

Hiding In Plain Sight

by mayfly

Can a love remain hidden? Do the interfering women of the family always know best?
(Neville/Draco)

Part 1 of 4

Chapter 1 of 4

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Author's Notes: Written for paddynmoon for 2010's hp_yule_balls exchange. Lots and lots of hugs and heartfelt thanks must go to my most patient and marvellous beta, raisinous fiendling, for not only correcting my atrocious grammar, but for also being full of brilliant ideas and much needed pointers. I would also like to note that I spell the younger Greengrass daughter as Asteria - from the ancient mythological character - rather than Astoria - from the modern hotel dynasty.

i. boys will be boys

The sun gently slants into the room from the gap in the thick curtains, and a subdued birdsong softly wafts in from outside. Neville Longbottom stretches himself, cracks open an eye and scratches his belly. There is an arm slung possessively over his torso, the hand curled around his bicep grip firm even in sleep and a long slender leg entwined around his. A pleasant warm feeling grows in his chest, and a soft smile plays on his lips. He turns around to see soft, pale blond hair fanned out on his pillow, a hint of a pointy nose and chin peeking through.

Neville doesn't want to wake his slumbering partner. He wants to lie like this for a while longer and enjoy the quiet, pleasant morning and welcome company in his bed. He wants to reminisce about the previous night and the sensation of his sleeping companion's body under him, over him, around him; his clever tongue slick and warm in Neville's eager mouth; his groping, demanding hands roaming all over Neville, grabbing tightly, refusing to let go; his long, lean legs wrapping around Neville, holding him close, trapping him exactly where he wants to be, just as he opens himself up completely to Neville and welcomes him into his tight, hot, exquisite body. And Neville falls, lets himself be sucked in, devoured by him and devouring in turn, not wanting anyone or anything more in the world, knowing that this is right, this is where he belongs forever and ever.

Neville feels his blood stir in his veins; his member begins to harden, the ghost of the memory of the night before still imprinted on it. His bed-mate snuffles and wriggles, his grasp around Neville's bicep tightening, almost as though he read his thoughts. Neville doesn't want to wake him and break this precious, comfortable moment, but he sees no alternative. He rolls onto his side to face his prone lover and lifts his arm, unsurprised when the grip on it never slackens. Tenderly, he smooths the bright, soft hair away from his face to reveal in a rare moment of quietude a sight that is both familiar and precious: precise, blond brows; closed eyelids, the pale lashes almost invisible; a high, sharp cheekbone that Neville lovingly caresses; an upturned, pointy nose that remains haughty even in repose; thin, pale pink lips, their shape a perfect bow; a regal, precise chin joining to a razor sharp jawline that Neville diffidently lets his fingers trail along, secure in the knowledge he won't get cut; and a rarely seen, barely visible spattering of blond stubble.

Neville cups the sleeping man's cheek. The rough, almost sandpapery, stubble feels strange and foreign. He gently shakes the man. "Draco," he says. "Draco, wake up."

Draco whines and buries his face in the pillow. "Dun wanna," he mumbles petulantly. "T'early."

Neville smiles fondly and strokes his hand down the revealed bare back, his palm slowly caressing each bump of every prominent vertebra. Draco arches into the touch and lets out a pleased sigh.

"You can stay in bed if you want, as long as you do remember that Gran returns today from her trip. She's bound to pop in and visit bright and early to make sure I haven't degenerated into a lazy layabout while she's away," Neville informs Draco matter-of-factly. "We could always explain to her what you're doing in my bed. I'm sure she'd understand."

"And inform my mother forthwith," Draco retorts sharply, suddenly wide awake and all dangerous angles and prickly defensiveness once again. Neville sighs, already missing the soft, accommodating Draco.

Draco jumps out of the warm bed into the cold room, his glorious alabaster nudity suddenly revealed, and stalks to the adjoining bathroom.

"Your room is bloody freezing," he grumbles over his shoulder as he leaves. "Trust you to wake up at the crack of dawn to ogle my fine form like a lovestruck Hufflepuff, but to completely forget to cast a warming charm on your bloody room!"

The calm, lazy morning spell is completely broken now his difficult and irascible lover is awake. Neville grins nonetheless and reaches for his wand, casting a heating charm over the room, lighting a fire in the hearth for good measure, and flinging the curtains open to let the cool morning light in. He can hear the sound of the shower turning off as he gets out of bed and wraps his plaid dressing gown round himself.

Draco strides out the bathroom, bright-eyed and clean-shaven, hair perfectly combed once more, and a towel loosely slung round his waist. He catches a glimpse of Neville's dressing gown and wrinkles his nose in distaste, as he has done every time he has seen it in the past three years. Flinging the damp towel onto Neville's unmade bed, he swiftly picks up his discarded clothes from the floor and gets dressed.

Neville leans casually against the fireplace as he watches his whirlwind lover get ready to leave. He almost misses him already.

"I'll leave you to greet your gran and get home then," Draco says as he walks towards Neville. "Merlin only knows what I'll do with myself now you woke me at this unwizardly hour on a Sunday. You Lancashire folk are ridiculously morning people," he gripes as he smooths down the lapels of Neville's unfashionable dressing gown. "We're still on for tomorrow after Auror practice, right?"

Neville nods his agreement, and Draco leans forward to give him a quick peck on the lips. Neville, not one to lose a chance, slips his hand behind Draco's neck to keep him in place and deepens the kiss. Draco quickly acquiesces, his mouth obligingly opening, and his palms spreading to rest against Neville's sturdier form, a deep moan reverberating through his body.

Once they are both breathless, they pull apart, cheeks flushed. They gently pant into each other's mouths, their breaths intermingling.

Neville smooths back Draco's hair. "Good morning," he tells him.

Draco smirks and gently untangles himself from Neville's embrace.

"I love you, you know," Neville tells him suddenly.

For a split second, Draco looks vulnerable and lost, his grey eyes a bit too wide and soft, just like he does every time Neville says the same thing. However, he quickly composes his features to answer Neville sassily. "Well, you would, wouldn't you?" Without another word, he Apparates away.

Neville slumps against the mantle and sighs. It's the same every time. He is almost certain Draco returns his feelings, but it would be nice if Draco told him, just once. Slowly, he gets ready for breakfast and his grandmother's imminent arrival. He would never tell Draco, but he had severely hoped Draco would agree to stay for breakfast. After two years of secrecy and sneaking around, Neville would dearly like to finally come clean about his relationship. All this hiding and subterfuge chafes. It makes him feel dirty and underhand. But it's a small price for having Draco. Neville would gladly put up with all manner of unpleasantness to keep Draco.

It might only be three years since the beginning of their tentative at first friendship, and two since they became lovers, but Draco has become as necessary to Neville as breathing and gardening. He can no more imagine his life without the prickly, snarky blond than he can without his beloved plants and greenhouse.

With that final thought, Neville makes his way down to the kitchen for breakfast.

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The morning is dull and chilly, yet it's reasonably warm in the conservatory as Narcissa Malfoy delicately prunes the gardenias. With her husband incarcerated, and her son either at Auror practice (wasn't that a surprise!) or else asleep, Narcissa's mornings are usually calm and introspective. She likes tending to her plants, finding it strangely pleasant and fulfilling.

Coming across a bug on her lovely Butterfly Bushes, she quickly vanishes it with an efficient flick of her wand and a moue of distaste. Narcissa doesn't like to acknowledge it, but whenever she's displeased, she wrinkles her nose just like her son.

A sharp tapping at one of the large windows interrupts Narcissa's absentminded humming. An elf pops into the room to let the owl in. It flies around the room, wings barely skimming the taller plants, and decides upon the large table that holds Narcissa's watering can. Narcissa steps towards the table, laying her secateurs down and smoothly removing her gardening gloves. The elf helpfully appears at her side, holding a bowl of owl treats and a letter opener.

Narcissa leaves the owl to peck at the treats as she removes and slices open the package it bore her. She finds herself with a pair of her son's soiled undergarments in her hands. Narcissa doesn't know whether to laugh or sigh. She settles for rolling her eyes as she holds up the well-cut silk garment. It has a large stain of obvious provenance on the front and the Malfoy crest embroidered on the waistband. She calls for an elf to dispose of the dirty item and turns to the letter than accompanies the package. Somehow, its contents isn't as surprising as it should be.

Lancashire, 5th of November 2001

Mrs Narcissa Malfoy née Black,

Please find enclosed an item that should belong to your son.

In light of said item, and the discovery of it within my own home the kitchen, to be precise I find that it is not prudent, nor feasible even, to ignore the erumpent in the room, to wit, your son's and my grandson's relationship, any longer.

I'm confident you find the current state of affairs just as vexing as I do. We can sit back and leave the young to their own devices no more.

If you are in agreement with me upon this matter, I would like to invite you to Longbottom Estate for afternoon tea at six o'clock this evening to discuss the subject.

Augusta Longbottom

Narcissa lays down the letter, knowing that it has been a long time coming. The fact she had anticipated this event does not make it any easier to face the fact she has no choice but to meet the Longbottom harridan.

