galleons."

"That won't be a problem," Peronnet assured him.

"Good. I will come through tomorrow after you open to collect the documents."

Peronnet agreed and Draco severed the connection. He felt a mixture of satisfaction and guilt, the latter due to Hermione's insistence that he not resort to bribes. However, all he wanted was names and frequencies. Nothing useful could be done with the information, so there would be no harm to anyone except the blackmailer, should Draco catch him this way.

He downed his third cup of coffee that morning and went to the next bank on his list.

ooo

Tuesday morning, as Hermione sat talking with Harry, she received a letter. She stared at the enormous, majestic owl that had borne the missive, hesitant to try and remove the note tied carefully to its right leg.

Harry chuckled. "I think Malfoy's trying to compensate for something."

Hermione scowled and hastily untied the twine, freeing the letter. The eagle nipped playfully at her finger and then took off, the force rattling the flatware on the table.

"Are you going to open it?" Harry asked.

She stared at the stiff, white envelope in her hand. Her name was scrawled on the face in what she had come to recognize as Draco's handwriting. For some reason, her heart started beating a little harder.

"No," she finally said, despite wanting to rip into the pretty paper. Draco might have mentioned something about their task, and she didn't want to have to lie to Harry. Of course, she also didn't want Harry around to see her reaction, whatever it might be.

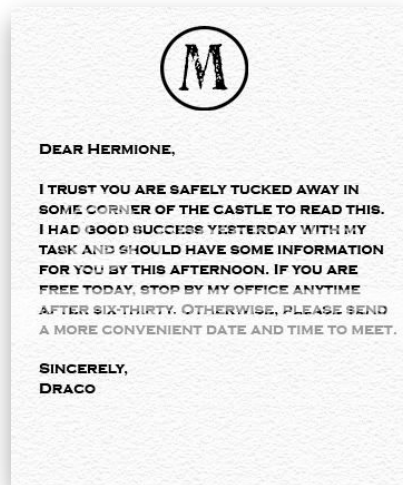
"How personal can it be?" Harry asked, finishing his last piece of toast. "He sent it via the school mail system. He had to know you'd get it in here."

Hermione stood and pushed in her chair. "Regardless, I'll see you at lunch, Harry."

She walked as quickly through the Hall as she could without running or appearing to be in a hurry. As soon as she was in a corridor with no one around, she rushed into the nearest empty room, locked the door, and went to the window seat. She stared at her name on the envelope for a few seconds, then berated herself for behaving like a schoolgirl with her first crush.

Then she brought the envelope to her nose and inhaled, a slow smile creeping across her face at the familiar aroma of Hawthorne Inks. Then she carefully removed the seal...a silver crane...releasing the card. It, too, was made of stiff, white parchment, a stark "M" printed in black on the front.

Hermione counted to three and opened the card.



Hermione's heart fell as she read, and she felt ridiculous for being so excited about receiving the unexciting note. What had she really expected?

In addition, it sounded as though he had gone against her wishes and contacted the banks for more information. She was even more disappointed and tossed the card on the floor in anger. Again, she asked herself if she expected any different. The honest truth was, yes! She had seen such a wonderful, generous side to Draco in the time she'd spent with him, but she had to again remind herself that those events had been faked. She had no idea which side was truly him, though she suspected it was the side that had deliberately ignored her wishes.

She got up, picked up the letter, and stuffed it unceremoniously back into the envelope. As she walked to her classroom before the first period of the day, her mind drifted to the Friday night before. He had expressed no remorse at the thought of bribing these banks for information, and she wondered about it. What would she have done in his place, considering everything he had been through in the last seven years?

By the time she reached her room, Hermione had convinced herself not to judge him so harshly next time. She couldn't approve of him paying bribes, but then she couldn't condemn him for it either.

ooo



Tuesdays were one of Hermione's favorite weekdays because she and Ginny had a standing lunch date in Diagon Alley.

When Hermione arrived at their usual table, Ginny was flipping through the week's issue of *Witch Weekly*, a slight frown on her face. "Hi, Ginny," she said, taking the empty seat.

"Well, I must admit, it was nice being able to read about your love life in this publication, and in the gossip section of the newspaper...since I don't get to see you often enough...but there's been nothing printed this week." Ginny set the magazine aside. "Everything okay?"

"Oh! Yes, just fine," said Hermione, smiling confidently. "Draco and I didn't go out last weekend, or all of last week, so I guess there was nothing new to report."

Ginny eyed her friend suspiciously. "You saw him three times in one week, and now it's been nearly two? That doesn't make sense."

"I saw him Friday," Hermione said, feigning interest in the menu that Ginny knew she knew by heart. "We just didn't go out."

"Yeah?" Ginny asked excitedly, reaching over to lower the menu so she could look Hermione in the face. "What did you do?"

"He had me over to his house," Hermione responded lightly, as though it was an ordinary occasion that didn't even merit mentioning. "He cooked," she added, almost as an afterthought.

Ginny's eyes widened and her lips parted in surprise. "Hecooked?" she repeated, incredulous. Then she smiled wickedly. "How was it?"

"Delicious," she replied, avoiding Ginny's prying eyes. It was strange, trying to act falsely innocent of something she hadn't really done. Unlike all previous topics, such as what she thought about Draco, or did she like him, this was one she couldn't answer truthfully.

"Not the food, you ninny," Ginny scolded. "You know what I mean, I know you do! You slept with him!"

"Shh!" Hermione hissed, blushing. "It's not something I want broadcasted, you know."

Ginny was grinning now, and she leaned in closer to Hermione. Her voice was low when she spoke. "I demand details! You owe me you know, for those shoes. What was it like? Was he amazing? I've heard he's very talented, that he has a few ... signature moves."

If possible, Hermione's face turned redder. "Ginny! This isn't exactly something I want to dissect. It happened, it was amazing, let's have lunch."

"Oh, no," said Ginny forcefully. "You won't let me talk about Harry, and it's been ages since you've slept with someone who isn't my brother. We are talking about this, in detail. I want to know everything, and I won't accept anything less."

"I'm sorry, you'll have to be disappointed then. I'm not ready to discuss it ad nauseum." Hermione didn't want to make up a host of details she would have to remember later, in case the conversation came up again. "It was ... amazing. That's all you get right now. Let me enjoy it for a while before I have to spill, all right?"

Ginny pouted. "Fine. But you will share; I'll make sure of it."

"If you say so," Hermione agreed lightly, content to worry about the rest later. Who knew? Maybe they would discover the blackmailer and break up before the subject could be broached again. This thought, however, left her feeling unsettled.

ooo

At three minutes before six-thirty, Hermione arrived in the wizarding business section of London, just outside the building which housed, among others, Draco's offices.

The lift told her that Malfoy, Inc. could be found on the seventeenth floor, and she pressed the appropriate button. When the doors opened, she stepped into a small, oval-shaped reception area. A large desk sat in the back left of the room, and ten chairs filled the space to the right. There was a door just behind the desk, and a bright hallway with one wall all windows to its left. Above the desk, where a young man with wavy, dark brown hair sat, "Malfoy, Inc." was spelled out in large, 3-D letters.

The man looked up. "May I help you?"

Hermione walked to the desk. "Yes, I would like to see Mr. Malfoy ... Caleb," she said, locating a name plate on the counter before her. "I believe he is expecting me."

Caleb's smile was a tired one. "Of course, Miss Granger. It's good to finally meet you. I'm Mr. Malfoy's personal assistant, Caleb Matthews."

He extended his hand and Hermione shook it. "Nice to meet you, as well," she said, inwardly shocked that Draco didn't have a woman in the front position of his office. She had expected to be greeted by a buxom, long-legged, gorgeous witch who couldn't count past twenty. Again, she had made an assumption about him that had been utterly wrong.

"His office is the last one down the hall, straight ahead. I'll let him know you're here," said Caleb.

"Thank you." Hermione started down the hall, admiring the view from the large picture windows. On the walls opposite the windows were pictures, generic corporate images that she had seen on the walls of lawyers and doctors offices. She passed eight doors with various name plates, all closed on dark rooms, before reaching the last one, which was open.

She knocked on the door frame anyway.

"Come in." Draco's voice was low.

The office was dark, with most of the shades drawn. A low fire crackled in the fireplace, causing shadows to dance on the walls. Hermione didn't see Draco right away, and she paused after taking a few steps inside, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark. She found him in a chair facing the fireplace.

"Um, hi," she said tentatively, taking a seat in the chair beside his.

"Hello." He still didn't look at her. "Thank you for coming."

"It was no problem. I can't stay long though, I've got a staff meeting tonight after dinner, and I can't be late."

He nodded slowly, not taking his eyes from the fire. "I have information for you. I contacted the banks yesterday and they were reasonable. I asked only for names and transaction frequencies, nothing that might possibly be useful to anyone, should the information fall into nefarious hands." The right corner of his lips turned up in what might have been a smile.

"Oh," she said, oddly pleased that he had thought of her concerns while conducting his business. "Was anything useful?"

He shrugged and brought a drink to his mouth, polishing off the last of the amber contents. "I haven't had the time to look at it. I thought you wanted to do that."

Finally, then, he looked at her, and even in the poor lighting, Hermione saw that he looked exhausted.

"How ... how have you been sleeping?" she asked.

Draco lifted one eyebrow in amusement. "Are you concerned about my well-being?"

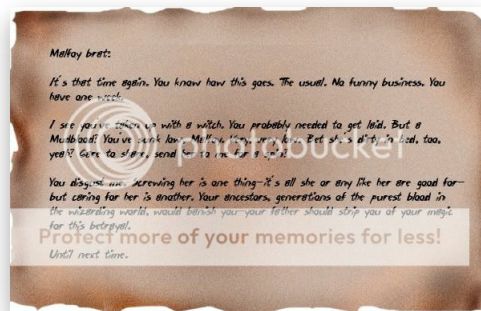
"Are you drunk?" she accused with a disapproving glare. On the table beside his chair sat a mostly empty bottle containing the same amber liquid that had been in his cup.

"I sure hope so," he hummed, turning away from her.

Hermione was about to scold him for wasting their time when he extended his arm toward her, a sheet of parchment in his hand.

"I got this today."

She took the note and opened it.



Hermione stared at the hateful words, reading through a second time.

"Care for a drink?" Draco asked, offering her the bottle he had used to refill his glass.

"No Is this why you're drinking? This letter?" she asked, surprised.

His return expression was incredulous. "How can you even ask that? It's bloody terrible. Disgusting" He trailed off, scowling into his newly filled glass, and drank half of its contents.

"I agree with you, but it's nothing I haven't heard before."

"Really?" he said. "That's awful."

"I think we can use it, actually. Learn more about the blackmailer through it." She bit her lip, reading it again.

"I don't ... What can we possibly learn?" Draco stood and pushed his chair dramatically until it collided with hers, then threw himself into it once more and leaned over to glare at the letter in her hand, as though he could intimidate it into giving up its secrets.

She found his slightly drunken antics amusing. "I would almost certainly say that the blackmailer is a man. Though, from the words alone, that cannot be determined. It's more the tone, I think. Surely, we can rule out a few people, at least."

Draco stared at the letter as though seeing it for the first time. "I know Pansy didn't write that. She doesn't drift to that side of the boat."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh, and he smiled widely at her. "Is there anyone else we can cross off? Anyone who doesn't share these blood superiority beliefs?"

"We'll have to look at the cards," Draco said, frowning as he tried to focus on the letter. "I don't know otherwise. I'm sure a lot of people I work with, though I don't know how many of them, are grey cards."

"That doesn't matter. It's important to rule out as many people as we can."

Draco sighed and finished the last of his drink. "I would never do that, you know. Use you that way. I don't ... don't think like that."

"I know," she said quietly.

"There are very few people I know who are that depraved."

"Maybe this can be a good thing," she said, folding the letter and returning it to him. "If this bloke gets so upset at you over me, maybe he'll make a mistake and slip something into a letter that will expose him."

"Hmm," he said, absently taking the letter and tucking in his robes.

A few minutes passed in strangely comfortable silence. "Where is the bank information?" she asked finally when it appeared Draco had nothing to say.

Draco stood, slowly walked to his desk, and pulled a folder from the top right drawer. "Here," he said, handing it to her. "The bank in Finland wasn't in business seven years ago, so chances are, the blackmailer didn't use that one. But you never know."

"What do you want me to do with all of this?" she asked, flipping through the information.

"I" He frowned, then shook his head in frustration. "I'm not thinking today! The cards are at my house; you don't have them." He held out his hand. "I'll take that. Maybe I'll have time this week to look through them."

Hermione nearly gave the folder back to him, but the way his voice strained and the hint of helplessness that flashed through his eyes made her pull it back. "I'll do it. I'll get the cards tonight, or you can bring them to me."

He hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"I've got a light week ahead. I'm positive."

"All right," Draco reluctantly agreed. Then he smiled, feeling the pressure ease slightly from his shoulders. "Thank you."

"You are welcome," she said, returning his smile. "I should be going. I'll be rushing through dinner as it is. I'll be in touch about all of this."

"Friday, right?" he said, walking her to the door.

"Yes. Friday. Bye, Draco."

ooo

Wednesdays were Hermione's busiest days. She had classes from eight in the morning until lunch, then for two more hours in the afternoon. Between lunch and her last class, she usually stopped in her quarters to grab her notes, then she sought a quiet corner of the library in which to read an article or two from the most recent journal she had received.

Just as Hermione remembered to grab an extra bottle of ink, as the one in her bag was almost empty, a chime indicated that someone was calling her through the Floo. She expected to see Draco's face when she answered, but was surprised to see Charlie grinning roguishly at her through the green flames.

"Hello, Hermione!" he said pleasantly.

"Oh! Charlie! Hi!" She set her things on her bed and knelt at the fireplace. "How are you? This ... is unexpected."

"I know, and I'm sorry about that," he said. "I need a favor."

"Sure." All thoughts of Draco had evaporated from her mind as she looked upon the face of the last man she had been in love with. On some days, she still was.

"Friday night, there's this ... thing. I need a date. I had one, but she cancelled on me."

"What time?" she asked without hesitation.

He grinned, a stray lock of hair falling into his eyes. Charlie jerked his head in an attempt to move it, but it fell back. "Can you be here at six?"

Hermione reached over and drew the strand away from his face. "Absolutely."

"You're a lifesaver. It's formal. Do you still have that purple dress?" he asked.

"I do," she replied, feeling caught up as though in a whirlwind.

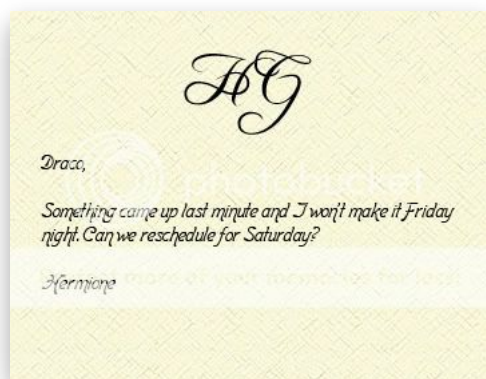
"Perfect. Six, Friday. My place." He winked. "Miss you, Hermione."

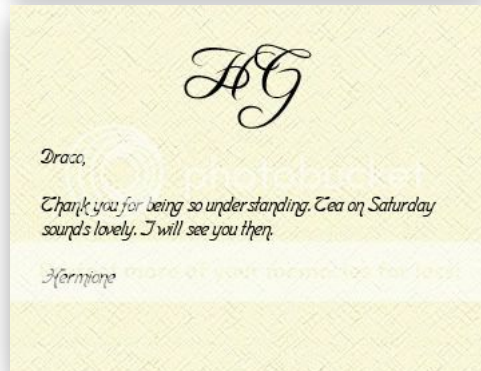
"You too," she replied automatically, smiling. "Bye!"

He grinned and then he was gone.

Hermione stared into the flames, and all of the things she should have considered during her conversation with Charlie flooded her all at once. She was supposed to see Draco Friday night, but he probably wouldn't mind rescheduling for Saturday.

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ooo

Friday evening at nine, Greg Goyle arrived at Malfoy Manor. Draco met him at the door, and together they traveled by Floo Network to the *Leaky Cauldron*. From there, they headed to a pub in Muggle London, one Draco had visited in the course of his work.

The place was smoky and dark, but Draco nodded in satisfaction. It was perfect for his purposes that evening: spend time with a friend, play a bit of billiards, and slowly but surely get hammered.

"So," said Greg, two hours and many drinks later with a goofy grin on his face.

Draco was hunched over, lining up his next shot. He waited for his friend to continue, and when he didn't, Draco aimed, pulled back on the cue, and took his shot. He missed the pocket. He wasn't very good at billiards, but it relaxed him in a way nothing else could because he didn't care about winning.

"So, what?" he said, standing his cue on end and leaning against a large wooden pillar.

"You and Granger," Greg said as he took his turn. "Never would've seen that one coming."

Draco chuckled. "No, certainly not."

"Anyway, where is she? How come you're out with me and not getting cozy with her?" Greg sunk his shot; he wasn't half-bad.

"She had other plans tonight," Draco replied, searching for his glass. He frowned when he found it empty.

"Yeah?" Greg took aim for his second shot. "Doing what?"

Draco shrugged and signaled for one of the mingling bar maids. "She didn't say."

The woman whose attention he had garnered swayed toward them, her every move designed to encourage the men in the pub to increase their tips. "What'll it be, love," she purred, her eyes taking him in appreciatively.

"Another pitcher of Guinness, please," he replied, handing her a large enough note.

She stuffed it into her cleavage and winked. "Coming right up."

"Why is it that women are always interested in you, Draco?" Greg asked, staring at the remains of his last beer. "You attract them like ... like flies."

"That's a wonderful image," mumbled Draco. "I have found that acting like you don't care about the women around you, like you aren't interested, works particularly well. Of course, even when it's not an act, the result is the same."

"Didn't you ask what she was doing tonight?" Greg asked.

Draco got set to take his next shot. "No. It didn't matter; she was unavailable."

"Yeah, but ... that seems so unlike you," said Greg. "Not to want to know, I mean. You two have only been dating a short time, aren't you worried that ... I dunno, maybe she's ..."

Draco straightened after missing the shot. He hadn't even considered what Hermione might be doing that night. A hint of curiosity formed inside him as he thought about Greg's comments, even though they weren't really dating and only got together now in order to work on the task of investigating the blackmailer. Not only was it none of his business, but he had no right to ask what she was doing, or to care. Greg couldn't know that, however.

"She has her own life. I would gain nothing by demanding she tell me what she's doing when we aren't together. It's Granger. She would never stand for it, and I'd end up with my bits hexed."

The tall, blonde bar maid returned with the pitcher of beer and Draco's change, which she slipped into his hand along with a series of ten numbers written on a scrap of paper. She was gone when Draco grasped their significance, and he crumbled the paper into a ball and stuffed it into his pocket.

Greg smiled nonchalantly. "Speaking of your bits, I heard you slept with her."

Draco frowned. He knew he hadn't told anyone, and only a few people knew their cover story, that Hermione had gone to his house and he had prepared a meal for her. None of those people ran in the same circles, and only two even knew Greg.

"Where did you hear that?" Draco asked curiously.

Greg shrugged and focused on his turn. "Just, around. People talking."

Draco doubted that, but didn't press the matter.

"Is it true?" Greg asked after sinking another ball.

"You know I don't make a habit of discussing these things," he replied. It would be dangerous for him to think too much on the topic; he certainly couldn't dwell on it for any period of time.

"I'm not asking for a blow by blow," Greg said, enjoying his innuendo. "Just ... you know ... did you shag her? She's different than the others."

Draco sighed, his mind beginning to wander. "That's an understatement."

"So, you did?" Greg pressed.

"Yes, Greg. Merlin, since when did you become so interested?" Draco snapped, snatching his cue and walking around the table.

"Since when do you not want to admit when you've slept with someone?" Greg returned.

Draco clenched his jaw, trying to ignore his friend's comment. It was true; he normally didn't hesitate to mention his conquests. He never went into detail, but affirmation was readily provided. This time, he made his shot and then looked at Greg. "This is different, as you said."

"Right. You're in a relationship."

The conversation reminded him too much of the one he had shared with Pansy the week before, and he hadn't enjoyed it then, either. Draco took careful aim and knocked his ball into the black, eight-ball, sending it flying across the table into a side pocket.

"Crap," he muttered. "You win again. Let's take a break."

ooo

"Here to present the award for Outstanding Terrestrial Integration is the head of the International Coalition for the Advancement of Dragon Research, Mister Xavier Montague."

Hermione clapped politely along with the rest of the room from her table near the front. She felt Charlie shift beside her, and when she glanced at him, she saw a line of sweat beading at his hairline. She frowned. It was next to impossible to make Charlie nervous, much less slightly uncomfortable. The temperature was pleasant, so she didn't think he was too hot

A strapping man walked to the podium, grinning broadly. The applause faded and he began speaking. "Every four years, this prestigious award goes to one member of our community who has proven him or herself to be concerned with the care of the world around us. Great care is taken in selecting this individual, as he or she gains an enormous responsibility for the coming four years."

Montague cleared his throat, and Hermione could tell the speech would be a long one. Charlie was fidgeting more than she had ever seen him do, and she hoped the night would be over soon so she could ask him what the problem was.

She looked around the table full of Charlie's coworkers to see if anyone else was suffering from whatever had gripped Charlie, but they were all paying attention to the speaker. Charlie's boss kept casting a glance in his direction, but didn't seem to notice Charlie's agitation.