Narcissa is forced to admit that Augusta Longbottom will most probably become a permanent fixture in her future. She sighs the long-suffering sigh of the doting mother. She knows she will put up with all sort of adversity and unpleasantness for the sake of her son and his happiness. She just wishes sometimes that he would not make it so hard. Dear Draco might believe himself to be a master of subterfuge and deceit pretty much like his dear father Lucius also did but the cruel truth is that to anyone who isn't

a naive infant, or a Gryffindor, he's as good as an open book.

Narcissa knew the exact moment Draco and young Neville transformed from friends into lovers. Just as she knows the depth and nature of Draco's feelings for his paramour, possibly even better than he himself does. For too long she has pretended ignorance. Augusta is right; it's time to take action.

Narcissa sends an affirmative reply with the owl and leaves the conservatory. She no longer feels the inclination to tend to her plants. She has a meeting to prepare for.

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Augusta Longbottom looks at the antique clock sitting on the mantelpiece as the minute hand ticks over to show the time as two minutes past six. She should have known that somebody like Narcissa Malfoy would not be punctual.

Augusta barely finishes her thought when she hears the whoosh of the Floo from the anteroom. Her back stiffens, and her features take on her habitual stern appearance as Nenny shows in the guest.

Narcissa is wearing a simple, blue robe that manages to highlight her beauty more than any fancy dress robes could and a deceptively friendly and charming smile. She glides towards Augusta, her hand held out. "Augusta, my dear," she says. "What a pleasure it is! I must thank you for the lovely invitation."

Augusta rises and clasps Narcissa's delicate, yet firm, hand briefly before motioning to her to take a seat. The blonde sits on the simple antique sofa, elegantly smoothing out her skirts. "I love what you've done with the house," she says. "I do find the country style so delightfully *charming*."

Augusta knows when she's being urbanely snubbed, but she doesn't deign to rise to the bait. She satisfies herself instead with sipping her tea and smiling politely.

"And you must show me the grounds," Narcissa continues. "Darling Draco has told me what a remarkable prodigy your Neville is with flora of all kind. He insists that Neville's greenhouse is a wonder to behold you will excuse my son's fondness of hyperbole, I'm sure and I'm positive the grounds must be just as delightful."

Augusta is not fooled by Narcissa's delicate, fine-boned beauty and inane prattle. She is well aware of the shrewd intelligence that glints in the wide, baby blue eyes opposite her, as well as the razor-sharp, cunning intellect that hides underneath the expertly coiffed blond hair. Many have underestimated Narcissa Malfoy not least of all her own husband to their detriment. Augusta is not one of them.

Augusta can easily understand the aesthetic reasons behind young Neville's infatuation with the Malfoy boy. Looking at Narcissa's beautiful figure, she is once more reminded that the Malfoys, and the Blacks even more so, were always a handsome family.

Whatever one might think of young Draco's morals or character, one certainly can't deny that, despite his sharp angles and almost waifish slenderness, he's a striking young man. She sincerely hopes that he inherited at least half of his mother's keen intellect, because he seems sadly lacking in her unparalleled talent at deception and discretion. Having said that, Augusta is rather pleased with Draco's distinctly un-Slytherin inability to prevent his expressions from betraying his true feelings and his rather amusing predilection for Gryffindor rashness and over-emotionality. Augusta doesn't like to contemplate Neville's chances if he rather found himself enamoured of someone as inscrutable and unscrupulous as Narcissa Malfoy.

"Young Neville would like nothing more than to give you the tour of the grounds and the greenhouse," Augusta says, interrupting Narcissa's polite small-talk and her own musings. "Unfortunately, he is not home at the moment, as you well know. He is with your son. They have gone *fishing*." The last bit comes out rather sardonic, even for Augusta.

Narcissa raises a delicately arched brow caustically, and they both share a silent moment of wry amusement with their progeny. At that moment, Augusta feels a strong kinship with the elegant, cold beauty sitting opposite her. It suddenly looks like it won't be that much of a hardship to work with her to sort things out.

"I trust my package wasn't a complete surprise," Augusta says drily, bringing them to the matter at hand.

Narcissa smirks in response. "I should have been expecting a parcel of that nature a lot sooner," she answers with a laugh. "My darling Draco was always such a messy, forgetful boy. In your kitchen, you say?"

Augusta cracks a smile, amused despite herself. "Under the sturdy oak table," she retorts. "It was really quite inconsiderate of them. Especially seeing as Neville possesses his own home."

"Oh dear! It's hard to imagine my baby boy all grown up and quite *sarfrisky*!" Narcissa hides her mouth behind her hand to stifle a giggle. Her eyes shine with mirth.

"Quite," Augusta responds, and it doesn't come out as stern as it should. "And to think they believe they have us fooled!" she exclaims, not a little affronted.

"Yes, poor dears," Narcissa agrees. "They are making rather a hash of keeping it secret."

"It's plainly ridiculous," Augusta says. "We can't be expected to let this sorry state of affairs continue."

"I quite agree," Narcissa nods. "We have put up with this stupidity for long enough."

"It's certainly not like my Neville to resort to all this distasteful lying and deception," Augusta continues.

Narcissa lets out a soft peal of laughter. "Of course not," she agrees. "Dear Neville is far too honest and straightforward. It's part of his charm. I'm afraid that we shall have to lay the blame fully on my Draco's shoulders. He's such a manipulative, conniving little snake who's used to getting his own way, bless his devious little heart."

Narcissa gets a proud, fond look on her face with the last pronouncement, and Augusta feels a moment of trepidation for what she's letting her grandson get himself into. She gives Narcissa a stern, meaningful stare, and the blonde witch continues.

"Regrettably, he is also somewhat of a coward, who will try to hide from things as long as he can."

Narcissa states the last without an ounce of shame, to Augusta's profound disapproval.

"As such, it would be more efficacious to concentrate on forcing my son to relent. He's a stubborn soul, who wouldn't think twice of cutting off his nose to spite his face."

Narcissa once more looks inexplicably fond of her contrary progeny.

"Forcing him might easily backfire, so it must seem as if it is his idea to make a clean breast of it and finally desist from this childish hiding.

"I shall try and bully him into marrying a girl of my choice. There's nothing like pushing a young man one way to succeed in making him go another. Before we know it, Draco should be flying into your Neville's arms and declaring his affections for all the world to hear."

Augusta smiles, satisfied. It's a tactic with plenty of merit. She knew that involving Narcissa Malfoy was the right thing to do. "Your plan sounds like a sound one," she says approvingly. "It has the added bonus of making Neville jealous. And if I know Gryffindor males, jealousy never fails to get them riled up and ready to take action."

Having settled their plan of action to their satisfaction, the two women sit back to enjoy their well-earned tea. Narcissa segues effortlessly from talk of her son to polite chit chat and juicy gossip, the latter of which giving Augusta the chance to make not a few pithy cutting remarks of her own about common acquaintances.

Once Narcissa Malfoy takes her leave, Augusta takes a moment to sit back and gaze out the window at the rolling hills and verdant countryside. *Young Neville*, she thinks, *you better be sure this is what you truly want.*

Part 2 of 4

Chapter 2 of 4

Can a love remain hidden? Do the interfering women of the family always know best? (Neville/Draco)

ii. laying out the trap

"There you are!" Narcissa exclaims, relieved. "I was afraid you'd decided not to come home for dinner after all."

Draco raises one pale eyebrow and gives his mother a long, shrewd look. "I said I'd be home by five today. I'm barely a quarter of an hour late." He gives his mother another suspicious look before continuing. "*Mother*, have you got anything planned?" he asks as sternly as any son can dare be stern to a mother like Narcissa.

Narcissa simply raises a delicate eyebrow in return showing her son how it really is done to maximum effect and Draco blushes, chastened.

Draco turns to leave to prepare for dinner, and Narcissa chooses that moment to speak. "Do wear something nice, dear," she says. "We have guests. Dinner will be served at half past six."

Draco turns around to shoot her an accusatory look. He finds his mother calmly working on her needlepoint, the picture of innocence. With a sigh, he leaves.

Narcissa smiles to herself, satisfied, once she is alone again. *Let the games begin*, she thinks.

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At half past six, they are all seated at the dinner table as the house-elves appear with their soup. Draco, who dutifully obeyed his mother's request and dressed in one of his more flattering dress robes, sits quietly sulking. He has been sulking from the moment their guests arrived.

Thankfully, Draco looks rather fetching when pouting. At least, Asteria Greengrass seems to think so, if the coy little glances she keeps giving him are anything to go by.

Calliope Greengrass, on the other hand, after giving Draco a critical once-over, is focusing all her attention on Narcissa. They are old acquaintances, after all, and they both know very well what this dinner is about.

Calliope was always a woman after Narcissa's own heart. She will be sorry to disappoint her, but her daughter is the best candidate for the job. Asteria is beautiful, sweet, timid, fragile looking and soft spoken. She is everything Narcissa would have chosen in a daughter-in-law. And she is the complete opposite of Neville Longbottom, despite their misleading similarities.

"I hear Draco has enrolled in the Auror program," Calliope says. "An interesting choice of profession. I don't believe there is any history of Aurors in the Malfoy family."

Narcissa smiles at Calliope as she sips the last of her soup. "No. Draco will be the first Auror in the family. We are very proud of him; it is a very noble calling. Did you know that Harry Potter is in the Auror program too? He shares classes with Draco."

Narcissa is pleased to see Calliope's eyes widen in surprise and reluctant respect. "Are you really in the same classes as Harry Potter?" she asks Draco eagerly.

Draco pretends to look bored and nonchalant as he lets an elf remove his empty soup bowl and replace it with the main course. "Yes, we are in the same year of training," he answers. "Sometimes after classes we go out for drinks together," he adds, almost as an afterthought.

Narcissa knows, though, that Draco is fiercely proud of his acquaintance with Potter, despite the pains he takes at hiding it.

Calliope looks impressed, and Asteria's shy looks become longer and more frequent. Draco pretends to be deeply interested in his meal.

The meal progresses smoothly. Narcissa and Calliope catch up on the latest gossip and news, all the while surreptitiously praising their children. Asteria and Draco remain for the most part silent, as their mothers expected they would.

Once dessert has been enjoyed, the group adjourns to the sitting room for coffee.

"I must thank you for a most lovely meal," Calliope compliments. Narcissa murmurs her thanks, and both mothers share a warm, meaningful look.

"I remember what exceptional gardens Malfoy Manor always had!" Calliope exclaims loudly. "Do they remain as beautiful as I remember?"

Narcissa doesn't miss the fact that Asteria's interest has been peaked. "Even more," she answers. "We have done extensive remodelling. The result is slightly more modern, but exceptionally elegant and pleasing nonetheless."

Calliope looks at her daughter's eager face and lets a pleased smile slip. "My Asteria is most enamoured of gardens, aren't you, dear?" she says, and her daughter nods shyly in reply. "She keeps abreast of all the latest landscaping trends."

"Why then, she should without a question see the gardens!" Narcissa exclaims, pleased that things are going exactly to plan. "Draco would only be too happy to give her the grand tour. My Draco also has a bit more than a passing interest in gardening. He helped me with the remodelling, you know."

Narcissa turns to look at her horrified son. "Draco, be a dear why don't you, and give Asteria a tour of the gardens. Show her all the changes we have made."

Asteria looks excited and eager, but Draco is less than pleased with the turn of events. "Now?" he asks, sounding a bit desperate. "The sun has long set. I doubt Asteria would enjoy traipsing through the gardens in the dark."

Narcissa almost pities her son as he grasps at straws. "Pish," she says. "A good Lumos will serve you perfectly fine. Besides, it's a full moon tonight. You might not even need that. The new rose garden will look absolutely divine under the light of the full moon."

"Yes, it should be frightfully romantic," Calliope adds, a bit too obviously.

Draco sighs and acquiesces with the air of a man walking to the gallows. Asteria smiles brilliantly, her eyes bright with anticipation. Narcissa can't help but like the quiet girl. She sincerely hopes she doesn't make the mistake of becoming too fond of her son.

Draco gives his mother one last angry and betrayed look before plastering on a polite smile and gallantly leading Asteria out the room.

The two mothers share a content smile.

"Brandy?" Narcissa asks.

"I don't mind if I do," Calliope answers as she sits back, satisfied.

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Augusta sips at her strong, black tea as she turns the page of the day's *Daily Prophet* to peruse the gossip section.

On the other side of the table, Neville is busy slathering marmalade on his toast.

The article Augusta has been looking for takes pride of place on the page. She hides her satisfied smirk behind the paper as she skims through it. Narcissa Malfoy truly is just as good and efficient as she said she was.

Augusta schools her features into bland disinterest and lowers the paper. She looks at her grandson, tall and sturdy as all good Lancashire folk are, as he innocently munches on his toast.

"This is interesting news," she says. "Did you know about your friend?"

Neville turns big, brown, guileless eyes to her. "Hmm?" he asks, still sleepy. "What friend? Do I know what?"

"The young Malfoy boy," she answers.

Neville's interest is immediately peaked, and he looks more awake already.

"It says here that he has been seen a number of times in the company of Asteria Greengrass. Sweet girl; I'm not very fond of her mother, though." She adds the last as an aside.

Neville scrunches his brow and looks perplexed.

"It is rumoured that he is courting her," Augusta continues and can't help but be pained by the wide-eyed look of disbelief and hurt Neville openly sports. Once more, she questions the prudence of letting him get involved with a family of consummate Slytherins.

"You know," she says, nailing the final nail in the coffin, "I think your young friend has the right idea about it. Don't you think it's about time you got a move on it too? Only yesterday I was having tea with Mrs Abbott. She has the loveliest daughter."

"Gran, please." Neville's voice is rough and has a slight quiver to it as he interrupts her. She lets his rudeness pass, just this once, because she has amply made her point.

"If and when I decide to get married, I am perfectly capable of finding my own wife." He stares at his toast angrily and takes a needlessly vicious bite out of it.

Neville rapidly decimates the piece of toast in his hand, then sits staring at the remaining one on his plate for a lengthy moment before roughly pushing it away. "I have to get to the greenhouse. I have work to do," he says gruffly. He doesn't look at his grandmother as he stomps out the room.

Augusta lays down the paper and finishes off her tea. She hopes her grandson will understand that it was all done for his own good.

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Neville exits the Floo into his living room, his blood thrumming violently in his veins. His skin feels too tight for his body; there's tension growing in his muscles and his tightly hunched back, urging him to do something.

Draco steps out of the Floo behind him, graceful and nonchalant, completely oblivious to the churning in Neville's gut and the buzzing growing in his head. He gives Neville a saucy sidelong look and climbs the narrow, wooden staircase to the bedroom, an exaggerated swing to his hips.

Neville watches him go, eyes trained on the long legs and round, pert bottom he never tires of watching. He wants to growl in frustration. Even in his irritation and anger, the blond doesn't fail to arouse him.

Neville bites his lip and remembers the cause of his overwhelming frustration. The evening had been a pleasant one, just like most Friday evenings they spent together. They saw a wizarding play Draco had been keen on and finished the night with drinks at a friendly pub.

Just like all the other times they had been out together, they had a comfortable, agreeable, friendly time. Friendly, because that is what they are in the eyes of the world: friends. Unlikely and surprising friends, but friends nonetheless. Friends who fuck each other in private, Neville adds wryly. Who kiss each other, sleep together, love each other.

Neville clenches his fist in frustration. Now, more than ever, he wonders if the last is true. On the way to the pub, Neville tried to slip his hand into Draco's. Draco shied away as if burnt, giving him a warning look. Neville was stung and hurt. So much so, that the moment they sat down with their drinks, he asked about Asteria. Not bothering to hide the jealousy in his voice, he asked Draco if it was true that he had been out with her. His throat tight, he asked if he had kissed her, if he had fucked her. He almost asked if he was going to marry her.

Draco's dismissive laughter, and the light-hearted way he answered, made Neville's blood boil. "Don't be silly," he said. "You know I have no interest in women. I'm only taking Asteria out to make Mother happy."

Neville wants to believe him, he really does, but Draco's not well known for his candidness. And besides, Neville thinks grimly, Draco would do a lot to please his mother, so would it really be too big a stretch for him to marry Greengrass to please her? He has never promised Neville anything, after all. He has never even told Neville he loves him.

"Neville, aren't you going to join me?" Draco's voice interrupts his dark thoughts. He looks at Draco to watch him disappear into his bedroom with a cheeky grin and a look full of promises.

Jealousy and desire and need surge once more in Neville's blood. He desperately wants Draco. He wants him more than he has ever wanted anything else. Neville runs up the stairs, taking them two at a time, suddenly eager to get closer to his lover.

Bursting into his room, he finds the blond already disrobed and artfully spread out on his bed in nothing but his fine silk underwear. Draco gives Neville a sultry, calculating look, and Neville all but rips his robes off in his haste.

He falls on Draco and kisses him with a wildness and desperation he rarely exhibits. His hands roam over the pale skin and grasp possessively at whatever body parts he manages to get a grip on. Predictably, Draco moans delightedly and kisses back just as aggressively, twining his long limbs around Neville's sturdy frame, and pulling him so close he can hardly breathe.

This is exactly what Neville wants. He wants to leave his impression indelibly stamped upon Draco's body, so that Draco will never forget or get over him, the way Neville never will. He pushes his tongue deep into Draco's hot mouth and rubs it along Draco's clever one. He wants to feast on Draco's taste, knowing he will never get enough of it. He wants to leave his own taste imprinted forever on his lover's taste buds.

Draco pulls back to gasp for breath, and Neville takes the chance to suck on the underside of his sharp jawline, making sure to leave a mark. The blond threads his finger through Neville's thick hair, caressing his scalp and pushing him close. "More," he breathes.