Hermione reached across the table for Charlie's hand, and when he wrapped his large fingers around hers, his hand felt clammy. Still, he gripped her hand as though it was a life-line, the only thing keeping him above a raging sea. Around them, cameras flashed, just as they had been all night, much to her annoyance. Why did people have to be so bloody interested in her all the time? Charlie was also quite famous in Romania, and so combined, they were drawing a number of looks.

Soon Hermione lost the feeling in her hand, but she didn't dare withdraw it. The speaker had moved from the history of the award to describing the man who would be receiving it that night.

"... Not only has he expanded Romania's earth-friendly Dragon Policies, he has discovered a way to reduce damaging smoke emissions by 25% through the careful manipulation of dragon feed."

Montague turned and beamed in the direction of Hermione's table. "It is with great pleasure that the International Coalition for the Advancement of Dragon Research presents this award, for Outstanding Terrestrial Integration, to Mr. Charles Weasley."

The crowd erupted in the loudest applause of the evening. Charlie squeezed her hand and then released it, leaving his seat beside her and walking purposefully to the podium. Hermione stared at Xavier Montague as he joined with the crowd in praise and then clapped Charlie on the back before returning to his seat.

Charlie cleared his throat and pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket. "Thank you, Mr. Montague, distinguished members of the International Board, honored guests." His eyes landed on Hermione then, and he gave her a strained smile.

It was then her brain was jump-started back into action. She stared at Charlie, incredulous that he had invited her to accompany him to "this thing," he had said earlier in a dismissive tone, without letting her know that he was the guest of honor.

Her indignation was short-lived, however, soon replaced with fierce pride. She knew how hard he had worked over the last four years, his efforts focused on improving the lives of the dragons in his care and the conditions in which they lived. He truly deserved this award.

Hermione glanced around the room. Where were his parents? His family? Surely they knew what their son had done, the incredible achievements he had made, and would want to support him on this momentous night!

She didn't see anyone, but then the room was very dark.

"Finally," said Charlie, grinning now that his speech was near its end, "I'd like to thank my family..."

A great whooping cheer went up, and Hermione knew it was George.

Charlie chuckled. "...my family, who has always been there for me, even through impossible times."

Hermione swallowed hard, knowing he referred to their relationship.

"Last, but certainly not least, my most ardent supporter and dearest friend." His eyes fell blazingly on her. "Without you, without your encouragement, your passionate defense of all magical creatures, I wouldn't be here."

Cameras flashed all around them, and Hermione found she was having trouble breathing. Time seemed to stop as they stared at one another, as stars seemed to explode around her.

When he tore his gaze away, time resumed its normal course. The moment had passed and in its wake, Hermione felt empty, cold. Charlie's words were bouncing around in her mind, ricocheting off the walls of her skull, until they were an indistinguishable mass of noise.

Charlie returned to his seat and the cameras went off again. Hermione smiled at him, but it was only pieces of what it had once been. Something was missing; she could feel it in her bones.

After the ceremony concluded, Charlie was bombarded with people congratulating him. Hermione moved away and was soon joined by Harry, Ron and Ginny.

"Didn't expect to see you here," Ron said, his voice strained.

"It was a last minute thing," she responded, trying to sound light-hearted. "He got ditched a few days ago, and, well, I'm the back-up friend."

Ginny was eyeing her so intensely that Hermione couldn't look at her, so she turned to Ron. "I'm so glad your family was here. This is a huge night for Charlie! I had no idea he was getting this award until Montague called his name!"

"Really?" Harry asked. "Charlie didn't tell you?"

"No. But you know him, doesn't like to make a big deal of things."

"Does Malfoy know you're here?" Ron asked accusingly.

Hermione, Ginny and Harry all looked at Ron in surprise. "There isn't anything to tell," Hermione said defensively. She couldn't fathom why Ron would be suddenly concerned about Draco's thoughts on her going somewhere with Charlie. It was almost as if Ron was worried about Draco getting hurt, which made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

The rest of the Weasleys joined them, all chattering at once. Molly, especially, was beside herself with pride. They had all spoken to Charlie now, and he had told them to leave, that the rest would be boring brown-nosing and schmoozing and he appreciated them coming.

It was another hour before Charlie and Hermione could leave. She hadn't been able to speak with him since the evening began and was anxious for the chance to both scold and congratulate him.

Once they were outside the main dining room, well away from cameras and reporters, Charlie let out a long, slow breath, leaning heavily against the wall. "Phew! Glad that's over!"

"Charlie Weasley," Hermione started, crossing her arms over her chest. "I am very angry with you for not telling me that this evening was for you! I was the only person in that room who was surprised...and what a surprise it was!" She beamed at him, relaxing her arms. "I cannot begin to tell you how proud I am!"

He grinned sheepishly and pushed himself off the wall. "I didn't want to tell you, for some reason." He grabbed one of her hands, and they started walking down the hall. "I was going to, I promise, but then my date cancelled and you said you'd come with me, and suddenly it was too hard. I took the easy way out."

"I suppose I can forgive you," she said.

Charlie turned down another hallway and stopped outside a door. "The ... Coalition got me a room here tonight," he said, pulling an old-fashioned key out of his pocket and using it to open the door.

"Yeah?" Hermione asked, following him in. "This is one of the nicest hotels in wizarding Romania, isn't it?"

"Exactly," he said, crossing the room and pulling a bottle of champagne from a bucket of ice.

Hermione's nerves were on fire, pulsing rapidly, almost painfully. She bit her lip as Charlie poured two glasses. He handed one to her and they tapped them together. He took a sip and set his glass down.

She held onto hers, not sure if it would be a good idea to drink the entire thing, or none at all. There were pros and cons for both courses of action.

Charlie moved around the room, examining the luxurious features like a kid who had been given a handful of Galleons and released in a toy shop.

When he disappeared into another part of the suite, Hermione downed her drink and went to look out the window. Her hands were shaking as she parted the sheers and she pressed her cheek to the window, enjoying the feel of the cold air outside.

Before she knew it, Charlie had returned. He had removed his dress robes, tie, and unbuttoned his shirt. "More?" he asked, refilling her glass.

"No, thank you," she said, stepping away from the window. Her eyes darted to the door and part of her felt a strong and foreign desire to run for it.

"I meant what I said." He moved closer, sipping from his glass. "About you being so important to me. To my life."

"You said all of that?" she joked weakly.

Charlie smiled and for a brief instant, they stared at each other, his green eyes intense and full of life and desire. Then he put down the glass in his hand and closed the distance between them, wrapping his strong arm around her waist and pulling her to him.

She gasped as his lips crashed onto hers and he kissed her passionately. He wasn't gentle, but he was careful; he was demanding, but not unyielding. He slipped his tongue through her lips and she sighed, lost the moment she had looked into his eyes.

Charlie reached his free hand to her hair and removed the spell that kept it locked in its perfectly sculpted style. He then threaded his fingers through the thick curls, gripping the hair at the back of her head.

Then his hands began exploring, tracing a familiar route over her body. When his lips left hers to trail down her neck, a single thought broke through the haze that had clouded over her brain, and she stiffened, her eyes flying open.

"Oh!" she breathed.

Charlie stopped and pulled back, his expression confused. "What?" he asked.

Hermione took a small step away and he let her, his frown deepening.

"Hermione, what ... are you ...?"

"It's fine," she said, not sure what question she was answering. Her senses were returning quickly, and it occurred to her why she had wanted to run for the door just moments before. "I ... I can't do this. I'm so sorry!" she whispered, horrified at herself for reasons she couldn't sort out just then.

His jaw tightened. "All right," he said slowly. "It's okay, we ... we don't have to."

Hermione sank into the nearest chair.

Charlie moved to sit on the bed, facing her, waiting.

"I ... I'm seeing someone," she said, tears pricking her eyes.

He hadn't expected that and his eyes widened. "You are? Oh. I see."

"I'm sorry, Charlie."

"Right, then ... What are you doing here? Why did you agree to see me tonight?" he asked.

"You needed me," she answered immediately.

Charlie let out a sigh and shook his head. "Hermione. You know how these things end, how they always end."

She shrugged, feeling ridiculous and foolish. "I ... I didn't really think about that."

"Still, I think you should ask yourself why you kissed me that way, when you're with another man." Charlie chuckled, peering at her through his fringe.

Hermione almost laughed; instead, she smiled. Her thoughts were so jumbled, so confused, that she had no hope of trying to disentangle them until she had time to focus, to think. She couldn't work out what she felt. The thought that had jolted her back into reality had been about Draco; she had thought about him while kissing Charlie. That much she knew.

It was a good thing, too, that Draco had crossed her mind. She shouldn't be sleeping with Charlie when she was supposedly dating Draco. For one thing, Charlie would eventually find out, if he hadn't already, and she couldn't explain the full truth to him because of her promise to Draco.

"It's ... complicated," she said, shrugging. "Impossible. Kissing you was a reaction, it's familiar, and it's natural. We've been like this for years, and I'm not used to being serious with someone." Hermione was surprised at the raw truth of her words. Kissing him was a reaction; she hadn't chosen to kiss him, she had simply done it. Was that a good thing or not?

"You're ... serious?" Charlie repeated.

She nodded without considering if she should have cleared it with Draco first. "You didn't know?"

"How would I have known?" he asked, frustration leaking into his tone.

"It's been in the paper," she offered weakly.

"Oh. We aren't always up to date on the reserve."

"I know."

The silence was heavy and awkward. Hermione wanted to leave, but she didn't want them to part badly. Charlie had been there before Draco and would be there after. This was just a pause.

"Who is it?" Charlie asked, his tone harsh. "I presume it's not a secret, since it's in the popular media."

Hermione bit her lip. "Draco Malfoy."

Confusion and then annoyance showed on his face. "Oh. Huh."

"I should go," she said. "I'm so sorry, please forgive me."

Charlie sighed. "No, I should never assume that just because we've done this in the past, it will always happen." He stood and walked over to her, taking her hand as he continued. "I should have realized that someday, things would change, and this wouldn't be possible anymore. Not that ... this is all we are, Hermione. You know ..." He trailed off; the words weren't necessary.

She leaned forward and kissed his forehead, breathing deeply the rugged scent that was his essence. It didn't set her heart racing the way it once had, the way the smell of Hawthorne Inks now did, and this truth made her sad. Something had changed without her notice, and she hadn't been able to properly grieve its passing.

"I know," she whispered, but couldn't return the sentiment. At least she had the cover of her relationship to excuse it.

Charlie stood and stepped away. "Thank you for coming tonight, Hermione. It was perfect, having you on my arm, by my side."

"Oh, Charlie," she breathed, tears finally spilling over. She rushed to him and hugged him tightly. *Why does this feel so much like goodbye?*

"Hey," he said, forcing his voice to sound cheerful. "Why the tears? No one has died, I'll see you again. Hey." He pulled her off so that he could look her in the eye. "Okay?"

"I know," she said, smiling. "I know."

"Good. Now, you'd best run along. Don't want Malfoy hunting me down for keeping you out too late."

Hermione started in horror, then laughed at the sheer absurdity of the situation. "Yeah, I should go." She pulled from his embrace entirely. "Congratulations, Charlie. What an honor. I know you deserved it."

"Thank you," he said. "For sharing this with me."

"Of course," she said. "Good night, Charlie."

"Bye, Hermione."

She closed the hotel room door behind her and practically ran outside. The cold air hit her like dozens of tiny spikes, driving the extraneous thoughts and emotions away. Above all, she wanted to see Draco, and the realization made her laugh again. She was going crazy! It made no sense to leave a man who truly cared about her and then want to see a man who was only associating with her because they had agreed to work together toward a mutually beneficial end.

Draco didn't feel anything for her, despite how convincing he was. She had to constantly repeat this in her mind because her heart simply wouldn't accept that nothing he did was real, that nothing mattered. But then there would be moments...the way he'd look at her, something in his tone...when she wondered if maybe her heart was picking up on something her head refused to see. They were just moments, gone as quickly as they appeared, that had tricked her into believing him, just a little.

And it was those moments she had started to hold onto, no matter how much she wished it otherwise.

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A/N: Thanks for reading, as always! I love all of your thoughts on the story and your theories on the blackmailer, and I want to hear more!

Credits: Many thanks to my betas on this chapter, pokeystar & drcjsnider! Thanks to Manda for the last minute read through and help with the title!

Art: I was lucky to end up with two pieces of art for this chapter. The first one is by janaparmajana, and the second piece is by silverrotter1.

Calm Before the Storm

Chapter 13 of 16

Hermione meets someone unexpected on her way out of the Manor.

Heavy Lies the Crown

Chapter 13 - - Calm Before the Storm

- - -

Saturday morning came too soon. Hermione glared at the alarm clock that she always set but rarely had to rely on. She turned it off and groaned into her pillow as memories of the night before flooded her mind. A myriad of emotions overcame her, but one thing was certain: she didn't regret not sleeping with Charlie.

Hermione didn't have much time to dwell on her thoughts, as the alarm left her just enough time to get ready before she visited her parents.

Despite doing her best, she was still sidetracked, and ended up being a little late. Her parents were laughing in the kitchen when she arrived.

"Hi, Mum, Dad," she said, her tone subdued.

"There she is!" said Thomas, grinning broadly and hugging her.

"Morning, love," said Elizabeth from where she stood in front of the oven. "All right, then?"

"Everything's fine. I had a late night," Hermione said, taking a seat at the table and peeling a banana.

She didn't miss the look her parents exchanged. Thomas decided he needed to attend to something elsewhere in the house, leaving Hermione alone with her mother. This was intentional, of course. Her parents must have expected that she'd want to talk about her night, and most likely with her mother. This was true, even though they had the conversation all wrong. Hermione didn't want to talk about a long, romantic night with Draco.

"So?" Elizabeth said, not turning around. "How are things with Draco?"

Hermione sighed and took her banana into the kitchen. After getting a glass of milk, she leaned on the counter. "He's ... fine. Great. But that's not what I'd like to talk about."

"Oh. All right, dear. What's on your mind?" Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder and frowned at the troubled look on Hermione's face.

"I ... I saw Charlie last night."

Elizabeth stopped stirring and turned around. "Charlie?"

"Here, let me," Hermione said, stepping around her mother to take over the task. It would help for her to have something to do with her hands while she talked. "He needed someone to go with him to an awards banquet; his date cancelled last minute."

"So he asked you," Elizabeth deduced. "Just like that? Out of nowhere?"

Hermione nodded. Her parents had adored Charlie, but they were also fiercely on her side. They weren't thrilled with the relationship the two had shared since officially ending their courtship. They wanted her happy, but didn't want to see her waste her time waiting for things with Charlie to magically fix themselves.

"Yes, and I agreed to go," she replied defensively. "He's my friend, Mum. It's not the first time he's asked me to accompany him somewhere, you know."

"I remember. What did Draco have to say about all of this?" she asked, stabbing to the heart of the matter. She always had a way of doing that.

"He doesn't know the particulars of what I did last night. I just told him something came up." Hermione was glad she had her back to her mother so she couldn't see the look she knew was there.

"Do you plan on telling him?" Elizabeth asked.

"If he asks, I suppose I will. The thing is, Mum" Hermione paused, trying to decide how best to say what she didn't even exactly understand herself. "I think it's a good thing I went," she resumed slowly. "I ... I think I'm finally starting to get over Charlie. I still felt the pull with him like before, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't as strong, that's for sure, and it was also incomplete. I know I would have always wondered if something like this hadn't happened."

Hermione was now stirring vigorously. "I'm not sure how to explain it, but I realize things with Charlie can never be. So much has happened since we ended, we've both changed so much."

"I was hesitant to mention it, but since we're discussing Charlie, I think this is a good time," Elizabeth said.

Hermione moved so that she could face her mother and still stir. Then she gave her mother her full attention.

"It's been about three weeks since you started seeing Draco. In those three weeks, at least in front of us, you haven't once compared him to Charlie." Elizabeth gave her daughter a pointed look. "Your father and I think that's significant."

Hermione frowned. She couldn't recall an instance where she had compared Draco to Charlie, but there was an easy explanation for the omission. She wasn't truly dating Draco; their association would end, so there was no point in comparisons.

"You're right, I haven't," she conceded. "I'm not sure why you think it's so significant, though." Hermione moved to focus on stirring so she could think without her mother reading her expressions.

"Every single man you've dated since Charlie, that's the first thing you do!" Elizabeth cried, chuckling slightly. "No man has stood a chance of competing with the image of Charlie you have built in your mind. Now Draco comes along, and it's been three weeks without a single mention of his vast shortcomings as compared to Charlie. How can you not think that's significant?"

Hermione's mind worked quickly, deciding to force the issue with herself. Fine. Her mother wanted comparisons, she would get them. Then she stopped to ask herself why she was so intent on proving that Draco was just like every other man she had dated since Charlie. He wasn't, incredibly so. He was charming and mysterious, alluring and sophisticated. Draco and Charlie were different, but unlike the previous men, the differences weren't bad. They were simply different.

Charlie was easy going, he smiled and laughed easily. Draco was harder on the outside, but his wit was sharp and intelligent. Charlie had rugged good looks, tan skin and a muscular fit. Draco was pale and lean, stronger than he appeared. His attractiveness was hard, perfect lines, thin, nimble fingers, and impossibly fine hair. When he smiled, his eyes reminded her of a summer storm over a wide open field. His touch had been like fire, burning all the way to her very essence. His...

"Careful, dear," Elizabeth said, reaching over Hermione to turn down the heat. "Don't want to burn it."

"Sorry, Mum," Hermione said, blushing. She had been so caught up in thinking about Draco that she'd completely stopped stirring.

"It's all right. I think I've made my point," she said, looking pleased with herself.

Hermione moved out of the way so her mother could finish with breakfast. She was taken aback at the realization she had come to: she really was starting to get over Charlie.

"Would you tell your father that breakfast will be ready in about ten minutes?" Elizabeth asked. After Hermione returned, she said, "When do you see Draco again?"

"We're having tea today," Hermione responded.

"I think you should tell him about last night," her mother said in her best motherly voice.

"I'll think about it," Hermione mumbled. For some reason, she didn't like the idea of telling Draco about Charlie. It felt too ... intimate, too personal. There was no need to bring their private lives into their working relationship. What she did on her own time didn't concern him in the least, so long as she kept up her end of the agreement.

Satisfied, Hermione returned her attention to setting the table. She resolutely ignored the nagging voice in her head that was reminded her there was another reason she didn't want to tell Draco that had nothing whatsoever to do with business.

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At promptly two in the afternoon, Hermione rang the bell at Malfoy Manor.

She had two reasons for calling on him this way instead of simply Flooing. First, she had dressed for the occasion, should anyone be lurking in the bushes beyond the Anti-Apparition wards, wearing a calf-length, blue-patterned cotton dress with simple flats. Her hair was down, held away from her face by a wide ribbon that was tied at the base of her neck. The more attention she could draw to their relationship, the better.

The second reason was because she needed to get used to being in Malfoy Manor, to possibly walking by the room where she'd been tortured. Though she had no intention of ever setting foot in that room again, there might come a time when she and Draco would be required to leave his bedroom, and she didn't want to make a scene.

She blushed at her thoughts and tried to make the heat in her cheeks go away. However, her heart started pounding at the idea of what she would soon be doing, adding to her flustered appearance.

When a surprised Draco answered the door after a few moments, he smiled when he saw her. "Hermione?"

At the sight of him, following her Freudian slip and the comparison she'd made earlier, all thoughts of the room flew from her mind. "Hi, Draco," she said, her stomach twisting in knots from his dazzling smile.

"Come in," he said, holding the door open. "I had expected you to arrive in my closet."

Hermione chuckled. "You never know where reporters might show up. Thought I'd make an effort, just in case."

Draco seemed thoughtful; he didn't speak but looked at her strangely. Finally, he snapped out of it and his expression softened. "You look lovely, as usual."

She rolled her eyes, but the feeling inside her intensified.

"I mean it," he said.

"That is irrelevant. There's no need to say it when there's no one around to hear you," she argued.

"I beg to differ," he said, but didn't elaborate. "I'd like to have tea in the garden, if it's all right with you. We can walk around the house if you'd prefer."

Hermione nodded, touched by his consideration. "No, that won't be necessary. The garden sounds lovely."

"Excellent. I'll have Chippy take your bag upstairs."

"Don't you want to discuss our work during tea?" she asked, pulling her bag close as though it would help her get through the house.

"No," he said, "I would rather we not discuss business until we're finished. It's a lovely day; I don't want to mix such an odious chore with the meal."

"All right."

The elf was Summoned, instructed, and dismissed.

Draco tilted his head toward the back of the house, indicating that she should follow him. Hermione took a deep breath and fell into step beside him. She could see light at the end of the vast hallway, and she kept her eyes focused on it.

When they neared the drawing room, Draco slid his hand into hers, lightly threading their fingers. It was simple but exactly what she needed...someone to be there. They reached the back of the house that led outside to the grounds, and Draco opened the two large, French doors.

Hermione gasped.

An enormous, formal English garden stood before her. A wide walkway began at the base of the steps leading from the veranda. On either side, in symmetric harmony, well-trimmed hedges, topiaries, and manicured lawns extended far onto the property. The entire garden was enclosed on three sides by a tall, green wall. Beautiful trees, their leaves now shades of red and yellow, were strategically planted around the garden space. There were smaller walking paths, benches, and statues in the garden, and the back was opened to the rest of the Manor grounds.