Incapable of not doing what Draco asks, Neville moves his mouth lower, trailing wet kisses down his long throat, until he reaches his protruding adam's apple. Draco trembles under him and grips Neville's hair tight enough to be painful. Encouraged, Neville sucks on the delicate protrusion. Softly first, then stronger, as Draco's moans become so loud they turn into a long, drawn out wail.

When Neville lifts his head, there's a livid, red bruise where his mouth was, and Draco has his eyes closed as he softly pants in arousal. Neville gently moves his large, coarse hands down the softly trembling body beneath him. He lightly pinches the tiny, pink nipples and gets a groan of appreciation, so he pinches them again harder, to Draco's obvious enjoyment. Neville smooths his palms down the protruding ribs and defined stomach muscles and gently tickles the trembling, flat belly. Draco giggles and shies away in response.

Neville quickly moves on and pulls down Draco's expensive underwear to reveal a thatch of wiry dark blond curls, a hard, glistening pink cock that makes Neville's mouth water, and a pair of perfect, long lean legs. Draco opens his eyes and looks critically at Neville.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he manages to rasp. "Take your hideous underwear off and come and ravish me!" He lets his pale thighs fall open in blatant display and lifts a challenging eyebrow.

Not needing to be told twice, Neville discards his sensible cotton underthings as fast as he's able and falls on Draco once more. It never even crosses his mind not to obey the implicit command. He aligns their bodies and grinds forcefully against Draco as he captures his mouth in a passionate sloppy kiss once more.

He loves the feel of Draco's slim body under his, as smooth as satin, as hard and unyielding as alabaster. For an interminable amount of time they move together, and Neville gets lost in the feel, the taste, the smell of Draco.

Draco grasps Neville's buttocks in a punishing grip, pulling him impossibly close. "More," he gasps, hissing his demand hotly in Neville's ear.

And Neville wants to give him more. He wants to give him whatever he asks for; he wants to give him everything. And suddenly, just like that, it all returns: Neville's burning jealousy over the witch Draco is going out with, his cold anxiety over the very real chance he might lose him, his overwhelming need to keep him close and never let him get away.

Suddenly, Neville wants to possess Draco as fully as he can. He wants to burn his brand into Draco's skin, so that Draco can never forget that he belongs to him, that they belong together.

Neville moves down Draco's body, leaving a path of hot kisses and sharp bites in his wake. He spends long moments mouthing Draco's small nipples, alternately sucking on them and biting them, as Draco holds him close, his hands once more buried in Neville's hair, and murmurs his approval. Neville isn't satisfied until the delicate nubs are puffy and lividly red. He presses a thumb into one of the abused nubs, pushing hard, and is rewarded by a sharp yelp and a long drawn out "yesss".

Before Draco can ask for more again, Neville returns to his task, moving once more down the supine body. He takes great pleasure in licking along the grooves of Draco's sharp ribs and lapping at his quivering belly, until Draco can take it no longer and tries ineffectually to push him away.

Neville takes the hint and nuzzles Draco's damp blond curls before licking a broad stripe up his pink cock. Draco lets out a heartfelt sigh. "Good boy," he mumbles. Neville reciprocates with a sharp nip that makes Draco yelp and leak even more precome.

He spends a lingering minute licking and sucking at the familiar cock and running his tongue over the hard balls. Draco moans and sighs and urges Neville on, but before long, it's not enough for Neville. He wants more.

He pulls back, and Draco whines at the loss, opening questioning dazed grey eyes. "Turn over," Neville says roughly, the commanding tone feeling strange on his tongue, yet tripping off so naturally.

A shiver of arousal ripples through Draco's body upon hearing the command, and his eyes widen in pleasure. "Yes," he hisses, the lust and willingness in his voice coiling around Neville, and turns over to lie on his stomach.

Neville strokes his hands slowly down the revealed back, until he reaches Draco's impossibly pert backside. He grips it tightly, and Draco wriggles in anticipation. Pulling the cheeks roughly apart, Neville eyes the tiny wrinkled opening that flutters under his gaze and comes to a decision.

Draco whines and writhes, and surreptitiously tries to slither a hand under himself to touch his cock.

"Stop," Neville orders, in that foreign commanding tone that seems to actually make Draco obey. "No touching."

Draco freezes, holding himself statue-still. His panting breaths resonate around the room, egging Neville on.

Neville bends over Draco and grasps his hands. He brings them above Draco's head until they reach the wrought iron headboard. Slowly, but firmly, Neville curls Draco's long fingers till they are securely gripping two of the sturdy perpendicular bars.

"Keep them there," Neville commands, and Draco whimpers, even as he eagerly nods his head in acquiescence.

Draco looks lovely like this; his cheek pressed against the cushion, biting his lower lip, eyes shut tight. The cords on his wiry arms stand out as he tightly grips the headboard, and the muscles of his back are bunched. Sometimes Neville can't help but wonder at how appealing his lover is, and he has to stop to catch his breath and bless his luck.

Taking hold of Draco's slim hips, Neville pulls them up to make him kneel, arse in the air. He pulls the bony knees apart, widening his stance, and letting his cock and balls hang free. Deliberately, he pushes Draco's shoulders back down, until his chest is touching the bed, and his back is arched in an impossible bow.

Neville sits back and looks at his handiwork, and almost chokes on his tongue. Draco is beautifully vulnerable and fully on display, his little pucker peeking out between the taut globes of his buttocks, and his leaking cock and swollen balls swinging underneath. Neville is so fervently turned on, he fears all it will take is just one touch for him to explode and empty himself all over Draco's gorgeously prostrate form. That thought alone makes his cock jump dangerously, and he is forced to grip his balls tightly and take a couple of deep breaths to bring himself back under control.

As he looks at Draco, he notices that a fine tremble is racking his body, and he is near hyperventilating from overexcitement. Worried, Neville soothingly strokes his back and the tense muscles of his thighs, trying to calm him. "Shh..." he murmurs comfortingly. "Shh... It's all right."

Neville hardly knows how he got in this position, calming an oddly submissive and vulnerable Draco. Draco always gives himself freely to Neville during their lovemaking, opening himself up in a way he never does any other time. But they have never gone this far before, even though Draco often hints at it. For the first time, Draco is not

snapping orders or petulantly demanding satisfaction, but rather is meekly waiting for Neville to act. And for the first time, Neville knows exactly what to do.

Eventually Draco is calm enough, and he begins to wriggle impatiently under Neville's gentle ministrations. Neville continues to caress his smooth thighs as he begins laying kisses, first on Draco's right buttock, and then his left. He bites the tender skin where they meet his lean thighs and worries it with his teeth until the blood rises to the surface.

In between Draco's moans, Neville can make out garbled words like "more" and "just like that". They spur him on as he nuzzles Draco's damp crack with his nose and licks his balls. Soon, however, he tires of them and moves on to lapping at Draco's exposed valley.

Once the hot valley is sopping wet with his saliva, Neville makes a point of his tongue and begins teasing Draco's delicate, furled pucker. Draco is no longer capable of articulating words as his moans grow ever more high-pitched and desperate. Neville stabs his tongue inside the grasping hole a couple of times before retreating and sitting back.

Draco sobs and whines his displeasure at Neville's pause. Neville gets a speculative gleam in his eye; obviously, Draco still hasn't understood who is in charge. He smacks the shapely bottom sharply and is unsurprised to see Draco's cock jump and leak a large dollop of precome, even as the blond yelps. The sheet under Draco is sodden with his leaking, and Neville is pleased to get it even stickier as he rains a couple more sharp smacks on the blond's accepting backside.

When Neville stops, Draco's bottom is tinged a pretty shade of pink, and he is harder than Neville has ever seen him. Neville strokes the heated skin. "You liked that, didn't you?" he asks huskily.

"Yes," Draco mewls, and pushes his bottom against Neville's hand, asking for more.

Neville would like to see Asteria bloody Greengrass make Draco come apart like this!

He leans over the side of the bed and fumbles in the drawer of the bedside table for the lube. The whole time, he feels Draco's scorching, eager gaze on him.

He quickly, but thoroughly, prepares Draco, not sparing the slick salve. Draco eagerly pushes back against Neville's thick fingers, trying to take him in as deep as he can. Once Draco is nice and slick and loose, Neville slathers more on his long neglected cock and tosses the pot away.

"Brace yourself," he warns Draco, and slides into him in one long powerful thrust.

Draco's knuckles grow white as he grips the headboard, and his long drawn out "yesss" degenerates into a high-pitched cry.

Once he is fully seated with Draco squirming under him, impatient once more, Neville carefully pulls all the way out, before pushing back in again. He repeats the motions in a smooth rhythm, and each time, Draco pushes back against him, trying to open up as much as possible to the intrusion, all the while loudly crying out his pleasure.

Eventually, Draco finds his voice again. "More," he gasps in abandon. "More! Harder. Ungh... Neville!"

Neville feels quite unlike himself, as he grips Draco's hips tightly in response, and starts up a hard, punishing rhythm. He pounds into the other man so hard and fast, the bed rattles against the wall, and he fears he might actually hurt him.

Neville doesn't know what has come over him; he almost scares himself with his intensity and violence. But all he can think is how much he wants and needs Draco and how important it is to make the other man understand his all-consuming need.

Through it all, the room echoes with Draco's loud, ecstatic cries and his endless nonsensical litany of "yes" and "more", and even more thrilling to the other man's ears, "Neville".

It cannot go on forever, and in the end, Draco lets out a loud, keening, ear-splitting screech and comes and comes, soaking the sheets under him. His hole pulses and tightens impossibly around Neville, forcing Neville's own orgasm to follow. And it does, forcefully and inexorably.

After Neville finishes emptying himself into Draco's willing body, they both collapse into a sweaty, exhausted heap, aftershocks from their orgasms still shooting through them.

Neville tenderly pulls Draco closer, and, unable to fight the exhaustion that overcomes them, they both give in and doze off.

When Neville wakes again, he finds the covers pulled up over his naked body, a fire burning in the hearth, and Draco gazing at him with glittering eyes.

"That was brilliant!" Draco exclaims. "You were so forceful and dominating!" A pleasurable shiver goes through Draco as he briefly closes his eyes at the remembrance. "I knew it would be good. I knew you would be good."

Neville blushes at the compliment and feels suddenly inexplicably shy.

"So, what came over you tonight?" Draco asks curiously, and Neville averts his gaze.

"You were still jealous, weren't you?" Draco crows, understanding dawning. "I shall keep it in mind," he adds, amused. "That all it takes to get the best fucking of my life is to make you jealous."

"Draco, please," Neville begs, wanting to just let it go.

Draco sighs and cuddles up to Neville, laying his head on Neville's chest and combing his fingers through the sparse hairs there.

"As much as it pains me to say it," he says, "you really have no reason to be jealous. There is no one like you. There never could be." Draco gently kisses the skin above Neville's heart and lies back down to sleep.

Neville lies awake for a long time after, his arms wrapped around Draco's slumbering form. He thinks about the night that just passed, he thinks about his doubts, and he thinks about Draco's last words. He hopes to Merlin that they mean what he thinks they do.

Part 3 of 4

Chapter 3 of 4

Can a love remain hidden? Do the interfering women of the family always know best? (Neville/Draco)

iii. taking the heat

A hex whizzes over Draco's head as he ducks and rolls. He shoots out an answering one of his own before he has even gained his feet again, but Weasley was expecting it and deflects easily with a shield charm. Draco throws him another hex almost before the shield drops again and is pleased to see it graze Weasley's shoulder. Weasley's arm starts swelling as he attacks Draco with a rapid succession of hexes. Draco bends and throws up shield charms almost without a thought; he is about to raise his wand to shout off a new hex when the instructor ends the mock duel with a sharply shouted, "Enough!"

"Very good," he tells them, motioning the next pair to take their turn.

Draco turns round and gives Weasley a feral grin as the redhead waves his wand over his hurt arm to end the swelling.

"Not half bad for a ferret," Weasley tells him approvingly.

"Why thank you, your Weasel highness," he answers with a small mocking bow.

After the small exchange of pleasantries, they both turn their attention towards the currently duelling duo. Potter is easily running circles around Partridge.

"Potter, stop toying with him and finish him off," the instructor yells, exasperated.

Potter is by far the best duellist of their year. Draco still sports an angry red burn from the last time he had to duel him. At the time, it was all he could do to keep Neville from going up to Potter and demanding satisfaction when he saw it. Draco indulges in a small private smile at the memory.

Soon enough, the class ends, and the unlikely trio head to the changing rooms to get out of their sweaty training robes. It never ceases to amaze Draco how all it took was Neville's steadfast endorsement and almost a year of being painfully nice (he is never repeating that!) for Neville's friends to accept him. Potter and Weasley, in particular, have taken to viewing him as some sort of repentant morally disabled youth and took him under their wings. Draco pretends to be annoyed, but truth be told, all he always wanted was Potter's acceptance; and as it turns out, Weasley isn't too bad after all.

Once in the changing rooms, Weasley quickly strips off his robe, nearly blinding Draco with his broad expanse of criminally freckled back. Next to him, Potter is undressing more demurely, almost shyly. Draco undresses ostentatiously, making sure Potter gets a good look of the burn mark on his side before he slips on a clean robe. Draco never fails to be amused at how easy it is to make Potter feel guilty.

"What is this I hear?" Weasley asks as he laces up his shoes. "The papers say you've got yourself a girlfriend. Blimey, you must be important if the papers report on your sorry love life!"

"It was only in the gossip pages," Draco answers. "Potter here got first page coverage when he made up with your sister."

"Oh shut up!" Potter admonishes him with a slight blush. "They say you plan on marrying her," he adds curiously.

Potter has long suspected that Draco may in fact be gay. Draco refuses to give him the satisfaction of an answer.

"If you actually found a bird who will put up with your pasty arse, you shouldn't let her go. That's what I say," is Weasley's opinion.

Draco looks down his nose at them. It is not an easy feat, considering Weasley is more than half a head taller.

"Just because the two of you are dead set on walking down the aisle and wasting no time in filling the world with your spawn, it doesn't mean that the rest of us are in a hurry to follow your lead," he retorts.

Weasley scowls, and Potter blushes in response. It is no secret that Weasley has proposed to Granger three times so far, and each time she told him that it was too early, and they should wait a bit longer. Nor is it a particularly well kept secret that Potter has taken to carrying around a diamond ring, in the hope that he will eventually acquire the courage to ask his ginger girlfriend to be his wife.

"And since you are so curious about my affairs, Asteria is not my girlfriend, and I am not going to marry her. I am not planning on marrying anyone in the foreseeable future."

Draco doesn't know why he feels the need to clarify things. He usually likes to keep the knowledge of his private affairs as murky as possible. But somehow he has the notion that he owes it to Neville, especially since the other man seems so jealous of little Asteria.

Neville's jealousy amuses and gratifies Draco. How could someone like Neville be jealous? Why would someone like Neville be jealous over Draco? Neville should know by now that no one else could possibly compare to him. How could Draco even consider looking at someone else when he has Neville? Neville who said he loved him.

Even thinking about Neville's simple, almost diffident, proclamations makes Draco's heart expand in his chest painfully and his breath catch. He hardly dares hope that something like that could be true, but if Neville says so, it must be. Neville never lies, except when Draco asks him to.

Draco knows that Neville doesn't like lying about their relationship, but there is no way around it. How can Draco ever tell his father that he is gay? Or his mother? His mother, who has her heart set on grandchildren and seeing her son married and happily settled. Doesn't Neville realise that after all his parents have lost, he can't take this from them as well?

But where does that leave Draco? Will he have to get married eventually? And if so, why not to Asteria? She is a very sweet girl, funny and easy to get along with, once you surpass her initial shyness. She would make a very pleasant and accommodating wife. Draco shies away from the thought. How can he possibly give Neville up and spend the rest of his life with a woman?

The neverending litany of circular and conflicting thoughts start to make Draco's head pound as he morosely follows his classmates to the pub. He proceeds to try and drink his confusion and rising panic away, even though it is still only lunchtime.

~ o ~

Narcissa pensively stirs a dash of lemon into her second cup of tea of the morning. Outside it is slowly getting brighter, a rare December morning that isn't completely overcast.

The time is steadily getting later, perilously close to midday, and Narcissa has long finished her breakfast. She has read the Daily Prophet from cover to cover, and yet she is still at the breakfast table, waiting. Lying in wait, actually. She would haughtily refute anyone who dared mention that was what she was in fact doing, but the undeniable truth is that, this Sunday morning, she is laying in wait for her son, who has yet to return home.

Narcissa is not worried about her son's whereabouts; she knows exactly where he spent the night, and where he obviously still is, and she can think of no safer place for him to spend his time. She has long pretended to be unaware of all the times her son neglects to return home for the night but truly, how could Draco believe her to be ignorant of anything that goes on in her household?

This morning, however, she wants to catch him out. She hopes that forcing a confrontation might extract the confession she's seeking, because subtle machinations have so far failed to bear fruit.

Despite all her foisting of Asteria Greengrass on him, her manipulation of the press, and her constant nudges and hints, Draco has yet to crack. He is showing strain, in the lines of worry and frustration that have appeared on his high forehead, and in his ineffectual outrage at Rita Skeeter's writings he even composed and sent a cutting letter of complaint to the Prophet in one of his fits of pique, but little was he to know that it was no match for Narcissa's well placed bribes and promises; but he has yet to crack.

Narcissa is beginning to worry at her son's restraint; it is most unlike him to be so stoic. She counted on him giving in at the first sign of adversity and loudly proclaiming his opposition to Narcissa's obvious matrimonial plans for him.