"Do you like it?" Draco asked.

"Like it?" she breathed, still trying to take it all in. "It's ... it's beautiful! Yes, I like it very much."

"My mother's work," he said, leading her down the steps and onto the grass just outside of the garden.

A white, intricately wrought iron table sat in the shade, looking like something from a film or postcard. Draco helped her into her seat, and she examined the spread on the table. Trays of delectable tea cakes, sandwiches, and scones sat amidst exquisite linens and china.

"This is too much," she said, giving him a questioning look. She had expected to have tea while sitting at the coffee table in the closet room, notes and papers spread around them.

Draco only shrugged and started filling his plate. "Mother will be pleased to know I used her garden for once."

"Not once she finds out *who* you used it for," she remarked, still hesitant to touch anything.

"It's nothing, Hermione. Please. May I pour your water?" he asked. Draco didn't know why he had gone to the trouble of preparing such an elaborate tea. The only thought that made any sense was that he'd wanted to impress her, simple as that.

"All right," she said, handing him her cup.

Tea passed pleasantly, their conversation effortless. Hermione forgot all about her promise to consider telling Draco about the night before. The sun was almost set before Hermione remembered why she was even there.

"Oh, Draco!" she said, glancing around at the very long shadows in the garden. "How long have we been out here?"

"I'm not sure, and I don't care." He sighed. "I suppose we should get busy. Are you ready to work now?"

"Yes, I think we had better. We don't want to be at this all night."

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Once in Draco's side room, they got right to work. Hermione sat on the sofa and placed the cards she had retrieved earlier in the week plus the information Draco had gotten from the bank on the coffee table.

He sat in the armchair beside the sofa. "Well, did you learn anything?"

Hermione folded her hands in her lap. "Not surprisingly, none of the names from the bank matched the names on your cards."

"I should hope that whoever this is has better sense than that," he quipped.

"Exactly," she agreed. "There were only three transactions that approached one hundred thousand Galleons each, and they were all deposits, all to one account in Paris, made almost seven years ago."

"That's ... not good." Draco sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"It's a starting point, at least," she said. "The bank where you deposit the blackmail money is in Paris as well, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, his brow furrowed in thought. "Do you think the two are connected?"

"It's possible. I checked with the bank and that account has been inactive since the third deposit and a subsequent withdrawal was made."

"What are the dates of the deposits?" Draco asked.

"Well" She paused. "If you'll recall, you only asked for the names of the depositors and the number of transactions over fifty thousand Galleons."

Draco cursed.

"However," Hermione said, "I ... I knew we needed that information, that it was vital to what we're doing and could either rule out this particular instance or make it our primary interest. So I ... I contacted Christophe Peronnet at la Banque française de la Magie and charged a few more hundred Galleons on your tab. I hope that's all right," she said, suddenly realizing that he might be angry with her.

Instead he grinned, entirely surprised. "You did? Well done, Granger. Though ... weren't you against resorting to bribes?"

She avoided his gaze, trying not to let it bother her that he had used her surname. "I was, yes...I mean, I am...but as you'd already contacted this bank, I thought it would be all right to request a little more information."

"It's all right with me," he said gently. "It simply seems ... uncharacteristic."

Hermione lifted her eyes to his. "I've been known to do what needs to be done in order to get results. I'm not always proud of it, but despite my protests earlier, I'm also not always above it." She turned back to her notes, eager to change the subject. "The precise dates were September 14, November 6, and December 30. Are those significant?"

"I'm not sure," he said, still grinning at the top of her head. Shaking his head, he searched through the blackmailer's letters. "I'm looking for the first three I made note of the date I received each one and when I made the deposits. Here they are." He pulled three slips of parchment out and opened them one by one. His expression became more excited with each note. "It looks as though this could mean something."

Draco had made deposits on September 10, November 1, and December 26.

Hermione smiled. "This is wonderful! It's quite possible the old account belonged to the blackmailer!"

"Whose name was on the account?" Draco asked.

"Let me see ... Oh." Her face fell. "Jean Valjean."

"We've already established that the name would be falsified. All we've got to do is find out who this man really is."

"I'm not sure we've got much to go on," Hermione told him. "Jean Valjean is the name of the main character from a famous French novel, *Les Misérables*. I doubt it's even a real alias."

Draco frowned. "I'm not familiar with that book."

"I wonder if the choice of the name is significant," Hermione mused to herself. "I'll have to give it some more thought."

"I've been thinking," Draco said after a few minutes of quiet.

"Yeah?" she said, somewhat distracted.

"I've got to make another deposit next week."

"Oh, that's right," she said, turning to him. "I'd completely forgotten."

He stood and began pacing in front of the fireplace. Hermione watched as he frowned, deep in thought. "I have an idea about gaining information, but it would require your help."

"You have it," she said without hesitation.

"Thank you," Draco said, flashing another genuine smile. "In his early letters, the blackmailer specifically said that I was not allowed to stay in the bank, and if any magic was detected at all...Invisibility cloaks, Polyjuice, Disillusion Spells, anything...he would turn the evidence over. I tested him once on his word, and he threatened my mother, as you know."

He stopped and resumed his seat, facing her. "However, with your help, magic wouldn't be necessary. You could simply wait in the bank to see what happens."

"When would you make this deposit? I have classes, and I'm not sure if I can miss any."

"I know," he replied. "I'm willing to work around your schedule. The deposit must be made by the end of the day Tuesday."

"Do you think the blackmailer will come the same day? How would he know when you've put the money in your box?" she asked.

"Well, if we wait until the last day it's due, then that's the best chance we have of possibly spotting him in the act." Draco's expression was excited and intense.

"Which would mean Tuesday." She considered her schedule. "I could probably give the sixth-years an out-of-class assignment, which would free my afternoon."

"Yeah?" he said. "Are you sure that's all right?"

"I'm sure," she replied. "The bank will close early enough that I can make it back for the staff meeting."

"Excellent." He beamed. "Thank you, Hermione."

She smiled. "It's not a problem. That's why I'm here, anyway, isn't it? To help you? I think we should discuss some details though."

"Agreed," he said. "Shall we discuss them over dinner?"

"That sounds just fine," Hermione replied.

"You know," Draco drawled, a pleasant smirk...if such a thing was possible...on his face. "I could ... cook."

At first, Hermione just blinked. Then his meaning sunk in and she blushed deep red. Draco laughed, and the butterflies returned to her stomach with a vengeance.

When he stopped enough that he could speak, he said, "Your reaction was perfect, Hermione. I couldn't help myself. That was brilliant." He chuckled again. "I did mean it though, and I specifically remember saying I would cook for you some time."

"That wasn't funny, Draco!" she said, unable to stop grinning.

He shook his head. "Again, I must disagree with you. So what do you say?"

"I would love to watch you cook, Draco," she replied. "If only to confirm that pigs do, indeed, fly."

He frowned. "I don't know your meaning."

Hermione stood. "It's a Muggle expression. 'When pigs fly' means 'it will never happen.' Because pigs will never fly."

"Well, they will if you Charm them to," he said, straight-faced, as he led her out of the closet and into the main part of the house.

"Never mind," she said, shaking her head.

The kitchen was on the lower floor of the Manor, in the back corner, and even though it was no where near the drawing room, Draco still held her hand until they were out of the main hallway.

It was clear that people didn't usually see the kitchen but also that Draco frequented it. After they entered, he went directly to the refrigerator and removed butter, cream, and a wedge of cheese. With a flick of his wand, Draco started two of the burners and Levitated two pots, one large and one small, from the rack over a long island onto the stove. Then he removed a half-used head of garlic and a handful of parsley from a cabinet.

Hermione watched, amazed at how easily he moved around the kitchen. She had assumed, wrongly again, that he wouldn't know the difference between an oven and a mixer.

"May I help?" she asked.

"If you want," he said, lopping a chunk of butter from the bar and setting it in the warm pan. "The cheese needs to be grated, but I usually set that to go on its own. Same with the parsley."

"I'll do the cheese," she said.

"Grater is in the third drawer to the right of the sink," he said, using a faucet over the stove to add water to the large pot. After tapping the pot with his wand, the water instantly started to boil. He added a half pound of fettuccine noodles, a dollop of oil, and a teaspoon of salt, and set a spoon to slowly stir.

Hermione retrieved the tool and found a bowl, then set to work. "I love freshly grated Parmesan cheese."

"As do I," Draco agreed. He removed a cookie sheet from a drawer and started slicing a fresh loaf of bread.

They worked in companionable silence for a few minutes. Draco added heavy cream to the butter and combined the two liquids.



Hermione found it strange that she didn't feel out of place standing beside Draco, preparing a meal. Like everything with him, it felt like the most natural thing in the world, and she wondered again how they could get along so well, despite there being nothing between them. She could easily admit that she found him irresistibly attractive, but she felt that their connection went far beyond that.

"Why are you doing it by hand?" Draco asked, startling her from her thoughts.

She shrugged. "Every week, when I go to my parents', I help my mum cook breakfast. I enjoy the process...it's a lot like Potions...and prefer doing things by hand. There's a stronger sense of satisfaction for me."

"Maybe I'll try it sometime. How's the cheese coming?"

"Just finished," she said, handing him the bowl.

He crushed a clove of garlic and tossed it into the bowl. Then he slowly added it to the liquid mixture, all the while stirring. When that step was complete, he whisked the mixture. "The parsley needs to be chopped, if you want. Otherwise, I'll set a knife to it."

"No, I'll do it." She removed a knife from a block on the counter and, with the same care she gave to her Potions work, began chopping the herb.

Draco chuckled. "You aren't getting a grade, you know."

"It's practice for when it counts," she returned lightly. "Here."

He added the parsley and turned off the heat to the burner. Then he Levitated a colander to the sink and carried the large pot over to it, straining the pasta. Hermione retrieved another, larger bowl, and Draco seamlessly added the drained pasta to it. Lastly, he added the sauce, stirring thoroughly to coat the noodles.

Draco Conjured two chairs and set them by the island. He set the table with a simple muttered spell and left, returning moments later with a bottle of wine. From the refrigerator, he retrieved an already prepared salad and placed it with the other food. When the oven timer dinged, he put the bread in a basket.

"Dinner is served," he said.

"Wonderful! It smells incredible."

Hermione shook her head incredulously as watched him pour them both a glass of a red wine that she expected would be both delicious and a perfect complement to the meal. It was.

"I must say, I'm impressed, Draco." She took a sip of wine. "It's hard to believe this is the only thing you know how to cook. The way you move in here is too natural, too effortless."

He tried not to look too pleased with himself. "I'll admit, I've tried other things, but I reckon I don't have the patience for it. Kind of like Potions." He smirked and sipped from his glass.

"This is delicious, Draco," Hermione said after taking the first bite. "Really."

"Thank you," Draco said. "So, tell me what you're working on in your free time these days. Other than what you're doing with me. Have you made any progress against the Cruciatus?"

"I thought we were going to discuss your plan for Tuesday over dinner," Hermione teased.

"I'd rather discuss this," he said simply.

She sighed and started telling him the basics; she had a theory, based on what happens to severely prolonged exposure. The Longbottoms had gone insane from the pain, so she suspected the curse primarily attacked the brain's pain center. If those connections were fried, other brain functions would suffer.

"I thought something just snapped," Draco said.

"All psychological reactions are rooted in physiology," she explained. "At least, that's what I'm basing my theories on. It's terribly boring."

"No, no, please. I'm very interested."

An hour later, the wine was almost gone and Draco was pulling a frozen cake that his house-elf had made from the freezer. Hermione helped him figure out how to heat it, and then they each had a slice.

Eventually, Draco decided they should return to the task at hand and come up with a plan for the next Tuesday.

As they walked in silence back to his rooms, Hermione felt a sense of belonging. It was the same feeling she had the first time she had been at the Burrow, and now she was feeling it with Draco. It was even stronger than what she had felt for Charlie initially, and she couldn't help but wonder, after the way Draco had behaved all day, if he didn't feel the same.

She glanced at him, only to find his brow furrowed.

They spent the next few hours devising and revising their plan for Draco's deposit. It was almost midnight when Hermione realized she was too tired to think. Fortunately, they were just going over the fine details. She yawned and Draco rubbed his eyes.

"I think it's a good plan," Hermione said, standing to gather her things. Somehow in the course of the day, they had ended up all over his bedroom and closet.

"Me too," he said from his spot on the sofa, his back to her. "I'll be thinking about any modifications or improvements though, and you should too."

"Yeah, yeah," she agreed absently, her thoughts focused on sleep. It took a considerable effort not to even glance at Draco's large, soft, comfortable, and inviting bed.

Draco stood and walked to the fireplace. "Write to me if you think we should change anything, and I will too."

"Hey, I'm going to Harry and Ginny's tonight. I'm watching James tomorrow, and they wanted me there first thing." Hermione stood in the door between rooms.

"And ... I'm assuming you're telling me this for a reason," he remarked.

"May I use your other fireplace? This one is only hooked to my room at Hogwarts, right?"

"Yes," he supplied, following her into his bedroom. "Of course. The Traveling Room is just inside the front door. Would you like me to walk you there?"

She swallowed. Draco had walked her past the drawing room twice now, but she needed to conquer it on her own. "No, no, I can find it. Thanks, though." Hermione put her cloak on and fastened it.

"Are you sure?" His tone and expression were laced with concern.

Hermione smiled bravely. "I am. I can do this. Gryffindor, remember?"

He nodded, still wary of letting her go alone. "I'll be right here if you need anything."

"Thank you. Well, goodnight, Draco."

"Night, Hermione," he said with a tired smile.

She fought the pull of the bed and left his bedroom. After standing at the top of the stairs for a few moments, taking deep, slow breaths, Hermione finally felt ready. She was confident that she could find her way through the Manor without incident and made her way to the first floor.

As she walked through the hall toward the grand staircase, she heard faint voices. One distinctly belonged to Chippy, and the other Hermione didn't recognize. It was a woman's voice...could it be Narcissa?

Hermione descended the stairs onto the main hallway and found the object of her query walking toward her, Chippy now gone. It was a woman, but certainly not Draco's mother. She had a cloak on, but it was open in front, and Hermione's eyes widened as she registered what the woman was wearing: lingerie. It was black and red and barely covered the essentials.

"Hello there," the woman said, looking Hermione over.

"Who are you?" she demanded, instantly disliking the woman.

"I'm Saturday Night, and you must be Miss Friday." Carrie smirked.

"Miss Friday?" Hermione repeated.

"I've gotta admit, I was extremely intrigued about you when Draco told me he wanted to switch nights." Carrie inspected Hermione more closely this time. "When he told me he was working Friday nights, I didn't believe him. Now that I see you, I really don't believe him. At least, he's not working on business, is he?"

"What do you ...?" Hermione trailed off, realization dawning. This woman, dressed like a prostitute, was in reality a prostitute. One who saw Draco on a regular business, in his home, to conduct her ... business. Hermione felt like someone had blindfolded her, spun her around a hundred times, and then set her loose.

Also, the woman had said that Draco had told her he was working Friday nights. That certainly wasn't the cover story, and Hermione wondered why he hadn't told his...mistress? lover?...that he had a girlfriend. Wasn't he worried about her reaction? What if this unsavory woman snitched to the first willing ear that she was sleeping with Draco while he was supposedly with Hermione?

Her head started to spin. "Don't you read the paper?" she asked, needing to determine just what this woman thought she knew. It wasn't possible that she didn't recognize her, hadn't read about her relationship with Draco...was it?

Carrie waved her hand in the air. "I don't pay any attention to that rubbish. I have much more important things to do with my time."

"No doubt," she replied coldly. Hermione still felt very uneasy about the whole thing, for numerous reasons. She might have to ask Draco about it, but the very thought made her nauseous.

"Why are you here, though?" Carrie asked, apparently enjoying Hermione's discomfort. "Saturday is my night."

"He's not paying me to sleep with him, if that's what you're implying," Hermione said through gritted teeth. "We're working together."

Carrie laughed softly. "Right. That story again. Well, as long as it doesn't interfere with my business, I couldn't care less who he sleeps with. Don't you find it interesting that he has a standing appointment with you, too? Of course, I would never claim to understand Draco Malfoy. He's quite the enigma."

"I don't like repeating myself," Hermione barked, anger beginning to cloud her judgment. "I am not sleeping with him." She didn't know why she was so upset. This was none of her business, anyway, but she couldn't help it.

"You're a little spitfire," Carrie mused. "Bet he loves that."

Hermione took very deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself. It didn't work. "Listen here, you ... you ... witch! I am no common slag, and I don't appreciate you implying such a thing! If you know what's good for you, you'll back off and stay away from me."

"Is that so?" Carrie didn't seem in the least bit threatened. "What's your name? I need to know if I'm going to tremble at the sound of it," she said sarcastically.

"What's yours?" Hermione demanded, jutting her chin out like a spoiled brat. She didn't care.

The woman preened. "Carrie, love."

"Hermione Granger." She stood a little taller. "Perhaps you've heard it."

Carrie raised an eyebrow, her demeanor instantly altered. "As a matter of fact, I have heard it."

"Then you'll know not to mess with me," Hermione threatened.

"Maybe you aren't sleeping with him, after all," Carrie said, a different interest evident in her eyes.

"If I was, he wouldn't need you."

"Touché." The woman shrugged. "Even if you were, it's always possible he's not getting everything he needs. Men like Draco often want things from me that their wives or girlfriends can't or won't provide." Carrie smirked again. "If you'll excuse me, I'll just be going. He's waiting for me."

Hermione was seething so badly she was shaking. She merely nodded once and tried to walk away as calmly as possible. When she had rounded the corner, she leaned against the wall, trying to get her emotions in check. What surprised her most was how upset she was, and she didn't even understand why!

Knowing the door was close, Hermione slowly resumed walking. Then she imagined Carrie practically running to Draco's room, throwing the door open and pouncing on him. It wouldn't take her long, and she obviously knew where she was going. Hermione started walking faster, wanting to be out of the house when Carrie reached her target. She simply couldn't abide the thought of what was about to happen.

"Potter residence!" she cried, tossing the Floo powder into the flames. With a shaky breath she stepped in.

ooo

Draco had his shirt, tie, socks, and shoes off when there was a knock at the door. A quick survey of the room assured him that Hermione hadn't forgotten anything. What could she want? A cautious smile played on his lips as he walked to the door.

As he opened it, he said, "Forget something?"

The smile froze when he saw that it wasn't Hermione on the other side.

"I might have left a pair of knickers here last week," Carrie said, sauntering into the room.

Draco closed his eyes and groaned inwardly. He wasn't ready for this right now! Hermione had just left, and he'd been thinking about her and their evening. In fact, he'd been about to go to bed.

Carrie was already setting the scene, lowering the lights, lighting candles, and putting on music. Draco watched disinterestedly.

"So I met Miss Friday," Carrie said casually, flicking her wand to pull down the sheets. "She seems ... feisty. Bet she's a real handful."

Draco frowned. "What do you mean? Who ...?" Something inside him lurched as comprehension dawned. The blood drained from his face and he thought he might be sick.

"On my way up," Carrie continued, not noticing Draco's reaction.

He went to his bed and sat heavily on the edge, his head a thick, useless mess. Carrie had met Hermione in the hall as she was leaving. A weight settled in his gut, and he felt awful. Not quite used to Carrie's new night, he hadn't even considered that Hermione was leaving about the time Carrie usually showed up. "What did you say to her?" he asked, pinching the bridge of his nose and attempting to brace himself.

"I introduced myself, we made small talk."

"Does she ... Did she ask about the nature of your profession?" Draco couldn't even define why he felt so awful. He just did. The last thing he wanted was for Hermione to know about his weekly trysts. How could he possibly face her again?

Carrie winked. "I'm pretty sure she figured it out. Smart girl, she is. Not how I pictured your type, though."

Draco whipped his head up to glare at the woman. "Mytype?"

She just laughed and leaned against his dresser, stretching her long legs. "So that's Hermione."

The weight in his stomach doubled at hearing Carrie say Hermione's name. "What do you mean?" Draco asked dangerously.

"I've heard of her," Carrie explained. "At least, I've heard her name. It's nice to put a face to the name."

Draco nodded listlessly. That made sense; Hermione was a well-known witch for all she did with Potter in the war.

"You care about her, don't you?" Carrie asked, crossing the room and sitting beside him on the bed.

"Why do you say that?" he asked tiredly, rubbing his eyes.

"In the years since I started coming here, you've never called out a name in your ... moment. Until recently."

If he had thought he couldn't feel any worse, any more embarrassed, any more ashamed, he had been wrong. That thing constricted inside him again. He couldn't even speak to ask her to elaborate.

"It's only been ... once, maybe twice, maybe more." Carrie didn't bother to see if he wanted her to continue. "I don't keep track of these things. I'm not surprised you don't really recall doing it. Saying her name. Your brain doesn't exactly work on full capacity at the time."

"Why are you still talking?" he growled. "Can't you see I want you to shut up?"

Carrie looked at him pointedly, ignoring the scowl that would make most grown men shudder. "There are things a man should know about himself. That he cares about a woman, for example."

Draco tried to work up the energy to deny it, but there was no point. He did care about her, and now What would she think of him?

"Are you ashamed of me?" Carrie asked.

"I'm ashamed of myself," he said. "For letting this happen. She's Gah!" Draco buried his face in his hands.

Carrie crawled next to him and started rubbing his back, growing bolder with each stroke. When she reached his beltline, Draco stiffened. "Stop," he ordered.

She did. "What would you like me to do?" she purred.

"Leave." He hadn't known what he would answer, but after speaking, he realized that was exactly what he wanted her to do.

"Are you sure?" Her whisper was accompanied by a gentle nibble on his ear.

"Yes," he hissed, jerking away from her. "We're finished."

"But we haven't even started!" she pouted.

Draco stood, his fatigue forgotten. "We're finished, nonetheless. For good; I no longer have need of your services."

Carrie slunk off the bed toward him. "She insisted that she wasn't sleeping with you. If she's telling the truth, you'll need me."

Furious, he grabbed her wrist and held her at arm's length. "What is the matter with you?" he yelled. "Were you hoping to lose your job tonight? How dare you say such things to her!" The more the woman said, the worse he felt. The thought of what had prompted Hermione to tell Carrie this ... he really was going to be sick.

For the first time that night, Carrie finally looked frightened, unsure of herself. "Let go of me."

Draco released her, pushing her away from him. "You had no right to discuss with her my relationship with either of you. As far as I'm concerned, you broke our contract."

Her eyes widened; she knew it meant a great loss of money. "Draco, no! Please! I didn't mean anything by it, I was only joking!"

"Yeah? So when I see her again, and ask what you two talked about, she'll laugh it off as nothing?" When Carrie didn't respond, he scowled. "You took a vow of secrecy, and you broke it. That nullifies the contract and ends our association. I expect my settlement first thing Monday morning."

There were tears in her eyes when she looked at him again. "Please, Draco. I...I'm so sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I don't have all the money."

Merlin, he hated seeing a woman cry. He pinched his nose again and sighed. "Just explain one thing to me. Why did you push me tonight? Why did you deliberately say things to anger me?"

She hesitated for a moment. "You're more ... aggressive when you're angry about something. I didn't realize you cared so much for her."

"I do," he said quietly, taking a deep breath. It felt better than he had imagined it would to admit he cared about Hermione. And the last thing she would want was for him to be mean and cruel to Carrie. "Just go. Don't ever come back here, you're barred from my property."

"Draco, let me have two weeks to get the money, I swear I'll get it," she pleaded.

"Forget the money. Just go. If you ever see Hermione Granger again, you will not look at her, speak to her, or acknowledge her. Do you hear me?" She nodded, grateful. "Good. Now go."

Carrie summoned her possessions and stuffed them hastily in her bag. Within two minutes, she was out of his room and out of his life.

Draco slumped on his bed in a daze. He glanced at the fireplace in his closet, but remembered that Hermione had gone to the Potter's. That's why she had gone that direction in the first place and had occasion to bump into Carrie. He cringed at the thought of what they had discussed.

Truth be told, Draco was angry with himself for jeopardizing a possible future with Hermione, one that he hadn't even realized he wanted until that moment, when it became impossible. She would never look at him the same again, would never even entertain the prospect of something more. Exhausted, without even changing out of his trousers, Draco crawled under the covers and fell into a troubled sleep.

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Hermione, on the other hand, was wide awake, staring at her ceiling and trying to figure out why she was so upset over Carrie. She had been trying to rationalize her anger, to explain it away in a logical fashion, but none of that had worked.

The truth was it made her jealous. More jealous than she had ever been in her life.

She had just realized she was finally getting over Charlie, had accepted her attraction to Draco, and had allowed herself to wonder if he might have feelings for her too.

Then she had been jarred back to reality, forced to see the truth for what it was, yet again. Draco was only acting. Nothing he said was true; none of his attention was real.

For whatever reason, he insisted on treating her in private the same way he did in public: complimenting her, doing nice things for her ... courting her...heavily. Hermione couldn't allow him half-truths, couldn't accept his words at face value when they were alone. He had to have a hidden agenda, and she determined to find out what it was. She would not give him access to her heart anymore.

That decided, she rolled onto her side and laughed at the ridiculous nature of her last thought. He already had his foot in the door, and she didn't know how to push him out without breaking her word to help him.

Hermione focused her attention on Carrie, but that only saddened her. Without even trying, she pictured Draco with her, touching her, kissing her. It was awful, and unbidden tears filled her eyes.

"This is so stupid!" she cried to the wall. "He's just using me! And I'm using him! We're using each other, and we agreed to it from the start! Who cares how many women he sleeps with?"

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get her head and her heart to work together. It hurt knowing that he could laugh and flirt and plot with her one minute, and then sleep with another woman the next. It was irrational; but then, most matters of the heart were irrational.

Inevitably, sleep overtook Hermione, and she was granted a dreamless night.

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A/N: Thank you so much for reading!! I really hope you liked this one.

Credits: This week's awesome illustration was done by pink_martini2. Check it out! Beta thanks go to drcjsnider & pokeystar, with special thanks to inadaze22 and manda for last minute reads and help with my SNAG.

The Beauty of the Rain

Chapter 14 of 16

The fallout.

Chapter 14 - - The Beauty of the Rain

- - -

She says you've known her deepest fears. 'Cause she's shown you a box of stained-glass tears. It can't be all The truth about the rain

~ Dar Williams, "The Beauty of the Rain"

- - -

Draco didn't feel any better about the situation in the morning. He forced himself through his routine, and by eight-thirty, he was in his home office with a cup of coffee, ready to start working. He had spent a great deal of time the day before with Hermione, and every moment that he wasn't working, he felt he was losing money.

The time with her always seemed worth it though, and not just because they were working together to identify the blackmailer and put an end to the unpleasant business. She was a breath of fresh air in his stale world.

Nevertheless, he had a lot of catching up to do.

At half-past two, he hadn't moved from his chair. He was bent over the latest proposal, trying to find any shortcuts he could take that would save him money but not reduce quality.

A sharp rap on the door made him jump.

Scowling, he went to answer it. His expression didn't change when he saw who had disturbed him. "What do you want, Pansy?" For some reason, perhaps on a command given by Narcissa, the house-elves let Pansy in without announcing her. He made a note to rectify this.

She raised an eyebrow. No matter how cross he was with her, she never let it faze her.

"Three things. First, your house-elf tells me you haven't eaten all day. So a meal is in order. Two, I want you to take a walk with me outside. It's a beautiful autumn day, and you're cooped up in this dreary study of yours. Three ... there's something I think you should see."

Draco rolled his eyes but knew that he would get no peace until he complied. He grabbed a light cloak, and together they walked to the back of the house and into the garden. Draco felt his tense muscles relax. The wind was cool and crisp and smelled like fallen leaves.

They walked around the entire garden in silence before Draco felt ready to talk. "You're right. I needed a break."

Pansy linked her arm through his and smiled. "Good. Chippy will have a meal ready for you when we return. I can't stay, but you must eat, Draco."

"What did you want me to see?" he asked.

Pansy's expression was apprehensive. "Let's sit." She pulled him to a bench, removed something from inside her robes, and handed it to him. "Just remember, don't hex the messenger."

Draco frowned and accepted the item, unrolling it to reveal the latest issue of *Witch Weekly*. The entire front cover was a picture of Hermione and Charlie Weasley at a formal occasion, sitting together and smiling. The headline read, "What's this? A new man for Miss Granger? details on pages 5-13."



Pansy looked positively ready to leap out of her skin from holding her tongue.

Draco kept his expression impassive as he opened the rag. Inside were more pictures of them in various poses and a lengthy article.

Finally, Pansy could keep quiet no longer. "Did you know? Are you two split? Remember what I said, I will severely maim her if she hurt you."

"No," he said slowly, staring at Hermione's smiling face. "We're not split." Draco closed the magazine, worried that he would betray his emotions if he looked at it any longer. "She told me she was going." It wasn't entirely a lie; she had told him something had come up. However, she had left out any and all details about that something, and he was starting to wish he'd asked a question or two.

Pansy's jaw dropped. "You *knew*?"

"She's a grown woman, Pansy. We've only been dating a few weeks, and she has a life outside of me." From the pictures, it looked like she had a relationship apart from him as well.

She snatched the magazine and hastily flipped to one of the pages. "Look at this picture. Look at her expression. Does she ever look at you that way?"

Draco had no choice but to examine the photo Pansy had thrust in his face. Hermione appeared ... blissful. There was no other word for it. Completely happy. Though he had seen some marvelous smiles on her pretty face, none of them quite approached the one she was giving Charlie.

"Nothing to say?" Pansy said with a smirk. "I can't believe you let her go anywhere with him! According to this article, they were quite the item a few years ago. Looks to me like nothing's really changed."

That hurt, more than he cared to acknowledge. Now he wanted Pansy to leave, and quickly, before his control cracked. "I'm hardly in a position to forbid Hermione from doing anything. It's Granger, Pansy. She'd listen to my demands just as much as she would torture a house-elf. Besides, I trust her."

"You trust her? How can you say that?! She went out with another man while dating you!" she exclaimed, waving the magazine in his face once more.

Draco grabbed it and tucked it into a pocket. "Yes, I trust her. If you'll recall, she has been friends with the Weasley family for most of her life. I'm sure there's a perfectly good, rational explanation for what's printed in that glorified gossip column."

Pansy patted his arm and gave him a sympathetic look. "Draco, I know what it's like to care for someone more than he cares for me. You deserve better than that. I just don't want to see you hurt."

He scowled and started walking back toward the Manor, uttering a terrific lie. "Don't worry about me; I assure you my feelings for her are in check. I like her no more or less than I should. And now that you've accomplished two of your aims, I must see to the third."

She caught up with him quickly. "I hope you're not upset with me, Draco. I thought it would be best for you to hear about this now, from me, rather than someone at work or from a stranger on the street."

He sighed and slowed his pace so she wouldn't have to run to keep up. "Yes, thank you. You're right. But I assure you, I have nothing to worry about. I appreciate your concern, you're a good friend."

Pansy wasn't buying it, but he wasn't about to tell her the truth. He was almost shaking now from holding in his anger, and he wanted her long gone before it exploded.

"Just remember. She's mine if she hurts you," Pansy said, fastening her cloak around her neck.

He tried to force a carefree smile. "That's won't be necessary."

She kissed his cheek and left him standing in the garden, a few feet from where he had taken tea with Hermione the day before.

He stared at the white iron table and sank into a chair. Was it possible only twenty-four hours had passed? So much had happened in that time. The day before, Draco hadn't wanted their time together to end. That's why he didn't talk about their work over tea or dinner, why he had offered to cook instead of having Chippy bring them something. Everything in his life seemed brighter when Hermione was around, and he greedily wanted her there more and more.

In the last day, he had realized he wanted something with Hermione just moments after losing that chance altogether. Then he had learned that she once had a relationship with Charlie Weasley and that she'd gone with him to some kind of awards dinner.

Draco was mad at himself for allowing feelings to develop for her and then for realizing them too late. He'd known something was happening when he had to fight a smile every time he thought about her and when his heart raced at the sight of her. It had just been so much easier to ignore it, to push it away, than to think about it.

However, he couldn't ignore his growing anger and knew it was rooted in jealousy. It was hardly rational, especially when he was just as guilty of having a bit on the side, but knowing didn't ease his discomfort.

Well-versed in feeling sorry for himself, Draco forced himself to get up. He had a to-do list that wasn't getting any shorter, and the more time he spent wallowing, the later he'd be awake. Besides, he was a fool to try to reason with his heart, to want to find a logical explanation for how he felt.

ooo

Hermione was exhausted by the time lunch ended on Monday. She had spent the day before in her room, forcing herself to catch up on the reading she'd been putting off. She recited Arithmantic tables in order to keep her thoughts from straying and running wild.

She hadn't been able to sleep easy the last two nights, either, so she had taken a Sleeping Potion. It was a last resort, and the things never agreed with her. They left her groggy the next day until she could catch a nap, and Mondays were full, non-stop classes all morning.

One hour remained before her last class of the day...her seventh-years...and she practically ran to her rooms in anticipation of getting some sleep.

Hermione felt much better when she took her desk ten minutes before the bell was set to ring announcing the beginning of the period.

She looked up when Samaya entered and frowned at the girl's expression. "Afternoon, Samaya. Did you have a good weekend?"

The girl looked contemplatively at Hermione. "It was fine. So, Professor, speaking of weekends Are you cheating on my father's cousin's brother's great nephew?"

Hermione knew she could only be referring to Draco. "Of course not," she said. "Why on earth would you ask such a thing?"

"Oh, just this."

As was her wont, Samaya placed a copy of *Witch Weekly* on the desk. Hermione's eyes widened as she stared at the picture on the cover. Then she read the headline.

"What?" she cried, grabbing the magazine and turning to page five. She was horrified to discover pages and pages of pictures, but the worst thing was the article, written by Rita Skeeter.

A new love? Or a recycled one?

Miss Granger seems to be making up for lost time with her most recent string of beaux. First, the very eligible but often reclusive Draco Malfoy, now a former love rekindled in Charlie Weasley. Mr. Weasley recently won a highly prestigious award in Dragon Keeping circles, and Miss Granger attended the awards ceremony as his guest.

The two were nearly inseparable all night, and were quite cozy at their table. Indeed, the pair couldn't keep their hands off each other. If she wasn't holding his hand, he was whispering in her ear or twirling his finger in her hair.

"He did no such thing!" Hermione exclaimed.

"What, the hair bit?" Samaya asked. She had moved behind Hermione to read over her shoulder.

"Yes, the hair bit," Hermione answered, annoyed.

When Mr. Weasley stood up to give his acceptance speech, the air between the two crackled with electricity and sexual tension. While she gazed adoringly at her lover, he surreptitiously credited her as being his inspiration, and this reporter has no doubt that her passions were not limited to defense of magical creatures (full speech printed on page 7).

Hermione shut her eyes, trying to keep her breathing even. She was so angry at Rita that she contemplated going right then to her house and hexing her into oblivion.

The attraction between the pair was evident to anyone whose gaze fell on them over the course of the evening. Mr. Weasley's boss, Mr. Russell Fields, said that he had long hoped his employee would reconcile with the feisty witch, as Charlie was happiest while dating her. It looks like Fields got his wish!

The question then begs: what of Mr. Malfoy? Just two weeks ago, he appeared quite enamored with Miss Granger, being spotted holding hands with her in Diagon Alley, his eyes fixed on the object of his affection.

So what happened? Is she unabashedly fielding or was Miss Granger simply toying with Mr. Weasley's affections, while her heart remained loyal to her former lover? If you're reading this, Mr. Malfoy, please accept my personal condolences. This is not the first time Miss Granger has wooed important men in order to serve her own purposes.

Protect more of your memories for less! Finally, the single witches of England are wondering one thing: Is Mr. Malfoy ready for love again? And where do we sign up?

Until next time, eternally yours,
Rita

Hermione had tears in her eyes when she finished. Draco! What if he had seen this? What did he think had happened...what did he think of her? Merlin, she hadn't even considered that someone would twist that evening so vilely! Leave it to Rita, she thought bitterly. If there hadn't been some truth to the article, even in undertones, she wouldn't feel so ashamed.

All those pictures! She had thought they were merely interested in her, but then when Charlie had been announced the recipient of the award, it made sense why so many people were snapping pictures of them...they wanted *him*. Well, except for Rita, anyway.

"Are you all right?" Samaya asked.

"I'm fine," Hermione said, her voice calm but strained. She had to see Draco, she had to explain. As soon as possible, she would go to the Manor and wait for him to return home. He couldn't be allowed to think that she was in love with Charlie! She wasn't! Finally, after so many years of holding on to memories, she wasn't in love with Charlie. She needed Draco to know that, to believe her. She needed someone to hear the words.

By that time, all the seats were taken and Hermione had to start class. Every word she spoke felt like ash in her mouth, every smile felt forced, and she glanced at the clock more times than she could count.

When the double period finally ended, Hermione was about to grab her things, run to her room and Floo to Draco's closet, when Sheetal stopped her.

"I was hoping to have a word with you, Professor," she said shyly.

Hermione's mind screamed at her to go, to leave, to get to Draco's, even though he wouldn't be there for a few hours, at the earliest.

"Of course, Sheetal," Hermione said, using her wand to shut and lock the door. "What's on your mind?"

"It's ... well, it's Evan, actually."

Hermione blinked. She had been so preoccupied with her own life that she'd forgotten that the Hogsmeade trip was this weekend, and the last she had heard, Evan was going to ask Sheetal to go with him.

"Evan?" she repeated, settling into her chair. "Is there something wrong?"

"Oh, no," Sheetal assured her, shaking her head. "Nothing's wrong. Our project is going very well."

"I see." Hermione had learned that sometimes it was best not to ask too many questions and to let her students struggle through the answers.

Sheetal fidgeted with a corner of parchment sticking out of her book. "He ... he asked me to go with him to Hogsmeade this weekend."

Hermione feigned surprised. "He did? That's Wow."

Sheetal nodded vigorously. "I know. I was shocked." She paused, pink creeping onto her cheeks. "I don't really know what to say."

"You haven't given him an answer yet?" Hermione asked, her heart panging for Evan.

"No, I told him I would think about it."

"And what have you thought?" Hermione was rather anxious to hear if Sheetal was interested in Evan.

The Slytherin girl sighed. "The thing is ... I do like him. He's funny and smart, and very fanciable. All the girls fawn over him." She frowned, shaking her head. "It's just so much pressure. We would be the first inter-house couple that spanned our two houses, and even though I know it's okay, I also know there are those in my house who wouldn't be happy with it."

Hermione scoffed. "You should never let someone else dictate your actions. That gives them too much power! It's just the kind of thing that leads to prejudice, and then before you know it, we've got another Dark Lord trying to take over the world. If you like Evan, and you want to spend more time with him, then you should."

"What would you have done, if our situations were reversed?" Sheetal asked. "If someone from Slytherin had asked you out in school?"

"That never would have happened," she replied. "I'm Muggle-born."

"Can't you imagine it, even for a moment?" Sheetal pressed. "Out of the blue, you're asked to Hogsmeade by a Slytherin bloke."

Hermione snorted. "I would have thought he was up to no good and hexed him." Sheetal looked frustrated. "I'm sorry, I'm not helping."

"What about Draco Malfoy? What if he had shown genuine interest in you during school? Would you have gone out with him?"

An image of Draco in their sixth year flashed in Hermione's mind. He was sneering, looking down his pale, pointy nose at her with revulsion in his eyes. Then the image changed into an older Draco, his lips curved up in a smile, his eyes intense as they bored into hers.

All that was now required was to imagine that during school, Draco had acted toward her the way he did now, when they were pretending. There was no question.

"If Draco had treated me then the way he does now, absolutely, I would have gone out with him," Hermione said firmly.

"Really?" Sheetal's eyes widened. "Just like that? What about you friends, your houses?"

"I'm a very ... contrary woman, Sheetal. I wasn't raised with wizarding prejudices, so they never took hold. I disliked Draco and his friends because they were arrogant, nasty prats, not because of their house and blood. But if I wanted something badly enough, if I knew that it was right for me, then nothing anyone could have said or done would have kept me from it." She shrugged. "That's just who I am."

"What if the other Slytherins treated you badly?" Sheetal asked.

"I would like to think Draco would have intervened on my behalf." Sheetal started to speak, and Hermione anticipated her question. "As for my friends, they would have been angry, furious even, but they would have seen, as I do...did!...I don't know, this is all confusing!"

Together they laughed before Hermione continued. "They would have seen how happy I was, that he treated me the way I deserved, and they would have accepted it. Eventually."

"I don't think I'm as brave as you are, Professor," Sheetal admitted. "But I also know that if any of my housemates give me trouble, you'll give it back to them, ten-fold."

Hermione smiled. "That's correct. So you're going to say yes?"

"I ... I think so. I want to."

"Then say yes. You'll be out of here soon, and you'll realize how silly the house divisions are. When you meet someone, your first question won't be, 'Which house were you in?'" Hermione gave Sheetal's hand a reassuring pat.

"You're right," the student said. "It's just one date, anyway. Who knows what will happen?"

"Exactly," said Hermione.

"Thank you, Professor," Sheetal said.

"You're very welcome," she replied.

When Sheetal had gone, Hermione was no longer in a frantic rush to get to Draco's. She went to her room, had a cup of tea, and at quarter to five, Floo'd to his room.

Not surprisingly, he wasn't there. She felt marginally better and worse being in his home, though, and tried to settle her nerves enough to go over their plan for the next day.

She couldn't concentrate. Waiting for Draco to come home was difficult; she started imagining their conversations, what he would say, how she might react.

It took over an hour and three cups of tea generously provided by Chippy before she could force herself to focus on something other than what she would say to Draco when she saw him.

She managed to finish going over their notes about the money drop and then found a book on the shelf and lay on the sofa to read. Before she knew it, her stomach was growling, and she looked up to find that the sun had set. Hermione called for Chippy and requested something to eat, and the elf happily obliged.

Hermione ate worriedly. Where was Draco? Why wasn't he home yet? What if he was so angry at her that he had ... what? Why would he be angry in the first place? They weren't even really dating!

Draco returned to the Manor at half-past ten. After his usual workday ended, he had spent time going over the books and preparing his deposit for the next day. When that had been completed, he'd simply not wanted to go home. He was beginning to associate Hermione with the Manor, and he couldn't think about her without feeling a strange mixture of emotions.

His initial anger had dissipated somewhat after having time to think about everything that had happened. It was hardly fair for him to be upset that Hermione had gone somewhere with Charlie while he was regularly seeing Carrie. The thought that Hermione might be seeing Weasley still managed to make his blood boil, and he told himself it was only because she had said in the beginning that she wasn't dating anyone.