Draco was never one to suffer in silence, nor was he one to willingly forsake something that made him happy. Narcissa is starting to suspect that she might have over-estimated her son's feelings for his lover. It would be a shame if she had, because she believes Neville Longbottom to be good for Draco. But, on the other hand, if it is so, then maybe she needn't give up her dream of grandchildren after all. In any case, things have to be resolved soon.

Narcissa's tea is almost cold enough to be undrinkable, and she has wasted the whole morning waiting, when Draco finally returns. She hears the whoosh of the Floo in the reception room, and Draco's cautious steps as he tries to sneak to his rooms.

Soon enough, she spies his rumpled figure creeping past the wide open doors of the oriental sitting room she purposely chose to breakfast in.

"Good morning, Draco," she says sharply, startling him.

Draco jumps and turns to give her a sheepish look. "Mother, what are you doing here?" he asks.

"Having a late breakfast and wondering where my errant son could be," she answers haughtily, feeling annoyed at having been kept waiting for so long.

"Hmm..." Draco studies his feet as two bright pink spots appear high on his cheekbones.

"If I remember correctly, you took Asteria out to dinner yesterday evening. Have you been with her until this time?" Narcissa demands with narrowed eyes.

She doesn't for a minute believe he has, but playing stupid has served her well on many occasions.

Draco's eyes widen in shock. "No, of course not!" he exclaims. "You know I don't think of Asteria like that!"

Narcissa raises a questioning eyebrow, demanding a more satisfactory answer.

"I was out with friends," Draco mumbles. "We lost track of time, had a little bit too much to drink, and I ended up spending the night at a friend's house."

"And would that friend be, by any chance, Neville Longbottom?" Narcissa asks pointedly.

"Yes," is the defensive reply.

Narcissa hums in response, managing to infuse even that with suspicion and a wealth of innuendo.

Draco doesn't rise to the bait; he simply stares at her mulishly.

Such a difficult boy, Narcissa thinks before changing tack.

"I don't see what you find lacking in Asteria Greengrass," she says airily. "She's a charming young lady with a beautiful temperament. Quite perfect, really. I think you're just being picky and contrary."

Narcissa raises an eyebrow, daring him to refute her.

Draco's expression clearly betrays his disagreement, but still he says nothing.

Damn the boy! Sometimes he is just as stubborn as his father, Narcissa thinks. Obviously subtlety and finesse will not do the job. Narcissa doesn't like being obvious and crass, but if she has to, she will.

"Draco dear," she says slowly, "I know you believe you're still young, but it really is time you considered matrimony.

"Becoming an Auror, and befriending two such illustrious heroes has done wonders towards reforming your image and that of the family in the eyes of the world, and is making them overlook the mistakes of your poor father and your own difficult youth.

"If you were to marry, or at least show the intention of doing so, it would prove once and for all that you have become a serious, upstanding young man who will become a conscientious and productive member of the wizarding community."

Draco's eyes are bulging, filled with disbelief and desperation, and his face is chalk white; yet he still stays silent.

Narcissa has no choice but to ruthlessly continue.

"I believe Asteria would make an ideal mate for you. You could have a long engagement, and I'm sure you'll learn to love her. That is, unless you have a previous attachment you neglected to mention. Have you, darling?" Narcissa looks at Draco pointedly, her gaze laden with meaning.

And still Draco says nothing. His face grey, he chokes out a "no" and flees the room.

Narcissa sits back, most disappointed in her son. She knows she hasn't made things easy for him, but she believes that if one truly wants something, it is worth fighting for it. Overcoming adversity will only make his bond with Neville stronger. Otherwise... Well, if he doesn't fight for it, then he doesn't want it enough, and he definitely doesn't deserve it. Either way, Narcissa plans on coming out victorious.

~ o ~

Outside, a light snow is falling as the sky gradually turns dark and evening comes. Inside his greenhouse, Neville seems oblivious to all of this. Floating lamps illuminate every cranny of the lush space, throwing into bright relief every leafy plant and every gaily coloured flower. It is so hot and humid inside, the windows are foggy, and Neville is wearing a simple cardigan over his shirt.

The whimsical wind-chime hanging above the door of the large greenhouse - a present from Luna Lovegood - chirrups and gurgles and whistles as the aforementioned young lady enters, but Neville is so engrossed in pruning his Avaricious Orchid he doesn't even notice.

Humming to herself, Luna makes her way through the densely populated greenhouse, petting and murmuring greetings and encouragement to the plants she passes.

At the back of the greenhouse, tucked into the very corner, is Neville's office. It's a cramped space, with a rickety set of shelves overbrimming with folders and gardening manuals, a large old desk, with a teapot and some mugs on it, and three mismatched chairs.

Luna places her package on the table, takes off her heavy coat, and unwinds her long multicoloured scarf to reveal a bright pink nose and cheeks to match. She fills the teapot with water she quickly sets to boiling with a murmured spell, and starts hunting through the drawers of the desk for the teabags. She eventually locates them under a box of seeds and pops two into the water.

Satisfied, she walks over to the still oblivious Neville, bends over and kisses his cheek in greeting.

"Luna!" Neville exclaims, startled. "When did you get here?"

"Not long ago," Luna answers airily. "Come on, let's have some tea. It should be ready by now."

*

Neville always enjoys Luna's weekly visits for tea and scones. She remains one of his oldest and dearest friends and the only one who has always supported him unconditionally, no matter what. Today she has brought persimmon scones, which go surprisingly well with the strong tea Neville favours.

Luna looks around the greenhouse with her usual wide-eyed gaze of pleasure and wonder.

"I'm so glad you decided to make this greenhouse," she tells him. "It's one of my favourite places, it's so friendly and joyous and crowded. And it makes you happy."

Neville blushes slightly, even though she says almost the same thing every time she comes.

"Yes, it does make me happy," he agrees. "Now, if I could just find a way to earn a proper living from it."

Luna waves his worries away, like she always does, uninterested in negative thoughts.

"It's good you have this right now," she says, "since you don't look like your Draco is making you very happy at the moment."

Neville looks around anxiously as he tries to shush her.

"Luna," he whispers uneasily, "you're not supposed to talk about that!"

"Oh, Neville!" Luna's laugh is light and tinkling. "The plants don't care about you and Draco. They told me they rather approve. Only the Fearful Fern says she would rather you indulged in your strange human coupling on the other side of the greenhouse. It makes her nervous, you see."

Neville blushes and glances at the fern suspiciously.

Luna catches his nervous glance and laughs, entertained, before turning earnest once more. "I wouldn't be talking about it, you know, if it wasn't so obvious you need to talk about it."

Neville deflates and slumps back into his chair. Luna is right, as she always is. She reads him far too well. It is no wonder she is the only person who knows about Neville and Draco. She sensed it almost immediately, without Neville having said anything.

Needless to say, he made her swear not to tell anyone, least of all Draco. Luna has kept her promise, but refuses to understand the point of it.

"Anyone can see that the two of you are in love. It's really rather silly of you to pretend to hide it," she often tells Neville, but he's relatively certain that she's the only one who has figured it out so far. He and Draco are too careful.

Neville sighs and looks at Luna dolefully, not sure where to even begin.

"You're fretting over Asteria Greengrass, aren't you?" she asks insightfully.

Neville nods morosely, feeling like a sulky child.

"Silly boy," Luna tells him, obviously reading his thoughts. "I'm sure Draco enjoys Asteria's company she's a lovely girl, and she has a wonderful reading voice and he has been seeing a lot of her, but it's you he loves, you know that. You're really just getting all worked up over nothing."

When Neville still looks grumpy and unconvinced, Luna wrinkles her brow in a show of slight frustration.

"Is Draco jealous over your friendship with me? Or have you seen him wearing a Delusion Bracelet?" she asks, as close to exasperated as he's ever seen her.

"No, of course not!" Neville retorts. "Draco knows we are just friends! And, anyway, Gran isn't trying to make me marry you."

"And you know Draco doesn't wear jewellery," he adds as an afterthought.

Luna laughs, amused. "Your gran doesn't think much of me. I believe she called me flighty. But I'm sure she has picked out a girl or two she'd like you to marry."

Neville blushes, remembering various conversations with his gran where she mentioned likely young ladies.

"Yeah," he is forced to concede, "but the difference is that I refuse to humour her, because I'm not planning on marrying anyone else!"

Neville flushes and looks away, the last having come out a lot louder than he had planned.

Luna sits back to nibble at the last scone with a satisfied look on her face. Neville groans; he just knows she's going to persuade him to do something he doesn't want to.

"Well, there you have it," Luna concludes with a smile.

"There I have what?" Neville is feeling sulky and not in the mood for Ravenclaw guessing games.

"You should tell Draco what you told me."

At Neville's blank look, Luna is forced to continue. "Tell him you don't want either of you going out with other people. Tell him you're afraid he might decide to get married to someone else beside you. Tell him you want to stop pretending to hide."

Neville sputters, overwhelmed. "I never said anything about going public! I can't tell him that!"

"It's obvious you want to," Luna replies calmly. "And you really should tell him. You deserve to be happy, Neville."