He slowly walked toward his room, his steps heavy. He wasn't sure what he would do or say when he saw Hermione again, but he did want to talk to her. What she had done, though probably unintentionally, had jeopardized their work and what they were planning to do. She needed to understand this.

More than anything, though, he felt strangely compelled to explain about Carrie. He didn't know what he would say, but he needed to know that she didn't think he was pathetic, disgusting, or loathsome.

When he reached his bedroom, Draco was surprised to see a lamp on in the closet-room. He didn't turn on the lights but instead pulled his wand and crept toward the opening between the rooms.

He sucked in a breath at the sight of Hermione, fast asleep on his sofa with a book open across her chest and her hair splayed out over a pillow. His heart ached; Merlin, she was beautiful.

After sheathing his wand, Draco poured himself a glass of bourbon and took the chair by her feet. He watched the slight rise and fall of her body that accompanied her breathing for a few long moments.

"Hermione," he called gently.

She stirred, her eyes opening gradually. She seemed confused for a moment as she took in her surroundings, and then her gaze fell on him. Hermione sat up straight, and the book fell to the floor with a thud.

"Draco!" She quickly grabbed the book and smoothed the pages that had gotten bent. "I-I'm sorry I didn't write or anything, and I shouldn't have just fallen asleep like this."

"It's quite all right," he said, unable to meet her eyes. "I'm glad you're here, actually," he replied hesitantly, stealing a glance at her from beneath his fringe. Might as well get it over with. "There's something I want to discuss with you."

Here it comes, she thought. The pictures in *Witch Weekly* ... surely he had seen them, had read the accompanying article! "All right," she said, resigned to the unpleasant but necessary conversation.

He stood and started pacing, a deep frown on his face. "It's about what happened Saturday night."

That took Hermione completely off guard; she'd gone out with Charlie on Friday night. "Saturday?" she repeated.

"It is my understanding that as you were leaving my house, headed toward the Traveling Room, you ... met someone."

Oh! Hermione's cheeks reddened and she directed her gaze into her lap. The woman who had thought Hermione was sleeping with Draco on Friday nights, who had been dressed in revealing lingerie, who hadn't bothered to cover herself when she'd met someone unfamiliar. Though she had considered bringing up the audacious woman, it was the last thing Hermione had expected Draco to mention.

"I would like to explain," Draco said stiffly.

"No!" Hermione cried, eyes wide. She'd endured more than enough mental images over the last few days, and she didn't need more information that would only help her imagination elaborate.

He looked at her, his expression torn and confused.

"I mean," Hermione said, gesturing tensely with her hands. "What's there to explain? I understand perfectly."

This wasn't going how he had expected it to. He had expected her to be upset. "But..."

Usually when Hermione was anxious, she didn't talk much. But when she was very, very nervous, she tended to ramble. "I get it, Draco. She ... she ... well, you know. It's perfectly understandable, you're a man, and you ... well. What you do with your private time is none of my business. It's not as if you're the only one, anyway, I..."

"You what?" he asked, his eyes narrowed and his tone harsher than he had intended.

Her eyes darted to his, and she realized what she had said. "I ... nothing."

Draco had been blessed and cursed with a vivid imagination. He credited it as being partly responsible for his failure to be an adequate Death Eater, for he could imagine the pain and suffering he would cause all too well. Apparently, he was also extremely sensitive...something he had always seen as a weakness...because he couldn't bring himself to be the cause of such pain and suffering.

His imagination was now running rampant, conjuring up the images of Hermione and Charlie Weasley in *Witch Weekly* and taking them a few steps further. The looks they'd exchanged, the innocent touches ... it all pointed in one direction. She had been about to confess something, and what else could it be?

"This is about Friday night, isn't it?" he asked, his voice calm, though tinged with the anger that bubbled just beneath the surface.

"You've seen it, then?" she asked, her voice a whisper. "The magazine?"

Draco's anger from the day before inexplicably resurfaced. As he glared at Hermione, trying to formulate the most hurtful, spiteful response he could, it struck him to consider *why* he was so angry at that moment. He wasn't actually dating her, yet his reaction could only be described as jealousy, rearing its ugly head once again. The thought of her being with another man made his blood boil.

"Yes," he snapped.

Hermione felt terrible for a moment, feeling the deep sting of regret at having betrayed someone she cared about. But then, after considering their entire conversation, anger coursed through her veins.

"Oh, so it's all right for you, but not me?" she countered.

Draco's eyes widened in shock at her rebuttal and the fact that she wasn't denying his worst imaginings. Pushed into a corner, he had no choice but to fight back any way he could. "The two are entirely different," he snarled. "What I do in the privacy of my own home will never reach beyond the walls of my house! *You* were plastered over nine pages of that bloody rag, making ... googly eyes to another man, when you are supposed to be with me!"

"Charlie is my friend!" she shouted, leaping off the sofa. "He needed a date for something and he asked me! I had no idea it was an awards banquet in honor of him and that there would be so many reporters there. That's why I was there, you enormous git!"

They were ... friends? And yet, she hadn't denied sleeping with him? Draco's pedestalic image of Hermione imploded. Perhaps it had been foolish of him to assume the things about her he had assumed...that she wouldn't approve of what he did with Carrie, that she would never do such a thing herself ... that she was anything other than perfectly human, just like he was.

The realization required extensive thought, but he wasn't at such a liberty at that moment.

"You are with *me*," he said through gritted teeth.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat at Draco's statement, despite how livid they were, despite being in the midst of a tremendous argument. It almost sounded like real anger and jealousy, as though he was this upset at the knowledge that she had gone out with another man.

"Did you read the article?" he continued, retrieving the now-worn magazine from his robes and waving it around. "Read what they wrote about you? About us? What you did put into jeopardy everything I have been trying to accomplish."

Of course. How foolish of her to have thought he truly cared about her...again. When would she learn? "No," she argued, crossing the room and snatching the rag, then poking him forcefully in the chest with it. "All the article did was speculate. A lot."

"Exactly," he said. "Our relationship has been called into question, and that greatly displeases me. The idea of us dating, by the way, was only for your protection. I'm certainly not getting anything out of it. But if you want to ruin it by sleeping with every friend in need, then who am I to stop you?"

Hermione didn't think, didn't consider what she was doing or the repercussions of her actions. All she saw was red. Before she could stop herself, she slapped him. Hard. His face jerked to one side and the sound of her palm hitting his cheek seemed to reverberate around the room and against the walls of her skull.

When she finally did stop to think, she didn't completely regret her actions. "You complete and utter wanker! I didn't sleep with Charlie!"

Draco slowly turned his head back to look at her, refusing to give in to the desire to touch his throbbing cheek. Her eyes were flashing and her chest was heaving; she was livid.

"You said..." he started quietly.

"I know what I said," she snapped. "I didn't sleep with him Friday night." Then she remembered how very close she had come to doing just that, and a fresh wave of guilt washed over her. "Oh, Draco, I'm sorry I hit you."

He backed away, glaring menacingly at her.

"It's complicated," she offered, her anger disappearing at the thought of trying to explain her relationship with Charlie to him but knowing she would try.

"You told me you weren't dating anyone," he said, anger once again lacing his words. "When all of this started, when I came to you in McGonagall's office. I had a very good reason for asking that question."

"I wasn't," she assured him, stepping closer by half a step but stopping when he echoed her movement, moving away.

Images flashed into Draco's mind of the first game of Quidditch he had attended with the Weasleys. Hermione and Charlie had been nearly inseparable, speaking closely, familiarly, touching each other the way secret lovers might do when they thought no one was watching.

He had been inexplicably annoyed by it at the time, and now his imagination had facts to add to his thoughts. Charlie Weasley *had* been with her. Draco couldn't deny that once again, jealousy was the root of his anger. He wanted to ignore the pain, as well, but too much had hit him all at once. She and the older Weasley had been together ... but when? For how long? Why did they end things, if they so obviously still wanted each other?

Pansy had been right...the pictures in the magazine were quite telling.

"And now?" he demanded.

"It's complicated," she repeated, her voice barely a whisper.

"It's none of my business," he said coldly. "Decide now what you want. You gave your word to help me, which you will fulfill. But we can end this sham of a relationship so that you can be with your Weasley again if you wish."

Tears filled her eyes before she turned away, and for an instant, Draco felt bad. But it didn't last. It made him sick to think that she had been pursuing another while being in a public relationship with him. It reminded him too much of the blackmail material and the relationship his parents must have once had in order for it to be created. He hated the very idea of infidelity, and he no longer cared that it was all a farce; it still stung as though their relationship was real. Reluctantly, he admitted that it was because he was falling for her and he had wanted it to be real, welcomed it, before

"It's not so simple," she said.

"Yeah, you've mentioned that," he bit out, moving across the room to put distance between them.

Hermione took a deep breath, ready to tell Draco the whole truth, ready to accept his anger, even though it didn't make any sense. "Charlie and I were together for about a year. It ended two years ago."

Draco was so caught up in being livid with her that he couldn't hide his surprise. The way they had acted together in those pictures didn't correlate to a long-over relationship.

She sat on the sofa, her hands shaking. "After Ron and I broke up, I met Charlie at a function in Romania. I'd been sent there by the research group I was with to attend a conference, and Charlie was staying in the same hotel for another meeting. We hit it off really well."

Draco hated the pain in her voice. It either meant that Charlie Weasley deserved to have the crap beat out of him or that Hermione was still in love with him. The former Draco would have been happy to oblige, but he suspected the latter. It hurt ... Merlin, it hurt him more than anything had ever hurt in his life. The one woman that he had opened up to, had shared parts of his life with...however small they might be...had wanted to be with and not just for one night, loved another man. He walked to the window and stared out, numb, as she continued.

"We were hesitant at first, but then we couldn't ignore what was happening between us. It was ... I've never felt so connected with another person in my life," she said, ignoring the doubt that had crept into her heart. Her statement had been true, once; until Draco, no one had come closer to her heart than Charlie. However, with Draco, she felt the seamless way they interacted, the way their thoughts seemed to merge, indistinguishable. There was undeniably a connection between them.

"Ron ... didn't take it well, and that's putting it mildly. He made things almost impossible. To this day, I don't understand why, but he hated that Charlie and I got on so well when he and I didn't work out, even though *he* had been the one to finally say, 'It's over.' Ron was angry, bitter, resentful, and vengeful, and he split the family, made it impossible to have a civil interaction with any of them. I couldn't go to Ginny, and I didn't want to put Harry in the middle. I had no one but Charlie, but even he was being

torn in two. It couldn't work that way, and so we ended things."

The man is an idiot, Draco thought to himself.

Hermione took an unsteady breath. She had only told her parents about what had really happened with Charlie and the Weasleys. Even now, years after it had happened, it still hurt. She looked for Draco in the room and found him nearly hidden in shadows in one corner of the room. A bright beam of moonlight shone through the drapes, but he was tucked into the darkness. She could only see his hair and his face, softly lit by the silver light. His face seemed pained, and she couldn't understand why.

For some reason, however, when her eyes fell upon his tall, solitary, forlorn figure, the hurt seemed to ebb. Since Charlie, nothing had been able to ease the pain. Time had transformed it from sharp, radiating sensation to a dull but constant ache whenever she thought about it. Her first sign that something was changing had come when she had gone two weeks without thinking about Charlie once. She had been so scared that she made a concerted effort to remember her former lover. And up until Charlie had Floo'd her, requesting her presence, Hermione hadn't noticed that she didn't miss him. Was time simply pushing her forward, into the next phase? Or was the man across the room partly responsible, through no knowledge of his own?

She was silent for a long while, and Draco finally dragged his gaze to where she sat. He was surprised to find her watching him. He scowled and shifted his weight, returning to stare out the window.

"The thing is," she finally continued. "I have always thought that one day, he and I would ..." She shook her head to herself, at a loss. "Would figure things out and be together again. Get married. Sometimes when we're together, we act as though nothing bad had happened. Harry and Ron don't understand, but they don't say anything. Charlie, he ... he comforts me." Hermione swallowed hard. She had never admitted this, even to her parents. "When I need it. And he comes to me, too. It's not too frequent, but neither of us has ever turned the other away."

Draco clenched his jaw. There it was, the truth. She had been sleeping with Charlie with some regularity following the dissolution of their relationship. He hated how much it hurt, the way it made him feel. As though his entire sense of up and down, of balance and order, had been thrown out and he was left suspended, trying to figure out how to find his way forward.

"Until Friday," she said.

It was spoken so softly that he hadn't been sure he had heard her correctly. "What?" he croaked, his throat oddly dry.

"Charlie is my friend, Draco. But what you and I are doing is important. I couldn't risk messing it up. I knew he would eventually hear that you and I are together, and he wouldn't have understood why I had slept with him while I was with you. I don't cheat; I absolutely refuse to. So I told him about us, and it was better, in the long run, to refuse him."

"You told him. About us," Draco repeated.

"Yes. I had to," she said. "I had to explain why"

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose, not wanting to hear the rest of her sentence. He was a fool to have thought there could be any hope for something more between them. She wanted another, but was refraining in order to help him. No, that wasn't entirely correct; she and Charlie had been officially over for a couple of years. At any point during that time, they could have reconciled, but hadn't. Still, it was obvious where her feelings lay.

"It is my sincere hope that we can bring this matter to a close as soon as possible," he said, still unable to meet her eyes, "so that we can both resume the lives we wish to live."

Hermione felt strangely elated. She wasn't sure if it was from finally releasing everything or something else. It felt as though she had taken an important step forward, though she didn't know where she was going. That didn't matter just then; it was important just to be moving.

"I'm sorry about Friday, Draco," Hermione said, standing from the sofa and turning around to look at him.

His expression was blank. "Why?"

"You were right; it put our work together in jeopardy. I won't be so careless in the future. I also think we should go out in public, maybe this weekend. Friday night, since I know you're free. Let people know, in no uncertain terms, that we are together."

"Okay," he responded listlessly. "If Saturday is better for you, that's fine with me. I won't be seeing Carrie anymore."

It was Hermione's turn to be surprised. "Really? I ... why?"

Because of you!

Draco shrugged, feeling weary. He had been dressed in his work robes all day and felt a sudden longing to be rid of them, to rest his head on his pillow and sleep to forget Hermione and the hurt and confusion she caused. He loosened his tie and undid the top button of his shirt.

"You don't have to do that," Hermione continued. "I know you're very discreet, and so long as I don't have to speak to her again, I can't possibly ask you to give that up..."

"It's done," he sighed, pulling his tie completely off and untucking his shirt. "It was my choice. Don't concern yourself with it."

Hermione bit her lip, suspiciously overjoyed that he wouldn't be sleeping with that woman anymore. Not that she had any right to be jealous, or any claim on him. Merlin, she'd just poured her heart out to him about Charlie! She had no right to want Draco for herself. And yet, as she watched him cross the room, remove his shoes and belt, further unbutton his shirt, reality hit her, and she fell back onto the sofa.

She wanted him. Of course, she had known that, but only somewhere deep, deep down, far away from the sphere of reality. The thought had now materialized in her mind, and she wanted to kick herself for everything she had said about Charlie. The last thing Draco would ever think was that she wanted him. But she couldn't tell Draco the truth, that she had feelings for him and no longer loved Charlie. At worst, he would laugh and tell her how foolish she was for falling for him. At best, he would shut her out, seeking her help only through the post, if he even still wanted it.

"I think we're through for tonight, don't you?" he asked, leaning in the doorway of the closet, shirt fully undone and hanging open.

Hermione silently cursed his undershirt. "Reckon so."

He nodded. "Everything still on for tomorrow?"

"Yes. I've got the afternoon off. Blaise is watching my classes."

"Good." Draco frowned. "We'll discuss our ... date ... at a later time."

"Okay." She didn't like the way he said 'date,' as though it left a bad taste in his mouth. "Night, Draco."

"Goodnight, Hermione." He didn't wait for her to leave and turned into his room.

Hermione stared at the fireplace before her, watching the flames dance and flicker. Had she, by freeing her own heart, turned his away...if it ever even had been in her favor? If not, surely now his was removed from her reach. Hot tears pricked her eyes and she spoke her destination shakily into the flames. She waited a few seconds before stepping through.

Draco watched discreetly as she stood there, and then he watched her go. Despite what he had learned, he was unable to deny his feelings for her, to push them away, to bury them. He had opened his heart a little, and the damage was irreversible. His best defense now was to shield the open wound from further injury in the hopes that soon their association would end and he could be free to nurse his wounds alone.

ooo

A/N: Thanks as always for reading! A line in this chapter was inspired by "Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?" Chapter title from a song by Dar Williams of the same name. Monstrous thanks to my betas, manda, pokeystar, & drcjsnider.

Art Credits: This chapter's fabulous art was created by marmalade fever. The [playlist](#), as always, done by inadaze22. Thank you so much, guys!

Winning You With Words

Chapter 15 of 16

Draco and Hermione continue their task.

Chapter 15 - - Winning You with Words

- - -

But your sweatshirt says it all with the hood over your face

And I can't keep starin' at your mouth without wonderin' how it tastes

~ Jaymay, "Gray or Blue"

Hermione had a difficult time getting through the next morning. She went to breakfast but was jumpy the entire time. When Blaise brought up their Hogsmeade trip that weekend, she had to ask him what he was talking about.

The worst part was that her only morning class didn't start until ten, so she was left to her own devices for two hours. Normally, she wouldn't be so tense before a mission like this...there had been no time for tension during the war...but after her conversation with Draco the night before, she was reduced to a pile of nerves.

The one thought that continually bombarded her was that she was more than just attracted to him. She wanted something. She had told Sheetal that if Draco had treated her during school the way he did now, she would have gone out with him had he asked. What Hermione had finally admitted to herself was that if he asked her out now and not as part of their work together, she would say yes.

"That will never happen," she muttered to herself as she stared at a journal article she hadn't been reading. Frustrated, she closed the journal and made another cup of tea. A glance at the clock told her only half an hour remained until class, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Hermione collected her books and the graded assignments she had to return and started walking toward her classroom.

Harry caught up with her about halfway there.

"Hi, Harry," she said.

"Hey, Hermione." He smiled briefly, and then his expression turned serious. "I tried to find you yesterday, but you'd disappeared."

"I went to Draco's," she said.

Harry frowned. "Yeah? So ... the article in *Witch Weekly* ... You and Charlie?"

Hermione sighed and leaned against the railing of the staircase. "That article is rubbish. I went with Charlie as a favor. I can't believe you'd give any credence to what Rita Skeeter has to say."

"I didn't," Harry assured her. "It just made me wonder, is all. I heard Charlie's speech, saw the way he looked at you. It's none of my business; who you're with should make you happy. I thought you were happy with Malfoy."

"I am." She smiled. "Although I'm surprised that you're questioning me about this. I thought you'd be thrilled to hear I wasn't with Draco anymore."

Harry shook his head. "I want you to be happy, that's all. With Malfoy ... I don't know, it's different. Being with him seems easy for you. That's great, that's exactly what it should be, for the most part. Sure, it'll require work for the relationship to really last, but so far ... you're the happiest I've ever seen you. Maybe even happier than when you were with Charlie. That's what I want for you, Hermione."

"Oh, Harry," she said, wishing she didn't have her arms full so she could hug him. "I think you're absolutely right. I'm surprised every day how ... right it feels with Draco."

"Ron wants you happy, too. He was less than thrilled to see you with Charlie." Harry shook his head. "I never thought I'd see the day when he preferred Draco Malfoy to his own brother. Guess those jealous feelings haven't entirely disappeared."

"Was that his problem?" she asked.

"Yes. I finally got it out of him." He chuckled. "Ron can be quite stubborn too, you know."

"You certainly don't have to tell me." Hermione resumed her course.

"Oh, listen. Molly asked me to pass along an invitation to the Burrow Saturday night," Harry called after her.

"I'll be there," she promised.

"Malfoy's invited too," he added.

Hermione rushed to the railing to look down at Harry. "Really?"

"Yeah." The staircase was now moving him further away from her.

"Okay, I'll talk to him! Thanks, Harry!"

The class flew by, and Hermione's thoughts turned to the dinner invitation. Would Draco accept? It wouldn't do anything for their public reputation, but it would certainly go a long way toward keeping up the image that they were together for her friends. She hoped he would, in part so that Charlie could hear about it.

Hermione suspected that, even after her 'relationship' with Draco ended, her feelings for Charlie wouldn't return. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about that yet. As he seemed to still care very much for her, she thought it would be good for him to get accustomed to her being with someone else.

After class, Hermione had a free period to get through before she could go to lunch with Ginny. She went to her room and double-checked everything she had put into her magic bag: cloak, sunglasses, various hats and hair ties, and a few Extendable Ears. Most importantly was the International Portkey Draco had set up for her. It was a small, pewter replica of the Eiffel Tower, appropriate for a trip to Paris.

Unable to sit still, Hermione left for Diagon Alley early. It would be better to walk off her surplus energy than drive herself crazy by sitting around.

The sun was bright despite the cool air, and the magical street was bustling with activity. Hermione walked the length of it, then checked her watch: ten until noon. Draco was going to make his deposit in precisely one hour, ten minutes before two, Paris time, and she needed to be in place before then. That would mean cutting her lunch with Ginny a bit short, but she knew her friend wouldn't mind.

Ginny was already at their table when Hermione arrived, sipping on a cup of tea.

"You're early," Hermione remarked.

"I had an appointment this morning and got out before I expected," Ginny explained.

"How's your week?" Hermione asked after giving her order to the waiter.

"Good, tiring. James is getting into everything he can get his hands on." Ginny chuckled, shaking her head. "Oh, hey, did Harry mention dinner?"

"He did," Hermione affirmed. "I haven't had a chance to talk to Draco yet, but I hope he'll be available."

Ginny smirked. "Whether he'll want to come is another matter, I take it."

Hermione couldn't help but smile. "I think he's come to terms with the fact that he has to interact with my friends eventually."

"Okay, now that's out of the way. Details, Hermione, don't leave any out," Ginny commanded in the same no-nonsense tone she had used the week before.

Thinking about sleeping with Draco was the last thing Hermione needed at that moment. "Not now, Ginny. I'm afraid I'm not in the mood."

"And I'm afraid I can't let you off this time," Ginny remarked. "Charlie is my brother, and you're my friend. I care about what happens to you, and if there's something going on, I should hope you would tell me about it! Besides, I'm sure Draco saw that ... that dirty gossip rag. What did he have to say?"

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, relief flooding through her. "I'm sorry, Ginny, I thought you meant something else." Then she repeated the conversation she had shared earlier with Harry.

"You're sure you aren't still carrying a torch for Charlie?" Ginny asked after she'd finished.

"Positive." Hermione tried to smile convincingly.

"I just want you to be sure. I think Charlie's still in love with you." Ginny took a sip from her water.

Hermione waited for the explosion of butterflies that she usually experienced when she allowed herself to think that Charlie really did still care for her. It didn't come.

"I think" Hermione paused. Ginny knew most of her musings on the matter and what she was about to say would come as quite a shock. "I think I'm starting to finally get over Charlie."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Really?"

She nodded. "I'm almost certain. I never imagined this would happen, but it is."

"That's amazing!" Ginny beamed. "I'm just glad you're finally moving forward with your life, instead of half-waiting for my brother to stop being such a coward."

Hermione laughed.

Ginny raised her cup to drink. "I'd put money on the fact that a certain blond-haired wizard is at least partially responsible for getting your mind and heart away from Charlie."

Just then, Hermione's wand buzzed, telling her that she had five minutes before the Portkey would activate. "Oh no, Ginny! I've got to go." She stood, counted out her half of the bill and grabbed her purse.

"What? We've barely gotten started!" Ginny protested.

"I know, and I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise!" Hermione let herself out of the gate that surrounded the outdoor eating area and darted down the street. She felt terrible for her hasty retreat, but she didn't want Ginny asking any questions.

Hermione flitted down an alley, pulled the statue from her purse, and waited for the familiar pull at her navel. When the spinning stopped, she found herself in a dark alleyway. Draco had said she would be close to the bank, so Hermione donned her sunglasses and put on a hat and headed toward the street.

The bank, a BNP Paribas, was on the Place Saint Andre Des Artes, one block to her left. Hermione confidently walked toward it, her head held high. As she neared the steps leading up to the old building, a man with bright blond hair exited, glanced in her direction, and then walked away.

Her heart leapt; she knew it was Draco, just leaving after putting the money in his safety deposit box. Hermione then entered the bank and set about her task for the afternoon: watching for someone to request access to the same safe deposit box.

Draco had rented a high security box, the kind that required the bank manager's key to open. Hermione's biggest concern was remaining in the bank, undisturbed, for the entire afternoon. In general, customers didn't loiter in banks, and if she merely stood around, someone would get suspicious or, at the very least, attempt to speak with her.

Draco had considered this, however, and had a solution: she would open a new account at the bank. He had given her a wad of Muggle money for the initial deposit, large enough to warrant the attention of the manager, whom he knew from experience spoke rough English.

The account would take a while to open, and Hermione would have the manager's attention. If anyone came to open a deposit box, she would know.

Opening the new account took about an hour, as Hermione and Draco had anticipated. The language barrier had been a slight hindrance, but the cash sped things along. So Hermione inquired about other bank services, and their explanations took another thirty minutes. When she couldn't legitimately keep the manager occupied any longer, she requested a safety deposit box. An assistant manager would help her with that, but she would still have access to the room and could therefore see anyone who entered.

The deposit box was rented and paid for a full year. Hermione thanked the woman who had helped her and checked her watch: four. The bank would close at quarter after five; she had an hour and fifteen minutes left.

She decided to inquire about a home loan and sat filling out paperwork for another half an hour. A French-English dictionary was all she had with her, and it took her a long time to get through the words on the loan application. However, she took her seat right outside the manager's office. It was also beside a water cooler and snack machine, the offerings of which she partook about halfway through the form.

Hermione saw the bank manager go into the restroom. She quickly decided she needed to think about the loan and hurried into the women's room and quickly altered her appearance. She took her hair out of the tight bun, put on a pair of fake prescription glasses, pulled off the floor-length dress to reveal a skirt and tank top, and popped a piece of chewing gum in her mouth.

When she returned to the lobby, no one recognized her, and she stood in the long line of people waiting to be helped by the tellers. She kept one eye on the bank manager's office and chewed her gum loudly, drawing annoyed looks from the other patrons.

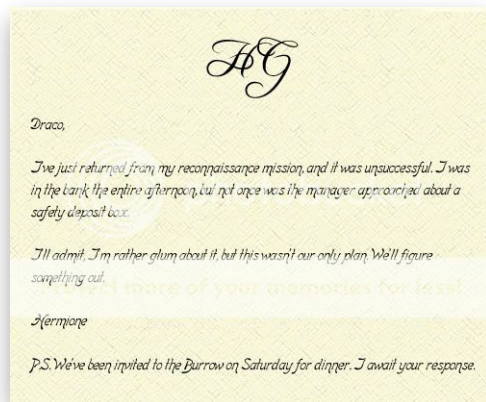
By the time she reached the counter, only five minutes remained until closing. Then she suddenly remembered she'd forgotten her account number and promised to return the next day.

Hermione left the bank, feeling quite pleased with herself for her success at being able to stay for so long, but also disappointed that nothing had happened. No one had come for the money. She wouldn't be able to come back the next day, and she knew Draco had a lot of work to do.

She returned to the alley and waited for the Portkey to activate once more, returning her to Hogsmeade. At precisely five-twenty-three, the Portkey whisked her away, dropping her safely in the "Arrivals" area at the end of the main road of the small magical town.

The elation accompanying her success had waned, and Hermione was left feeling despondent. She had been certain that they would learn something useful today. She shrugged to herself. There was no use fretting about it.

Hermione Apparated to the edge of the wards around Hogwarts and walked the rest of the way to the castle. Once inside, she went straight to her room to write a letter.



After a quick trip to the owlery, the letter was on its way. She took her time walking back, her thoughts turning to the brief moment she had seen Draco earlier that day. It had been reassuring and strengthening to see him after their intense disagreement the night before. Just knowing that he was still there, still going forward with the plan, and that he hadn't decided to cut her out of his life, had eased a few of her worries.

His expression had been blank when he had glanced at her, but his eyes were alight with anxiety. She might have been imagining it, transplanting her own reaction at his presence onto him, but she thought she saw him relax, just a little bit, when he caught sight of her.

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Hermione received a letter the next morning between her fifth- and seventh-year classes. It was from Draco. Knowing the room would begin filling up at any moment, she ripped into the envelope and opened the card.



The letter was abrupt and void of even the little humor his last one had contained. That bothered her more than she wanted to admit.

When all of her students had taken their seats, Hermione forced a smile. "To begin today, I would like a brief update on your progress. Write out what you have done so far and how you plan to spend the rest of your time in order to achieve your goal. You have half an hour."

Most of the class looked slightly stricken, and Hermione suspected they had been letting the assignment slide.

While they worked, Hermione went over the previous afternoon again, looking for anything she missed. Without a Pensieve, it was really impossible for her to remember details about things she did not pay attention to. She would ask to borrow Minerva's Pensieve after lunch.

When the time was up, Hermione called for their parchments. Two of the groups seemed unfazed, but the third, the one with Corey, Damian, and Karalynn, appeared nervous.

"Now we will begin a discussion of the use of Arithmancy in Divination." Hermione stood and went to the board. "The author of your book has an opinion on the matter. Does anyone remember?"

Samaya raised her hand. When Hermione nodded to her, she said, "Something to the effect that, when used in conjunction, the two disciplines can yield powerful results."

"Do you agree?" she asked the entire class. After a few moments of silence, she smiled. "Don't everyone speak at once. Really, by this point in your studies, you should have an opinion. I know all of you have taken Divination, so ... don't be afraid to disagree with the author. He's just one wizard."

Evan hesitantly put his hand up. "I think they can be used together, but I don't know about 'powerful results.'"

Hermione cheered internally. "Why do you say that, Evan?"

"If it was true, then wouldn't someone have already discovered it?" he ventured. "Learned how to use this ... power?"

"That seems like a reasonable conclusion," she replied. "These disciplines have been in existence for centuries, and not much has changed in either one. Now, anyone else?"

The class flew by, and soon Hermione was heading to the Great Hall for lunch. It would be a hurried meal today, as she needed to use Minerva's Pensieve.

When she was back in her room after securing the use of the magical device for the day, she pulled the memory from the bank out of her head and sent it into the swirling grey liquid. With a deep breath, she touched the liquid's surface.

Hermione landed in the lobby of the bank. She followed herself through the path she'd taken the day before, but paid attention to everything around her. No one was free from suspicion: the other people in the bank, the employees, the security guard. Security

Quickly she scanned the corners of the rooms and smiled at what she saw: video cameras. She would be willing to wager that there were cameras in the safety deposit box room as well as behind the counters and in the back of the bank. If she could get those videos, then she might be able to see if someone, even magically, entered the bank and somehow opened the box.

Without waiting to watch the entire memory, Hermione exited the Pensieve. A glance at the clock showed that she had an hour and twenty minutes before her next class. That wasn't enough time to set up International transportation, get into the bank, somehow get the video, get back to England, and be ready for her class. However, if she already had a Portkey ready when class ended, she could easily get to the bank with plenty of time to spare.

Hermione went to her fireplace and put in a Floo-call to Draco's office.

His personal assistant answered. "Hello, Mr. Malfoy's office. Ah, Miss Granger," said Caleb with a pleasant smile.

"Hi, Caleb. Is Draco available?" she asked.

"He's in a call at the moment. Would you like to hold?"

"Sure," she said. Caleb and his desk disappeared, and she was treated to a slowly moving panoramic ocean scene, complete with beach sounds. The wizarding equivalent of call-waiting.

Only a few minutes passed before Draco's office came into focus, and she saw him looking anxiously into the fire.

"Hermione," he said formally.

"Hi, Draco." She gave him a quick smile before launching into her request. "I need a favor. I have this idea that I think might work, but it's a bit complicated."

"Name it," he said.

"I need a Portkey to Paris, same place as yesterday, for two-fifteen our time. Set it to return me to Hogsmeade two hours, ten minutes later."

Draco frowned. "You're going back to the bank?"

"Yes. I can't really explain right now. I'll write to you when I return." She needed him to simply agree without asking any questions. Time was of the essence.

"All right," he agreed warily. "Do you still have the one you used last time?"

She nodded. "Do you need it?"

"No," he answered slowly, "they'll be able to just reconnect it, since the location is the same."

Hermione smiled warmly. "Thank you, Draco."

He seemed to be fighting with himself about reacting and eventually just nodded rapidly. "You're welcome. Make sure to let me know what this is all about later."

"I will! I promise!" Hermione was about to end the connection when a thought occurred to her. "Draco, wait!" she called.

He reappeared, his expression one of mild interest.

"Do you think it would be okay to use magic today? Since the money has already been taken?"

Draco's brow furrowed. "I-I'm not sure, I hadn't thought of it. I don't see why not. Hermione, what are you doing?"

"No time to explain. Thanks again!" She didn't wait for a reply to exit the Floo, and she sat on the floor and breathed a sigh of relief. She would have to end her class early today, but that was all right. As it was, she would only have two hours to get the video, and she had no idea yet how to accomplish it.

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Hermione stared at the outside of the bank for a good ten minutes before she decided to simply Disillusion herself. If the blackmailer found out, he couldn't do anything but forbid magic at any time for future occasions. None of his letters mentioned anything about magic after the deadline had passed.

She returned to the alley and performed the spell, then stepped back into the plaza. Once she was outside the bank doors, she only had to wait a few minutes for someone to open the door so she could sneak in.

The same was true for the door that led into the back of the bank. However, finding the video would not be an easy task. Hermione tried to think of any movies she had seen that would help, but nothing came to mind. With no other choice, she resorted to going through the rooms, one by one.

Half an hour later, she found the monitoring room. Two men sat at a desk and watched eight small monitors, each displaying a different scene.

"*Stupefy!*" she whispered, and the men slumped in their seats. Hermione quietly shut the door behind her and locked it, then propped the men up to look like they were still watching the monitors and put them under the full Body-Bind. From the outside looking in, nothing would appear amiss.

Frantically she searched for anything that would help, only to discover that all the recordings were digital.

"Blast!"

Hermione glanced around the room for a spare disk on which she could put the information. Silently she thanked her parents for buying a computer and that they had needed her help to set up. She successfully navigated through the hard drive, but when she came to the archived video data and attempted to put it on a CD, a password was required. Briefly, she considered reviving one of the guards and getting the code from him, but dismissed it. Time was running short.

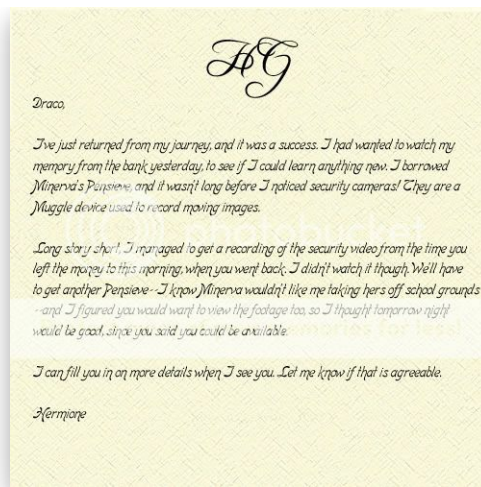
There was a spell she had heard of from Harry, who had a friend who was in Magical Law Enforcement. It could provide magical passwords for low-level security. She wondered if the spell could be modified to work on Muggle electronic equipment. Somehow she doubted it and didn't want to risk deleting the information entirely.

With just forty-five minutes remaining, Hermione decided to watch the video from the day before and use a Pensieve to examine it later. She clicked on the appropriate day, and eight images popped up. She couldn't focus on them all at once, but she knew they'd be reviewable in the Pensieve. She kept most of her attention on the safety deposit room and the back rooms of the bank, especially the room directly behind the deposit boxes, where bank employees had access to the wall behind the boxes. Then she put the video on fast-forward, starting from when Draco entered with the manager and made the deposit.

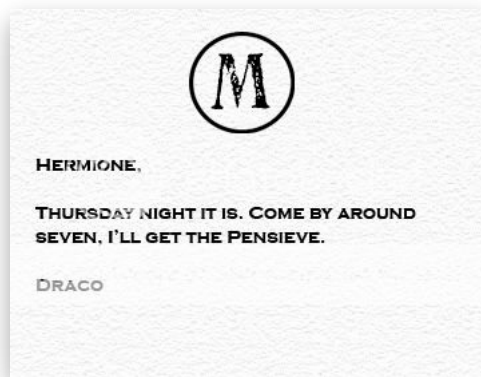
To her delight, the video ran even after the bank closed, and she got all the data from the time Draco was there to when he returned to check the box. Surely they would be able to see something; the money couldn't simply disappear into thin air.

She now had only five minutes before the Portkey was set to activate, but it didn't matter where she was if she was invisible. Hermione unlocked and opened the door and had just revived the guards when it activated, sending her hurtling through space to Hogsmeade.

Hermione felt triumphant, and it was evident in her letter to Draco.



His response later that evening was disheartening because she'd been hoping for a positive sign from him, something to show that they were okay. Instead she got a very short note that left her feeling less than enthusiastic.



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Draco was anxious. In the days since he had last seen Hermione, he had tried to keep his thoughts focused on work and on trying to identify the blackmailer. Besides, he had no reason to think of her now that he'd mucked everything up. His world seemed far bleaker without the hope that had unknowingly taken root deep inside him.

Now she was due back at his house in a few minutes, and he was going to spend a large portion of his weekend with her. He wasn't sure how to act around her anymore.

He heard the Floo activating from his bedroom and took a deep breath.

"Draco?" she called.

"I'm coming." He joined her in the closet-room in time to see her removing her cloak.

"Hi." Her smile was timid, but it still set his heart racing.

"Hello," he returned awkwardly. Draco indicated the Pensive on the coffee table. "Shall we begin?"

"Right now?" she asked, puzzled.

Draco remained near the doorway and crossed his arms. "Well, yes. What else is there to do?"

Hermione's expression was confused, and she stood with her jumper half on, just her right arm through the sleeve. "I-I ... shouldn't have assumed. I'm sorry. Would you mind if I ran to the kitchen and found something to eat?"

He blinked. She had been expecting dinner, and why wouldn't she? Every night they had worked together, he had gladly provided the meal. "No, no," he said. "I'll call Chippy to bring us something."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." He forced a smile. "I wasn't thinking."

"If you'd like," she started, pulling her jumper completely off, "I could tell you about my day yesterday while we wait."

He agreed, and Hermione relayed her trip back to the bank. She became quite animated, clearly pleased with the success of her venture. As she talked, Draco slowly relaxed. Thankfully, she wasn't behaving any differently than she had before, so maybe things wouldn't be horrendously awkward.

Dinner arrived before she had finished, and he ate in strained silence as she talked through the first half of the meal.

Then she abruptly stopped, set down her fork and frowned.

"What?" he asked.

"This You. I don't want things to be weird between us."

Draco resolutely did not meet her eyes. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't give me that," she said. "Ever since I got here you've been stiff and distant. It's just us, I know, but you can't be like that. We've got a relationship to fake."

There was no way he was going to confess to her that he was stiff and distant because he wanted her and she was in love with another man.

"It's nothing. I've had a long week," he explained. That much was true, at least. "I'll be back to normal by our date tomorrow night."

Hermione tilted her head slightly and looked at him thoughtfully. "Draco, may I ask you something?"

"Sure," he replied warily.

She placed her fork on her plate and took a breath. "I've seen a few different sides to you, and I was wondering which one was the real Draco Malfoy."

He frowned. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Are you the man I see on our dates? Who laughs easily, makes silly, snarky jokes and intelligent conversation?" She smiled shyly. "Or are you really angry and snappish, which I've seen break through the exterior on an occasion or two. Maybe you're the man I see most often, weary and aged beyond your years."

Draco shifted awkwardly. The question made him uncomfortable. "I ... don't have a good answer for you. Can't I be all three?"

She smiled. "Oh sure, everyone has sides to their personalities. I was merely wondering which one was predominant."

He sighed. "I don't know. I'm just ... me. This is me. I don't sit around and feel sorry for myself, but I also don't have a lot to be happy about."

Hermione considered his words, really gave thought to them in light of what she knew about his life and what she had learned over the past month. His childhood was pampered, he was the apple of his mother's eye, and he got everything he wanted. When Voldemort returned, he had expected that life to improve; instead, his father had landed in Azkaban, and he had been given the task of killing Dumbledore or his own parents would be killed.

That year had been very difficult for him, and in the end, he couldn't do it. The following year he had spent trying to be invisible...to his parents, Voldemort, the teachers at school, and even, to some degree, his own friends. Immediately after the war ended, his father was once again sent to prison, and the job of running a multi-million Galleon company had been dropped in his lap with no training and no help. Then, to top it all off, he received the blackmail letters, a burden he couldn't share with anyone. In the seven years that followed, he worked almost every waking moment to make his life, and the life of his mother, tolerable, without letting her know their financial strains.

No, she doubted he had much to smile about.

"That's ... not fair," she said finally.

Draco looked at her, resignation on his face. "That's life, Hermione. That's *my* life, anyway. No one ever promised it would be fair."

"So you don't know who you really are."

His eyes were heavy with sadness that he couldn't hide. "I would very much like to find out some day."

They were silent for a while, and Draco was lost in his thoughts. He had never been allowed to simply be, to float indeterminately until something struck his fancy. When the mess with the blackmailer was finished, he looked forward to discovering what he wanted for his future.

One thing he knew for certain: he wanted to love and be loved. It was impossible for him not to think of Hermione as he considered this, and he thought it was strange how easy it was now to admit he cared for her, wanted her, fancied her. Perhaps because he knew he couldn't have her, there was no risk in the admission.

"Are you ready to begin?" Hermione asked.

He nodded and followed her to the sofa.

Carefully, Hermione removed the memory and put it in the Pensieve. "I'll go first," she said and then dipped her finger into the iridescent fluid.

When she disappeared, Draco took a deep breath before plunging a fist through the liquid's surface. He arrived beside Hermione in a small room. Two men sat apparently lifeless in chairs, and one wall was covered with small television screens. Draco knew enough about Muggle technology to recognize them.

"Over here," Hermione said, motioning to where a third chair was Summoned, seemingly out of nowhere.