"But what if I lose him?" Neville is embarrassed by how small and lost his voice sounds.

"You won't," Luna reassures him, her voice so certain Neville is almost persuaded. "What happened to the brave Neville I used to know? Everything will turn out as it should, you'll see."

Neville hums in reply, deep in thought. Luna is right, as usual. He hasn't been very happy for the last two months, yet the thought of losing Draco paralyses him with fear.

Neville is so lost in churning conflicting thoughts, that he barely notices when Luna softly kisses him goodbye and leaves.

Does he dare ask for what he wants, even if it might mean losing his blond lover?

Part 4 of 4

Chapter 4 of 4

Can a love remain hidden? Do the interfering women of the family always know best? (Neville/Draco)

iv. the game is up

Augusta looks around the ostentatiously elegant sitting room as she sips the fragrant tea Narcissa favours. Surely, such splendour is not truly necessary for one's comfort.

From the room's large windows, she can see into the extensive Manor gardens. Everything is covered at present by a sheet of white. Amongst the soft snow and the white gravel paths, the albino peacocks are barely visible as they strut around self-importantly. Who ever heard of such frivolity as white peacocks! Augusta barely suppresses her snort.

Opposite her, Narcissa is looking very fetching in deep crimson as she carefully stirs a drop of lemon into her Earl Grey.

"Unfortunately, my plan has failed so far to provide the desired outcome," Narcissa tells Augusta mournfully. "Draco is showing distinct signs of strain and discomfort, but as of yet, he has proven admirably stubborn and steadfast in his chosen course."

Narcissa sighs with disappointment.

"It is the same with Neville," Augusta agrees. "He is obviously discontent and jealous over the current state of affairs, but he has yet to take some direct action."

Augusta is very dissatisfied with her grandson; she never thought he'd prove to be such a pushover for a pair of pretty eyes.

"I believe we have no choice but to do something drastic," Augusta states decisively. "Something that will shake the boys up and force them to react. It is time we acted boldly and aggressively."

Narcissa nods her agreement. "I do believe you are right, Augusta. Despite giving Draco increasingly unobvious hints, it is time I forced a confrontation. I shall present an ultimatum to him and give him no choice but to come to a decision."

Augusta frowns at Narcissa's wording. "Do you think there is a possibility Draco might decide against owing up to his attachment to Neville?"

"I'm increasingly beginning to suspect that might prove to be the case in the end," Narcissa confesses apologetically. "It will be unfortunate for poor Neville but it will be much better for him in the long run to learn now rather than later that Draco's attachment wasn't quite as strong as he thought."

"Indeed," Augusta agrees. When they began their endeavour, she never considered such a resolution. It will indeed be most unfortunate for Neville, but she hopes he will quickly regroup. The Longbottoms never had much use for fickle and easily discouraged partners, after all.

"How do you plan on forcing Draco's hand?" Augusta asks.

"As you must know, in a little over a week we will be holding our customary Yule Ball at the Manor," Narcissa explains. "Thanks to Neville's and Harry Potter's attendance, our guest list has grown to be rather impressive. I do hope you will be attending this year, my dear Augusta. It is quite the public event. I will try to force Draco to announce his engagement to Asteria Greengrass at the Ball. I am going to threaten him that if he doesn't do it, I will do it for him."

Augusta is reluctantly impressed by Narcissa's bold proposal, even though it makes her not a little apprehensive.

"Don't you think it might be a bit too drastic?" she asks wryly. "And public?" she adds, thinking that this might be the most un-Slytherin thing the other woman has ever proposed.

"Not at all," Narcissa responds with confidence. "I'm going to give Draco the ultimatum tonight. After a few days of stewing, the possibility of such an announcement should have him quickly confessing. Draco does hate public humiliations."

"And what if he doesn't confess?" Augusta is not fully convinced, despite Narcissa's assurances.

"Then he will get engaged to Asteria," Narcissa answers implacably, "and I will see to it that he honours his engagement."

For the first time, Augusta considers that Narcissa might be playing both sides. She should have realised from the beginning that she would want to be covered for all eventualities.

A small knot of worry appears in her stomach at the suspicion that she might have been masterfully played by Narcissa Malfoy from the very start. It is too late now, the deck has been set, and she is too deep in the game to pull out. She gives Narcissa her agreement to make her final move and hopes she hasn't overestimated young Draco's affections for Neville or the resilience of Neville's heart.

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The Manor's large ballroom looks resplendent with all its Yule decorations; Narcissa hasn't spared any expenses. The banquet tables groan under the weight of all the Yule delicacies piled high on them, and silver platters float around the room, bearing delicate flutes of champagne and steaming mugs of mulled cider. In the corner, a string sextet is playing Yule carols and traditional Wizarding dances. Everything is perfect.

Draco stands in the doorway, eyeing the early arrivals and his mother, who flitters around them in greeting. He is dressed in one of his finest and most severe robes green velvet with pale green embroidery, dark green velvet to suit his dark mood. He has schooled his face into a carefully bland expression to hide the frustration and turmoil that is tearing him apart. Yet his normally clear grey eyes betray him; they have turned iron grey and flat.

Not even the pleasant burn of his thigh and back muscles, nor the even more pleasant ache deep in his arse, where he can still feel the ghost of Neville's length in the steady soft throbbing, can brighten his mood. If anything, the memory of how perfect Neville is, how much Draco loves it when he transforms into an aggressive and dominating lover as he has been doing with increasing frequency of late makes Draco's mood darker.

Last night was the most exhilarating one yet. Neville was demanding, implacably in charge and relentless. He mercilessly fucked Draco into submission and oblivion, with a

force Draco never yet experienced. But even as Draco revelled in it, a sliver of worry wormed its way into what remained of his rational mind. He could not help but feel that Neville was trying to express something through the fierceness of his lovemaking.

Draco knows that Neville has been feeling discontent of late, and Draco has long suspected he might be working himself up to a decision of some sort. Whatever it proves to be, Draco is certain he won't like it.

Draco catches his mother's eye, and the weight of his own impossible choice nearly bends him in two. His mother has demanded an engagement and will not accept a refusal. Draco can barely tell what is worse: making the announcement himself, being the one to make the light in Neville's eyes dim and to demonstrate to him conclusively that he really does live up to his family name, or hiding behind his mother's skirts and accepting the humiliation of proving to be the craven coward many still believe him to be by letting her make the announcement for him.

Whatever he chooses, it will feel like ripping his own heart out. That is why, a week now since his mother first told him what she expected from him, he refuses to come to a decision. His mind screams in horror, and his heart cries in despair every time he even thinks of the cruel choice he has been given. Because whatever he chooses, to face his fate with courage or cowardice, he will lose Neville. Neville would never agree to be the lover of an engaged man, and Draco much as he wants nothing else could never ask it of him.

Despite his late night musings and his wishful dreams for a future with Neville, Draco knows it can never be so. Much as Neville is his heart, his parents are his family, and he would be nothing without them. It's easier to live without his heart than his family, or so he hopes.

Even though his heart is stuttering in his chest, and his stomach is tying itself into knots, Draco plays the part of the gracious host with his father in Azkaban, he is the Lord of the Manor now and greets his guests.

As the night grows older, the ballroom starts to fill. Weasley and Granger arrive together with Potter and his girlfriend. Blaise and his mother. Theo and Pansy. More and more guests arrive, and he greets them all, barely recognising their faces anymore. That is, until Neville and his grandmother enter.

Draco's heart lodges in his throat. He barely knows how he manages to welcome them and wish them a merry Yule. Neville gives him a piercing look and a forced smile, and Draco can't help but be blinded by panic as he thinks, *Neville knows! He knows, and yet he came.*

Suddenly, feeling faint and dizzy, Draco excuses himself. He needs to find a quiet corner to sit down and regain his equilibrium. All he needs is a small breather and a glass or two of champagne to pull himself back together again.

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His mother finds him sitting on a chair in an empty corner slowly sipping on his fourth glass of champagne of the night.

"There you are," she exclaims upon spotting him. "It is most unseemly for the host to hide away like this. Come, the Greengrasses have arrived. You must greet them."

Still in a daze, Draco puts down his glass and follows her.

The whole Greengrass family has arrived together. Mr and Mrs Greengrass, looking suspiciously cheerful; Daphne and her fiancé, the oldest Montague son; and Asteria, gazing at him with bright eyes and a shy smile. Draco feels the bile rise to his throat, yet he greets them all with a smile he knows is too wide and fixed to pass for genuine.

Unable to take their well-wishes and eager looks anymore, he takes his first opening to escape and practically drags Asteria to the dance floor. She is soft and comfortable in his arms and dances beautifully.

"The ballroom looks stunning," she tells him. "It's even more beautiful than last year."

"Yes, my mother outdid herself this year," Draco agrees, tightening his grip and pulling her closer.

He inhales her pleasant scent and desperately tries to find some sort of spark or latent attraction. Asteria giggles a bit breathlessly, and Draco wishes he could only find the sound arousing.