Then he remembered that she'd been invisible. Together they watched the video screens as they sped through the nineteen hours of footage in a little over half an hour. Nothing interesting happened in the safety deposit box rooms, but at about eleven-thirty at night, according to the timestamp on the video, someone entered the room on the opposite side of the wall from Draco's box, removed a picture from the wall, and opened a back door to the box. The money was removed, the picture replaced, and the person disappeared.

Draco and Hermione left the memory, and Hermione sat staring at the Pensieve. "I can't believe it," she said after a while.

"Did you get a good look at the man?"

"Yes, I saw him yesterday and today. He works for the bank, as a teller. It's not a very prominent position" She shook her head. "What I don't understand is why no one noticed! It's on video!"

Draco frowned. "Either no one monitors the videos at night, and since no one has reported anything stolen, they haven't bothered to look, or whoever is watching the videos has been given an incentive not to notice anything."

"I'm almost certain that a guard sits in that room twenty-four hours a day. If that man in the video is a bank employee, what is he doing getting the money like that for the blackmailer?" Hermione stood and started slowly pacing.

"The blackmailer might have an accomplice, who got a job at the bank for just this purpose. Or...and this is my gut instinct...the blackmailer put the employee under the Imperius and possibly the night guard as well."

She stopped and turned to face him, leaning against the wall. "You think Dark magic is involved?"

Draco nodded. "It's the most likely scenario. The blackmailer's already shown no qualms in using Dark Arts with the spell on the letters. Since this employee isn't someone either of us recognizes, I think we can almost certainly rule out a willing accomplice. The Imperius fits, Hermione."

"You're right, it makes the most sense," she said. "However, I'm still going to check on that man, see if he's a Muggle or wizard, find out when he was hired."

"And how are you going to do that?" he asked, one eyebrow rising on his forehead.

"The bank is open on Saturday. I'll go in, try to talk to him. Flirt a little, if I have to." She smiled and shrugged. "I'll figure out something."

Draco ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know that it would be such a good idea for you to flirt with him," he said, trying not to sound too upset at the idea.

"It'll be harmless, I'm sure," she returned.

"What if he is a wizard? An accomplice or even the blackmailer in disguise? He'll surely recognize you, and then you could be in danger."

Hermione scoffed. "I'll be in disguise, and besides, I think I can handle him."

Draco stood and went toward her. "It's not that I'm worried about your abilities, Hermione. If my fears are confirmed, then we're dealing with a Death Eater. I don't want you getting too close. You're already a target because we're dating. I won't risk it."

Hermione wavered between annoyance that he thought his word was final where she was concerned and feeling flattered that he was clearly worried about her well-being. "Do you really think we are dealing with a Death Eater?" she asked, steering the conversation in another direction. She would go to the bank Saturday, whether he wanted her to or not.

"Yes," he said gravely. "I've always had my suspicions; I knew it was someone who practiced Dark Arts, but now ... with the Imperius ... Have you heard of Occam's razor?"

"Of course," she said. "All things being equal, the simplest explanation is best."

"The simplest explanation in this case is that a Death Eater is blackmailing me, using some hapless Muggle to retrieve the money and somehow get it to him, and then living a life like a king on my money." Draco didn't bother trying to hide his anger. "If I'm right, this situation just became more dangerous for you," he said. "I don't want you taking any unnecessary risks. This is my problem, I will handle it."

Her eyes widened. "You don't want my help anymore?"

"What? No!" he blurted. "I mean, yes, I still want your help. But the field work goes to me from now on."

"That's ridiculous," she argued, crossing her arms. "I am more than capable of completing whatever mission we devise."

Draco took a step nearer, his expression torn. "Please don't misunderstand me, Hermione. I would never question your capability. But I cannot ask...*won't* ask...for you to put yourself in danger for this problem which is solely my own."

Hermione inhaled sharply. The look in his eyes was almost ... desperation? Why would he be so adamant against her future participation? "You don't have to ask."

Her statement surprised him. He knew she was fiercely loyal, but he had never anticipated that loyalty would ever include him. Draco was touched, but he also knew he wouldn't be convincing her, either. He decided to let it go and deal with it if the subject resurfaced.

"I appreciate that," he said with a half-smile. Merlin, she'd made him forget that she was in love with someone else. He hadn't noticed that they had moved and were standing only a few feet from each other, and now when he looked into her eyes, he saw that she had just made the same realization.

"Let's talk about tomorrow," he said, retreating from where she stood and returning to an armchair.

"That's right; we have a date to plan." She smiled warily.

"I have three options for you, and it's your choice." He clasped his hands in his lap. "One, the Russian Magical Philharmonic is in London for two performances, one tomorrow night. It's supposed to be quite a show; they've combined Muggle and magical instruments."

She merely nodded, and he continued. "Two, there is a book reading in Hogsmeade with Gheralynne Hanswick, and she'll also be signing her latest book."

Hermione gasped. "I love all of her novels!"

Draco raised an eyebrow and silently thanked Blaise for his information. "Finally, there is an important Quidditch game between England and Spain. Both teams are undefeated, and the winner will claim the top spot in the rankings. The choice is yours."

Hermione nearly blurted out the book reading, but then she stopped to think. That choice would be mostly for her, and the fact that Draco had even suggested it sent the butterflies fluttering in her stomach. Clearly he'd been thinking about her with that option.

They would probably both enjoy the symphony, but it was such a formal occasion, and they would be required to sit in silence the entire evening.

The Quidditch game, however, would be mostly for Draco. That was her choice, and she told him so.

His jaw dropped. "A-are you certain?"

"I am," she replied firmly. "Just tell me what colors to wear."

Draco then narrowed his eyes at her. Never in his wildest dreams would he have guessed she would pick the Quidditch game, and he was instantly suspicious. "Why?"

Hermione laughed. "I can't tell you my nefarious plot, Draco. That would ruin the surprise!"

He relaxed and sighed. "In all seriousness: why? I thought you hated Quidditch?"

"I don't hate it, never have," she explained, taking a seat on the sofa. "I've never understood the appeal, but I have always enjoyed cheering for Gryffindor, and for Ireland at the World Cup. It's an exciting sport, and I'm sure I'll have a good time."

"Better than the other two?" he asked skeptically.

"Maybe, maybe not." She shrugged. "I know you'd enjoy Quidditch the most, that you never take a break from your work, never take a holiday, and that you're always stressed about finances and the blackmailer. This date is for you as much as for me, so ... That's why."

Draco had wanted to kiss her on a few occasions before, but that was the first time he really had to struggle to refrain. It wasn't that she had said yes to the game, by far his first choice, but that she had done it for him. She was right; in the seven years he had been head of Malfoy, Inc., he hadn't taken a single day off work. When he was sick, he'd simply worked from his bed. He had been to various events, even a Quidditch match or two, but they were all business related. Not one had been simply for fun.

Hermione noticed the strange way Draco was looking at her, and her heart started pounding. They weren't exactly close, she was at the far end of the sofa from where he sat in his chair, but he looked as though he might leap across that space and kiss her. She would not have objected.

The moment passed, and Draco shifted in the chair. "Quidditch it is, then. England's colors are blue and gold."

"Lovely," she remarked, more disappointed than she could have anticipated that the kiss didn't happen. "What time should I be here?"

"The game begins at six. I'll get us a box, and we can have dinner there," he said.

"Maybe we shouldn't get a box," she said, thoughtful. "The more I think about it, the more I realize what a good choice the match is."

"Oh? How so?"

"I would imagine a lot of people will be there, and more people will see us. It'll be a great chance to show them that the whole business with Charlie really was nothing. They'll see us together, happy, and then Rita's rubbish won't matter anymore." She smiled at her conclusion.

"Good point." Draco returned the smile and then quickly decided he needed to be anywhere but in an enclosed space with her a minute longer. He stood from his seat and began tidying the room.

Hermione got the message. "Well, tomorrow then," she said, activating the Floo. "What time should I arrive?"

"How about five-thirty?" he suggested. "That will give us time to get there and find our seats without worrying about missing the opening whistle."

"All right." She smiled. "Good night, Draco."

"Good night, Hermione."

His back was to her, and she smiled as she stepped into the waiting flames. Hopefully the whole unpleasant business about Charlie and Carrie was behind them, and they could move forward with their task.

And maybe something more.

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A/N: Thanks for reading!! Art for this chapter was done by moonjameskitten. Be sure to check it out! See the link on my profile. You can also find the link to the playlist, done by inadaze22. Chapter title taken from one of the songs on this week's playlist, Gray or Blue, by Jaymay.

Do This With Me

Chapter 16 of 16

Draco and Hermione continue their efforts.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 16 - - Do This With Me

- - -

If you're gonna fall,

I'll let you know,

that I will pick you up

like you for I,

I felt this thing,

I can't replace.

~ Angels & Airwaves, "The Adventure"

Draco woke up Friday in a good mood, and nothing, not even his impending lunch with Pansy, could ruin it. He started the day with his usual two cups of coffee and half a dose of the modified Pepper-Up before dressing and heading to work.

When Caleb arrived, Draco set him to a special task, one that gave the secretary pause. "Are you certain, Sir? You don't want me to sort your mail, handle your Floo messages ...?"

"Sort the mail, yes, please. Then I'll deal with the messages. I need the information by lunch." Draco even gave the younger man a clap on the back before ushering him out of the office.

The morning meetings flew by faster than usual, and soon Draco was Apparating to Diagon Alley to meet Pansy. She had picked a new café for them to try and was already at a table when he arrived.

"Hello, Pansy," he said brightly.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked immediately, her brow furrowed in concern.

Draco laughed. "Nothing! What makes you think something's wrong?"

"You never smile at me," she explained, crossing her arms. "You rarely smile, period, and you're never excited to see me. What's going on?"

"I'm ... happy," he said, realizing it was true. Merlin, he needed to figure this out before things got out of hand. Otherwise, when he and Hermione parted ways, his reaction would not be good. Though, at least his sour mood would be authentic.

Pansy raised on perfectly trimmed eyebrow. "Oh? I take it things with Granger are back on track, then?"

"They were never off track," he said.

She looked skeptical. "So that whole business with Charlie Weasley was ... what, exactly?"

"Just as I said," Draco replied. "They were at the awards banquet as friends. His date had cancelled on him; he asked her to go."

"Then why was she so bloody happy in those photos?" Pansy demanded.

Draco shrugged. "Turns out he was getting an award for his care of dragons. He had done something to improve their quality of life, or something. You know how she's always been interested in the rights of magical creatures."

"And you have always thought it was rubbish," Pansy said pointedly.

"That's true," he admitted. "However, it's hard to dismiss her arguments. She gets so incredibly passionate about her causes."

Pansy smirked. "I see why you listen. You just get her all worked up and then shag her rotten. You're terrible, Draco Malfoy."

Draco shook his head and drank his entire glass of water, all the while thinking unpleasant thoughts about Filch cleaning the loo so that he wouldn't react to Pansy's statement. The last thing he needed to do was think about shagging Hermione in any way, much less after she was all fired up about something.

Another glass of water was required.

"You all right?" Pansy asked.

"Fine. Just fine. How are you?" He knew how she loved talking about herself and hoped to steer her attention away from Hermione.

"We're not finished talking about you, yet," she declared. "So she isn't in love with Weasley?"

"They're just friends," he insisted, silently cheering himself for his half-truth.

"If you say so," Pansy sighed. "I suppose she is spared another day."



The waiter arrived with their meals and both began to eat. As Pansy added a lump of sugar to her tea, she asked, "What's got you in such a good mood though? I assume that you'll be seeing Granger, but that's nothing new."

"You're right," he affirmed. "I am seeing Hermione...I really wish you'd start calling her that. And even though that's enough to make me happy, we're going to a Quidditch game tonight. The big one, England against Spain."

Pansy frowned. "I didn't know Granger was into Quidditch."

"She doesn't follow it, but she likes to watch." He shrugged. "It was her choice."

Pansy studied him in silence for a few seconds, and then her expression softened. "Wait. You're going to a game? Draco, that ... that's incredible! You haven't done anything for yourself since ... well, too long."

He grinned. "I know. I'm really looking forward to it."

"What did you mean, it was her choice?" Pansy asked. After Draco's explanation, her eyes were wide. "She picked Quidditch over books? Are you sure this is really Granger and not some Polyjuiced version?"

Draco chuckled, and suddenly he didn't want to share Hermione's reason with Pansy. Even if she could appreciate it, he wanted to keep that between Hermione and him.

"I'm quite certain," he said, turning his attention to his food in hopes that Pansy wouldn't press the topic. After a few moments of uncharacteristic silence, he glanced up to find Pansy worrying her lip. "Pansy?"

She smiled automatically, but then her expression turned apprehensive. "I've got something to tell you."

"All right," he said, giving her his full attention.

"The thing is ... I'm sort of ... well, I'm seeing someone," she stammered.

Draco almost laughed at how worked up she'd made herself to say *that*. But laughing would probably anger her and she wouldn't continue talking about it. "Yeah?" he said simply.

"Yes," she continued. "He's a really great man, Draco. Kind, thoughtful, attentive, compassionate ... I'm quite crazy about him."

"That's wonderful." He smiled. Her tone was different this time than with any man she had mentioned before. She hadn't made a single comment about his looks or his prowess. That was certainly telling.

"I would like for you to meet him," she added, her knuckles white from gripping her napkin.

"Of course," he said reassuringly. "I'd be glad to."

"Are you busy tomorrow night?" Pansy asked. "I'd like to have you over for dinner. You and ... Hermione."

Draco's eyes widened in surprise. "I'm not sure which should shock me more: you inviting her over, or calling her by her name."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Is that a yes?"

"Actually, can we make it another day? We've got plans at the Burrow." He tried to say it with a straight face, but couldn't quite manage it. He blinked.

"Amazing," Pansy said, shaking her head. "You must really be in a bad way to willingly go there."

The line between the truth and the lie had long been blurred, so much so now that Draco didn't have to worry about what he was saying. "You could say that," he admitted.

"Don't tell me you love her," Pansy scolded. "You've only been together a month...I know, I've been keeping track."

"If I'm not, then I'm well on my way," he replied, taking a sip from his tea.

Pansy gasped. "You aren't going to ... to *marry* her, are you? Merlin's beard, what would your parents say? Oh! Do they even know? Lucius can't approve, but if your mother has taken a liking to her, then he'll be civil for her." She paused only long enough to catch her breath. "That's what you have to do. Ingratiate her to your mother. Then Lucius will accept her."

"Whoa, whoa, stop!" Draco exclaimed, chuckled. "You're getting quite ahead of yourself. As you said, we've only been together a month. As for my parents ... Let's just say their vacation was well-timed."

"Surely they must know," Pansy argued.

"They do, and Father wasn't pleased. As you could well understand, given his ... history of intolerance and family history."

"And your mother?" she asked.

Draco cleared his throat. "In her most recent letter, she said she was looking forward to meeting Hermione. Enough about me, tell me how long you've been seeing this bloke I'm to meet." He wasn't looking forward to what would follow: a lengthy detailing of all their dates, letters, and rendezvous, but if she was talking about herself, then she couldn't think about him and Hermione.

He was surprised, therefore, when Pansy clammed up and said nothing more than, "A few weeks."

Draco tried to get her to expound, but she refused to provide him any details, including the man's name. He did promise to discuss the possibility of dinner the following Saturday with Hermione, and Pansy assured him that all his questions would be answered at that time.

As he returned to his office, Draco decided the whole conversation had been strange, but it had not dampened his mood in the least.

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At five minutes until six, Hermione was rushing from the Slytherin Common Room to her own rooms. She had requested Samaya's help with straightening her hair, something she rarely did and only when aided by a professional. The idea was to make it look like she was putting effort into her relationship with Draco.

However, the entire exercise had been more effort than either she or Samaya had anticipated. Already late, she still had to change, get her things together, and Floo to Draco's room.

"Hey, Hermione!" said Harry as she rushed down the hall.

"Oh, hi, Harry!" she called back, not slowing.

"Where are you going?" he asked, hurrying to follow her.

"Meeting Draco. At six. I'm late," she panted.

"What's on the agenda?" Harry was jogging lightly to keep up.

"Quidditch." He stopped. Hermione considered leaving him, but couldn't. She turned around, breathing heavily. "What?"

"Quidditch. Tonight. *The* game?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"I suppose you could call it *the* game. Which starts in ... oh, bollocks! Two minutes! I've got to go, Harry!" She resumed her course to her room, this time full-out running.

"What about tomorrow?" he shouted.

"We'll be there!" Hermione called out her password before she reached the door and opened it with a quickly muttered spell. Once inside, she started throwing her clothes off and pulling on the pair of jeans and long-sleeved blue shirt she had picked out. She'd Charmed it to have gold stripes at the ends of the sleeves and around the collar...England's colors, but subtly displayed.

She wrapped a cloak around her shoulders, slipped into a pair of brown flats, and put on a little lip gloss. The Floo was waiting, and she called out her destination and rushed into the flames.

Draco was pacing when she emerged, and he looked up, startled. Then he stared as he took in the sight of her.

"Your hair," he commented.

"Do you like it?" she asked. Samaya had straightened it, then applied a product that would make it shiny.

"It's nice," he said, still examining it curiously. "It really makes you look different."

Hermione couldn't help but notice that for the first time since they'd been 'dating,' he hadn't complimented her. "Different is good?"

"Different is ... different. I suppose I'm so used to seeing your hair curly that I'm not quite sure what to make of this yet." He smiled. "You look lovely."

It didn't help. All that effort she had put into her hair, all that time "Oh! I'm so sorry I'm late!"

He laughed. "It's fine. We won't really miss much. Are you ready to go?"

She nodded.

"We'll be using the Traveling Room," Draco said. "This fireplace is only connected to your room. Is that all right?"

"Yes, I think I've conquered your drawing room. Not that I'd like to spend any time there." For the first time, Hermione noticed what he was wearing: khaki trousers, brown shoes, and a dark blue, long-sleeved v-neck T-shirt that clung to every hard line on his chest and arms. He was thin and lean, muscular but not bulging.

She blatantly stared...ogled, rather...as he walked through his bedroom.

He paused at the door and frowned at his apparel. "Is something the matter?"

"Not at all," she said, swallowing hard. "I've ... just ... never seen you in anything but work attire. It just occurred to me." Surely he would see through that lame comment!

"I wasn't even sure I had anything," he said, motioning her out the door. "I've had this shirt since Hogwarts, and I think it might be too snug."

"No!" Hermione rushed. "It's not. It's perfectly fine. Besides, it's too late to change."

Draco eyed her skeptically, but said nothing more. In the Traveling Room, he grabbed a light jacket and an over-cloak. Then they traveled via Floo to the Quidditch stadium.

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Draco had done as Hermione suggested and purchased tickets that weren't in a box. However, he still had a reputation to uphold, so he got seats that were in the next best section. Each place had a cushioned seat and back, cup holder, and call button, which could be used to order food from an extensive menu.

Unlike the Quidditch World Cup, England's stadium was permanent, and the season ticket holders were granted luxurious perks.

"Wow, this is amazing!" Hermione said, testing out the reclining capability of her seat.

"Hard to imagine we're not watching this on the telly," Draco commented, pulling the menu from a pocket on the outside of his chair. The score was 30-10, England behind. The teams were well-matched, so a long game was anticipated.

"You know," said Hermione, turning in her spot to face him. "That's not the first time you've mentioned Muggle technology. And when I was telling you about my trip to the bank, you never stopped me to ask me to explain about cameras, or computers, or CDs. Why is that?"

Draco blinked, completely taken by surprise at her question. "I ... To be honest, the details are boring."

"I'm pretty sure we're going to be sitting here awhile," Hermione said teasingly.

He considered his options but came to the conclusion there was no harm in telling her. He had already confessed his biggest secret, and he trusted that she wouldn't break his confidence in this matter, either.

"I've never told this to anyone," he said as a warning.

"Really? Why not?" She repositioned her body in the seat, both legs on the floor and facing the game. However, she leaned closer to Draco so he could speak quietly.

"My father, I suppose. Protection from those who aren't so tolerant." Draco had leaned closer as she had, and now he could smell her hair. It was different, but not unpleasantly so. Still, it wasn't quite *her*.

"Oh?" Hermione said.

"It's nothing bad," Draco assured her. "It's just ... oh, hang it all. Many years ago, my father invested in Muggle communications. That's how he gained most of his current fortune."

Hermione gasped, which happened to coincide with a goal for England. "You're lying."

"No. When I found out, I was ... astonished. Dumbfounded."

"I don't blame you!" she said, still stunned at his admission.

"It took me a full year to get familiar with the products my father dealt in. He'd started in phone service, long distance, but then the field exploded, and he added cellular companies, internet ... Now I'm hearing big things about something called Bluetooth. Have to make a decision on that in the coming weeks."

"This is so surreal," Hermione said, glancing out over the action. One of England's Chasers had the Quaffle and was racing toward Spain's goals. "We're at a Quidditch game, talking about cell phones. Do you have one?"

"Not anymore. I did for awhile, but I didn't care for it. I got calls at all hours, it was impersonal, and I didn't like conducting business that way. Got rid of it."

"Wow," she said. "I suppose I can see why you wouldn't want that information readily available." Hermione paused, and then scowled. "Lucius Malfoy can belittle, kill, torture, and maim Muggles, but he has no problem working with them, so long as it bolsters his Gringotts account."

Draco hadn't been prepared for her quick jump to anger, but it didn't surprise him. "I know," he said softly, staring at her hand. Her hand was clenched in a fist, so he gently threaded his fingers between hers and gave a small squeeze. She immediately relaxed.

"As long as there are Death Eaters still on the loose, I think it's a good idea not to tell people what my business does," Draco explained. "They might retaliate." Then he scoffed and whispered, "Maybe that's why I'm being blackmailed."

Hermione shivered at the feel of his warm breath. "Do you think so?" she breathed.

Pulling away slightly, he shook his head. "Not really. I know for a fact that my father never discussed his business with other Death Eaters, and there are no former or current Death Eaters employed by Malfoy, Inc. Except me." His tone was gritty. "Since I'm convinced a Death Eater is behind it, then I don't think that is the reason."

Hermione glanced at him. "Can you be absolutely certain? What if a Death Eater somehow found out about your father's business? Just because there are no Death Eaters in your employ doesn't mean there isn't someone sympathetic to the cause who'd want to hurt your family."

Draco considered her words, then shook his head. "My uncles don't know about my father's business, and they know better than to cross him."

"Your uncles?" Hermione repeated. "How can you be sure they don't know?"

"They're duty- and magically-bound to alert my father...or me...of any conspiracies or threats against the family," Draco explained. "If they'd heard something, even a whisper, they'd have informed me right away, and in the seven years since my father's imprisonment, they've said not a word."

Hermione looked at him, slightly horrified. "You've ... seen them?"

"Yes. They've been at the Manor a number of times," he replied.

"They've been at your *house*?" she said, incredulous. "And you didn't turn them in?"

Now he gave her a questioning look. "Why would I do that?"

Hermione scoffed and crossed her arms. "Oh, I don't know," she bit out sarcastically. "Maybe because they're two of the most wanted Death Eaters on the Ministry's wanted list? They killed countless Muggles, perpetrated untold vicious crimes...need I go on?"

Draco didn't like the direction of the conversation. The last thing he wanted was for them to argue, especially about his insane uncles. "They're family, Hermione. My hands were tied."

"They're dangerous, evil men," she argued vehemently.

"What would you have done?" he demanded gently. "In pure-blood tradition, Rabastan and Rodolphus are considered my father's brothers, even though they're only related through marriage to my mother's sister. I know what they did...trust me, I don't like them...but I couldn't betray them like that."

Hermione watched the game, her brow furrowed.

"I hope you don't think less of me," he sighed, running a hand through his hair.

"I don't," she said eventually. "It's just difficult to comprehend. I know they're family, but ... I could never feel safe knowing they could show up at any moment."

Draco frowned. "Despite their history, I've never felt unsafe around them. I suppose that's for the same reason I wouldn't turn them in; they're family. They wouldn't hurt me."

Hermione nodded. "But how can you say that because *they* don't know about a plan to hurt you that there isn't one?"

"Well, I suppose it's possible," he admitted. "Though, as you said, they're two of the most wanted Death Eaters out there. I just think they'd have heard about it."

"As long as you don't rule out the possibility," said Hermione, looking at him with kind eyes. "It would be easy for me to sit here and tell you what you should have done, but one thing the war taught me is that no one can know how they'll act when put into impossible circumstances. So I shouldn't judge someone for not doing what I instinctually think they should do."

"Thank you," he said, looking down at the seat in front of him.

She gave his hand a squeeze and smiled when he looked at her. He smiled back.

Soon Draco was absorbed in the game, his free hand occasionally mimicking the moves of the players. She smiled, wondering if he even knew he was doing it.

"See him? Number twelve?" Draco asked, pointing toward one end of the field.

"Yes, I see him," she affirmed.

"Today, I had Caleb do a little research on these teams, and I read over it after lunch instead of the financial reports I was supposed to read. Anyway, as we missed the starting lineups, we missed his name. But it's someone you know."

Hermione tried to focus on the player, but he was moving so fast that she couldn't see his face. "I don't know, who is it?"

"Oliver Wood," Draco said, turning to watch Hermione's expression. As he did so, however, his eyes fell on something else. He let his gaze linger for an instant, then sat back in his seat. "Looks like your idea worked."

"What idea?" Hermione asked, still trying to make out Wood's features. "I thought he played Keeper?"

"He did, but then a few years ago, someone on the Puddlemere United managing staff noticed that he flew really well and asked him to play Chaser in a few practices. He went from back-up Keeper to starting Chaser." Draco chuckled.

"That's very interesting," Hermione said. "I may have heard Harry and Ron talking about him, now that you mention it. What idea?" she repeated.

"Oh, right." Draco turned his body toward Hermione's. "Your idea to sit out here and not in a box. We're being watched. Don't look," he added hastily.

"That's good, then," she said, her leg knocking against his. "Just what we wanted."

Draco was about to say something, but he stopped. They did indeed want someone with a camera and nosy nature to spot them, but something had to be done in order to convince people...and more importantly, the blackmailer...that they were still an item.

"I've got to kiss you," he whispered, leaning close.

His proximity and his words set off a cascade of exploding fireworks in her stomach. "You've got to do what?" she asked.

"Kiss you. Not on the cheek. To sell it for good." He glanced over her shoulder and saw the man with the camera, still trained on them.

Hermione could barely breathe. Of course it was just for the silly magazine, but that knowledge didn't mean her heart would stop pounding any time soon. She hadn't really given much thought to public displays of affection. They weren't something she did a lot in the first place, and with a boyfriend who was only pretend, it seemed such occurrences would be rare. Still, with the rumors about Charlie, something noteworthy was required in order to quell them.

"Hermione?"

"Right, yes. Fine. Good thinking," she rushed out.

"It has to look natural. That's important. It can't look like our first kiss." His palms were beginning to sweat and he rubbed them on his trousers. "Has to look like we've done it a hundred times."

"Oh, I agree," she said nervously.

Draco had no idea how to go about making a kiss look natural when he was required to do it. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered how kisses even happened in the first place! It had been a long time since he had kissed someone like this...just because he wanted to, and nothing more. He had very rarely kissed Carrie during the years she came to him; he could count the occasions on one hand. Kisses were reserved for relationships, and at least six years had passed since he had been in one.

Yet people kissed all the time. He scanned the seats, looking to catch another couple in the act. He found three pairs who happened to lock lips while his gaze swept past them. It looked so easy, not at all the enormous thing it was quickly becoming in his mind.

Then it hit him: he was thinking about it. When you want to kiss a girl, you just do it, you don't think.

Hermione was facing slightly away from him, her attention on the goal where most of the players had congregated in a fight for the Quaffle.

Draco edged closer to her, took her chin in his hand, and turned her to face him. Then, without thinking, without breathing...he couldn't if he had wanted to...he gently, briefly, covered her lips with his.

Hermione smiled intensely at him, returned her attention to the game, and it was only then that he could breathe again. It was over too quickly, but it felt exactly right, the

most natural thing in the world. Was that his technique, or was it kissing her? Really, a conclusion couldn't be drawn on such singular research. A few more kisses that night were in order.

For her part, Hermione was still trying to calm her racing heart. His light touch on her chin, his soft, pliant lips on hers ... It was all she could do not to hyperventilate. How she played it so cool afterward, she would never know. Merlin, it was just a tiny kiss! Barely a kiss, even, and yet she was unable to concentrate on anything afterwards.

It was probably the extreme circumstances, the build-up. One little kiss couldn't possibly affect her so much.

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Draco managed to get in another kiss. Right after an England score, Hermione was cheering, and he just acted. He put his arm around her, pulled her close, and kissed her solidly for a few seconds. When they parted, her expression was one of bewilderment.

He had hoped to get in a third...just for good measure, in case the photographer had missed the first two...but didn't get his chance. After four hours, the score was 230-310, Spain. There had been a few Snitch sightings, but the Seekers were so well-matched that when one had the advantage, the other was able to distract him from his goal.

Hermione had felt extremely uncomfortable after Draco kissed her the second time. It wasn't the kiss itself...all prior theories about circumstances were thrown out the window, as she hadn't been expecting this one and had still felt near to swooning. Especially when he lightly touched his tongue to her lip before pulling away.

The difficult part was how much she wanted it to be real. His acting skills were far too convincing if they extended to being able to give breathtaking, sensual kisses at Quidditch games to a woman he wasn't in a relationship with. It wasn't fair. Then again, he had probably been with dozens of women. He had certainly kept a regular appointment with one for she didn't know how long. He probably kissed women as easily as he breathed.

Suddenly, the crowd reacted as one when the Snitch was spotted. Both Seekers tore after it, trying to gain an advantage. The crowd, Draco and Hermione included, was on its feet, chanting. Lights in the stadium were flashing rhythmically, and Hermione started to get dizzy.

She blinked and shook her head to try and clear her head, but it was quickly starting to throb in sync with the noise. Then everything disappeared and she fell into a kind of trance.

Draco noticed her stop cheering and go very still. Her eyes became glazed over and then she started blinking rapidly.

"Hermione?" he said, then shouted her name in an attempt to be heard. "Hermione!"

She made no response, but a look of pure terror was beginning to form on her face.

"Hermione!" This time he grabbed her arm, hoping to jolt her out of ... whatever was going on. Still no effect. Now she was beginning to shake. Draco looked toward the cameraman and saw that his attention was on the game. Draco linked his arm through Hermione's and Disapparated them both to an empty box near the top of the stadium.

The shaking had increased and she looked locked in a silent scream. Draco laid her on the sofa and she immediately curled into a ball. He was terrified; he had no idea what was going on, no idea how to help her. He had seen similar symptoms before, but never so severe.

Without knowing if it would do any good, he knelt on the floor and wrapped his arms around her. She continued to buck in his grasp for a few minutes, then the tremors began to slow. Draco held her until they stopped, and after what felt like a very long time, she finally opened her eyes.

"Draco?"

He released her somewhat and shifted his body so he could look at her face. "Hey."

"I ... Where are we?" she asked, glancing around the unfamiliar space.

Draco drew his arms away entirely and sat on the floor. "I brought us somewhere quiet. Are you okay?"

She nodded, still taking in her surroundings. "This isn't your home."

"No. I rented a box for the game in addition to our seats. In case you wanted to eat up here, or get away from the crowd."

Hermione turned toward him. "We're still at the game?"

"Yes," he replied. "We can leave if you'd like. I merely wanted to get you somewhere out of the way."

"No, we can stay. That was very thoughtful, Draco."

He nodded dismissively. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

She put a hand to her forehead and massaged her temples. "I think the lights, and the sounds"

"You had an attack," he attested. "I've seen similar symptoms before, Hermione. I doubt this was your first."

Her expression turned to discomfiture, her already flushed cheeks brightening. "No. But it's been a while since the last really bad one. I almost had one at your house a few weeks ago, but I was startled right out of it."

"Hey, it's nothing to be ashamed about," Draco insisted, climbing onto the sofa beside her.

She shrugged. "I know that. It's just, these attacks come at the most inopportune times. They can be rather embarrassing."

"Well, no one even noticed. They were too busy watching the game."

Hermione looked at him, her eyes roaming over his face. They stopped on his right cheek and he did his best not to flinch under her scrutiny.

"What's this from?" she asked, lightly tracing the marred skin. "Did it hurt?"

"Ironically, the same source as your attacks: my Aunt."

Her eyes shifted to his and she retracted her hand. "What happened?"

"Bellatrix wanted me to torture a friend of mine simply because he hadn't paid her the 'proper respect,' as she called it. I refused." He made a face. "First time, too. I didn't see her move, she was so quick. Backhanded me hard, and she happened to be wearing an especially pointy ring that day."

"Do you have other scars?" Hermione asked softly.

He swallowed uncomfortably. "Yes."

She nodded. "Sometimes I try and think of these attacks as battle wounds."

"I couldn't believe how brave you were that day," Draco confessed, grateful the conversation had turned away from his scars. "You wouldn't give up. I thought you were telling the truth about the sword, but Bellatrix just kept at it. When I later learned you had been lying" He shook his head. "I've never known someone as strong as you. Not even Death Eaters, grown men, could stand up to the Cruciatus the way you did."

Hermione smiled. "Perhaps my cause was simply the one worth dying for."

"I've never thought of it like that," he said. "I'm sure you're right."

Hermione glanced again around the room. "Why don't we open these curtains so we can see the game? Did it end?"

"I'm not sure!" Draco said, grinning. He used his wand to move the curtains, revealing the entire pitch and the frenzied crowd. "Guess not."

"The view is incredible," she said. "And look, there's a screen for replays."

"Excellent." Draco leaned back in his seat and settled in to watch the game. "Do you need anything? There's the equivalent of room service, if you get hungry."

"I'm fine for now." After a few minutes of watching the game in silence, Hermione spoke again, this time very business-like. "Draco, do you wear cologne?"

He frowned, completely caught off guard. "Sometimes ..."

"Are you wearing it tonight?"

"I am," he replied, feeling suddenly warm around the collar. "Why?"

"I'd appreciate it if you would tell me exactly what happened after you noticed there was something wrong."

Draco nodded and retold the short story. Hermione was thoughtful the entire time.

"I've never had an attack go away so quickly," she explained when he had finished. "I remember being able to smell something when I was going through the flashback. As I focused part of my mind on trying to figure out the foreign scent, I was gradually drawn out of the attack."

"You think there might be a connection," he said, completing her thought.

"Exactly. Would you give me the name of the cologne?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied.

She looked him over briefly, pausing on his hair. "Shampoo, too. And ... Do you use any other products?"

Draco chuckled. "I will provide you with a full and detailed list, Hermione."

"Thank you," she replied. Her scientifically oriented mind had a strong desire to sniff him all over, to see if any of the smells triggered a memory. However, she doubted very much he would appreciate her doing so, and she didn't think she would be able to focus on her task for very long without getting distracted. One thing she did know, however: he did not smell of Hawthorne Inks that night, likely because he had changed out of his work clothes into something more casual. She hoped this information would prove useful.

Draco felt awkward just sitting and watching the game. He felt he should be paying attention to Hermione, but she seemed content to sit in silence. At least, he thought so.

"It's ... strange in here," she commented. "It's so quiet. Don't you think? There's no roaring crowd, and I can barely hear the announcer."

"You're right," he said. "If you want, I can let the sound in." When Hermione nodded, Draco pressed his wand into a small controller, and the noise from outside their box slowly increased. "Better?"

"Much!" she said, smiling. "Now it feels like we're really here again."

"Are you sure you want to stay?" Draco asked. "Really, I don't mind leaving."

"No!" Hermione insisted. "I'm having a great time. You know, other than nearly causing a scene while surrounded by thousands of rabid Quidditch fans."

"If you change your mind, let me know," he told her.

"I will," she assured him. "Besides, I'm actually enjoying the game."

Twenty minutes later, Draco glanced beside him to see that Hermione had fallen asleep. She had her head on the armrest at other end of the sofa, her body leaning sideways and her feet still on the floor.

He stood and lifted her legs onto the sofa, and she settled into a more comfortable position. Then he found a blanket, bright gold and blue with a giant golden Snitch in the middle, and covered her with it. Finally, he lowered the lights and the volume of the outside sounds and settled into a cushy recliner to watch the game.

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The winner was determined two hours later at almost one in the morning. Draco had a difficult time staying awake for the entire thing when the box was so conducive to sleep, but he managed, thanks to the jolt potions periodically given to all the attendees. When England's Seeker caught the Snitch, ending the game at 520-460, he was more relieved than anything.

Draco shut the sound off completely and stood, stretching. Hermione hadn't moved since he'd covered her on the sofa, and he wasn't keen on waking her now. However, he doubted she would want to spend the night in the Quidditch stadium.

He went to her side and knelt on the floor, pausing to stare at her before waking her. She was beautiful, even with straight hair, and he didn't think he could ever tire of looking at her. Then he scoffed inwardly; he sounded like a love-sick puppy, and it was slightly nauseating.

"Hermione," he whispered, then rolled his eyes and said her name at a normal volume.

Slowly she opened her eyes and recognized him. She yawned. "Hey. What happened? Is it over?"

Draco smiled. "Yeah, it's over. England won."

"I feel like we just did this," she said, sitting up.

He laughed. "We basically did. Except this time you just fell asleep."

"What time is it?" Hermione asked, rubbing her eyes.

"About one."

"Merlin," she said, throwing the blanket off and standing up.

Draco followed her lead. "Are you ready to go, I presume?"

Hermione nodded, yawning again. "Yes."

Together they walked in silence toward the Floo stations. Halfway there, Hermione shivered, and Draco put his cloak around her shoulders.

"Thank you," she said tiredly. "I think I left my cloak at your place."

There was a long queue at each of the fireplaces, so they waited a few yards away from everyone.

"What are we doing about tomorrow?" Draco asked her. "What time is dinner?"

"Oh, that's right!" Hermione exclaimed. "It completely slipped my mind. I usually Floo to the Burrow. If you want, you can come through to my room and we can go together from there."

"All right," he said. Almost as an afterthought, he added, "What are you doing with your day tomorrow?"

Hermione blinked, surprised by the question and remembering the detail she wouldn't be sharing with him. "Well, it's Saturday, which means breakfast with my parents. Oh, that's right, they want to have you over soon."

He nodded. "I remember. Next Saturday is good for me. The weekend after that I'll be in Paris."

"Paris?" she repeated, her eyes wide. She stood with her back resting lightly on the wall, facing the interior of the stadium.

"Won't you be, as well?" he asked, leaning nonchalantly on the wall, facing her. "For the opening of the Weasley shop?"

"Oh! That's in two weeks? I'd forgotten. I suppose I will be there," she said, her thoughts focused on how busy her life had been since agreeing to work with Draco.

He gave her an uneasy look. "I reckon we'll be there ... together."

The way he said 'together' made her pause, and then she understood. At that point in their relationship, it would make sense for them to stay together while in Paris for the shop's opening. "We'll deal with that when we have to," she said, another yawn escaping her control.

"Good idea," Draco said, frowning.

"After breakfast with my parents I'm going to Hogsmeade," she continued after a few moments.

"Is it already time for the first trip?" Draco asked. "I can't believe it. Seems like last weekend we were sitting on an orange sofa, talking during another Quidditch game."

Hermione smiled. "I'm not on the chaperone list for this weekend, but Blaise and I are taking our fourth-years to the Shrieking Shack. We both think it's important for our houses, especially, to spend time with each other."

"Blaise?" he said.

"Yes, Blaise. He is head of Gryffindor, you remember."

"I wasn't aware that you two were friends." Draco pushed himself off the wall with his shoulder and casually shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Look, the queue is much shorter. Should we get in?" she asked.

"Reckon so," he said, and gently led her toward the Floo stations, his hand placed lightly on the small of her back. Once they were situated, he said, "You're avoiding the question."

"No I'm not," she protested. "And you didn't really ask a question. Blaise and I aren't really friends, but he's pleasant to talk to, and we both agree on the importance of destroying the typical house stereotypes."

Draco smirked and was about to respond when they were interrupted.

"Mr. Malfoy. Miss Granger."

They both turned to the source of the voice, and Draco recognized the man with the camera who had been watching them during the first few hours of the match.

"How about a picture?" he said hopefully.

Draco looked to Hermione, expecting her to refuse. Instead, she nodded with a smile.

"Great, thanks," the man said, getting into position.

Hermione scooted closer to Draco, and he put his arm around her. The camera flashed, and then without thinking, Draco absently kissed the top of Hermione's forehead. The camera went off again, and he inwardly groaned.

"What did you think of the match, Mr. Malfoy?" the man asked, obviously pleased with his success that night.

"It was a good one. I'm glad England pulled it out in the end."

"Looks like they've got a good shot at the EuroCup this year."

Draco nodded.

"We're up, Draco," said Hermione.

They had finally reached the fireplace. The green flames were set to go continuously without the need for powder with every person. "Malfoy Manor," he called. The flames roared bright red for an instant before turning back to green. "After you."

When they'd arrived in the Traveling Room, Hermione returned the cloak to an amused Draco. "What's so funny?" she said, yawning again.

"You went through first," he said, leading her into the hall. He still hadn't connected the main fireplace to her room at Hogwarts, and he didn't have any plans to. "You didn't

see the look on that man's face when we both traveled here. You would have thought he'd discovered gold, he was so excited."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

He smiled lazily. "Think about it. Why wouldn't you simply go home? Instead you came here."

"Oh! You're right!" Then she shrugged. "I suppose it's official, then."

"Let's hope there won't be any more talk of Charlie." Draco let her into his bedroom and walked her to the fireplace in his closet. "What are you doing after your play date with Blaise?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, swatting him playfully and glancing around for her cloak. "I suppose I'll return to the castle, have lunch, catch up on some reading until it's time to meet you. Molly likes us there by seven, so why don't you come by around six-thirty?"

"So early?" he teased. "I was thinking more along the lines of seven, seven-fifteen."

Hermione shook her head and checked her bag, yawning. "Here it is. I had it all the time. If I don't go, I'm going to pass out on your floor. See you at six-thirty, Draco. Goodnight."

"Night."

She disappeared into the flames with a small wave, and then he let out a huge sigh. What a night! So much had been packed into the evening that he would need time to digest it all.

Draco didn't dwell on much of that. All he thought about while drifting to sleep was the way Hermione had felt in his arms and the softness of her lips pressed against his. He hoped he'd need another reason to kiss her very soon.

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End Notes: > Thank you so much for reading! And thank you for your patience. Hope you enjoyed this! Chapter title taken from "The Adventure" by Angels and Airwaves. Beta credit goes to drcjsnider, pokeystar, and somandalicious. Art in this chapter is by marshy75 of LJ.