Across the sea of dancers, Draco can see his mother gazing at him assessingly, Mr and Mrs Greengrass looking satisfied and a little bit smug, and Augusta Longbottom staring at him inscrutably.

Once more, Draco finds it hard to breathe. Thankfully, the dance comes to an end, and the dancers can all take a short break.

He's about to ask Asteria for the next dance too, anything to get away from circulating and socialising he really doesn't think he can take any of that tonight when a familiar deep voice breaks in.

"Good evening, Asteria. I'm really sorry to interrupt, but could I borrow Draco for a minute? I want to have a short word with him, and I promise I'll have him back to you in almost no time."

Draco turns round to face Neville and receives a sheepish smile. "You don't mind, do you, Draco?"

Draco shakes his head wordlessly, and Asteria gives her assent with a blush. Neville smiles at her thankfully and leads Draco away.

Draco feels the panic from earlier return to him once more as he lets Neville lead him through the large terrace doors out into the cold, dark gardens. He hears the muted sounds of the band taking up once again and sees the bright stars twinkling in the dark sky, all the while his heart beating a mad rhythm within his chest.

Neville casts a quick warming charm over both of them before turning to look at Draco, his gaze earnest and his face determined.

"I do realise my timing is not the best, but I have something I must tell you, and it can't wait any longer," Neville starts ominously, and Draco feels the nausea begin to take over.

"I love you, Draco," Neville tells him fervently. "More than anything. I know you know that. And I believe you love me too."

Draco remains silent, eyes wide and unblinking, as his heart is first suffused with warmth and then lanced by pain.

"I really thought I could do it," Neville continues. "I thought I could do anything, could put up with anything, for love and for you. But I can't. I'm so sorry, Draco, but I just can't."

Draco still doesn't utter a word. What can he say? Neville's eyes are glistening with tears, pleading with Draco, and Draco feels his heart tear in half.

"I can't do this anymore," Neville explains. "I want you more than anything, but I can't lie anymore, I can't pretend and hide anymore. I want to go out with you, Draco, as your lover. I want to be the only one for you and you the only one for me. I want to be yours for as long as you'll have me, and I want everyone to know."

Draco bites his tongue hard, the pain grounding him as his stomach roils, and he begins to feel the ground slipping out from under him.

Neville bites back a sob. "That's what I need," he says hoarsely, "and if you can't give me that, then I'd rather not have anything at all."

Draco sways on his feet, eyes wild and hands clenched at his side. With one last long, anguished look, Neville strides away back into the warm and cheery ballroom.

It has begun to snow again, but Draco barely notices as he falls to his knees in the cold snow. His eyes feel suspiciously damp, and his vision has gone blurry as he bites his knuckles to keep himself from sobbing. Neville has just offered him everything he has ever wanted and dreamed of, he has handed him the possibility of a future he has barely even hoped for. Draco covets that future, that chance to be with Neville, more than anything. Not until now, when he is being forced to forsake it, does he realise just how desperately he wants it. How can he ever turn his back on it? How can he ever turn his back on Neville?

Draco feels his heart break into a hundred tiny shards that rip his insides apart because he cannot give Neville what he wants, he cannot give himself what he so desperately desires. He has a family and a duty, and they must come first, for that is something he has been taught never to question. Draco feels the bitter tears fall freely as his throat closes up painfully.

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It's in a stupor that Draco rises and cleans himself up. He feels completely numb and raw as he returns to the Ball. He dances and makes meaningless small talk; he sips champagne and greets yet more guests.

"Brilliant party, this," Weasley tells him when he finds himself standing next to him.

"Yes, Draco, thank you for inviting us," Granger adds.

Draco turns to give the couple a stiff smile and an even stiffer bow. He can't help but notice how close together they stand, how they lean towards each other. How obvious it is to all that they are a couple and are in love.

Draco feels the crippling pain grip his stunted heart once more, and he has to get away as fast as he can.

He mumbles his excuses and stumbles, blind, through the chattering crowd. He almost trips, but feels a firm grip on his arm keeping him from falling, and he sees Potter's smiling face greet him.

"Hey there, Malfoy," Potter says cheerfully. "How's it going?"

Potter is holding a rosy-cheeked and laughing Ginny Weasley by the hand. The redhead grins at Draco and pulls her hapless boyfriend towards the dance floor. Draco stares at them, feeling once more dizzy and lost, so lost and confused. He feels like nothing makes sense anymore. There's no up and down anymore. *There's only duty and... duty and... What was the other one?*

"Draco," says a soft and cherished voice. "Draco?"

It's his mother. She clasps his wrist.

"Draco," she repeats once more.

Her eyes are soft and tender and strangely sad.

"It's time," she says. "It's time for the announcement. Will you make it, or shall I?"

Draco's head spins, and the panic he has barely contained this last week rises to choke him... *And love*, he thinks. *That's the other one. Now that I've found it, how can I live without it?* But Draco has been given no choice, no future; for him, there is no winning, only losing. Fear and hysteria grip him, and there is no longer any time for delay and dissembling. He must act.

"I will do it, Mother," he rasps, and she squeezes his wrist and offers him an encouraging smile before letting go.

This is it, Draco thinks as he walks towards the band. *The rest of my life begins now. But what will it be?* The weight of the impossible choice he's been given threatens to crush him once more.

He motions the band to silence them and turns to face the full room.

"I have an announcement to make," he says. His voice is loud, but the quiver is obvious.

Eyes wild, insides gripped by panic and nausea, he looks over the crowd. He can see Blaise and Pansy looking perplexed, but giving him an encouraging thumbs up, always on his side; Andromeda, who once chose love over duty, smiling; Granger and Weasley sharing an eerily similar expression of curiosity, the image of a couple meant for each other; Potter with his arm around Ginny, cheeks still red, mouths still smiling, another picture perfect image of love; Mr and Mrs Greengrass standing expectantly; and next to them Asteria biting her lip, eyes bright, making his heart scream out in wrongness; Augusta Longbottom holding herself with an inexplicable air of disappointment; his mother, eyes unaccountably apologetic. His mother, who loves him no matter what. No matter what? That's what she has always promised him; the only thing he has never ever doubted. That thought grips hold of his mind and gives him hope.

In the end, he can no longer avoid it, and his eyes wander where they least want to, where they have yearned to from the beginning. Neville stands by himself, a little apart from the others. His shoulders squared, as if ready for a blow, his feet slightly apart, his stance tall and proud, his eyes red rimmed, and yet his gaze unflinching and intense and demanding, so demanding.

Draco wants to tear his gaze away, look anywhere but into those deep brown eyes that strip him bare and leave him nowhere to hide, no chance to lie. Draco wants to look away, but there's no use because wherever Draco looks, all he can ever see is Neville. *How could I ever choose to live without him?* he thinks.

For a long, interminable moment, he stands there, mind teetering on the cusp of his possible futures, afraid and paralysed.

"I have an announcement," he repeats to the murmuring and questioning room. He spares a brief glance for his mother.

"I'm sorry, Mother," he says. "I'd give you anything I could, you must believe me, but I can't get married." Gasps and surprised whispering fill the room.

"I can't marry a pure-blood witch, like you want," Draco repeats, voice louder, Neville's steady gaze lending him courage. "I can't because I'm in love."

Draco takes a step into the now empty dance floor.

"I'm madly, passionately, irrevocably in love. And I want to spend the rest of my life trying to make him happy, if he'll let me." Neville's hot gaze is burning Draco up, but Draco can't stop looking at him, and now that he's started, he can't stop talking.

"I don't want anyone else. I just want him. I'm yours, Neville, for as long as you'll have me and for longer still."

Violent whispers erupt as the room explodes into noise. Draco never lets his gaze waver from Neville's face and his scorching eyes. Completely oblivious to all else but Draco, Neville strides purposefully across the dance floor and sweeps Draco into his arms, crushing their mouths together.

Draco has never felt more prepared to be swept off his feet or ravished, and he blissfully melts into Neville's embrace as his knees go weak. Neville's kiss is at once possessive and grateful, but all Draco's mind can do is chant, *Yes, yes, yes.*

There never was another choice, there never was anything else but this for Draco. There never was another future for him, but this one with Neville.

Draco risks opening his eyes to glance at his mother. She is wiping the tears from her eyes with a lace handkerchief, and when she catches his eye, she gives him a watery smile and a wink.

Draco closes his eyes and loses himself in Neville's kiss once more, relief flooding him. Maybe he can have both his love and his family. Maybe his future is brighter than he ever dreamed it could be.

Feeling as if he can't contain the happiness and hope that wells up inside him, Draco breaks the kiss to whisper in his love's ear. "I love you, you know, you great lummo."

Neville pulls him even closer and chuckles happily. "Well, you would, wouldn't you?" he answers dryly.

And suddenly, they are both laughing together, and all is well. Now that everyone knows, Draco no longer feels afraid. In Neville's arms, he feels complete and ready to take on the world. The future doesn't scare him anymore; together with Neville, it can be nothing less than glorious.

Fin