

Grey Tuesdays

by floorcoaster

Hermione goes on holiday to Italy for three reasons: a number on a calendar, her mother, and spontaneity.

1-Jan

Chapter 1 of 1

Hermione goes on holiday to Italy for three reasons: a number on a calendar, her mother, and spontaneity.

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Montorosso



You bump into him, literally, while in line at the gelato stand on the promenade that overlooks the beach, just as you were about to order the Stracciatelli. He's wearing faded blue jeans with a hole on the right knee, a dark maroon T-shirt and hiking boots. He looks as though he stepped out of a magazine...sharp, angled face, strong jaw line, and perfect cheekbones.

For a brief instant, he looks startled to see you, then hides everything behind a wall of grey steel...impenetrable and thick.

You went on this trip, alone, because you wanted to learn spontaneity, to 'suck the marrow out of life.' The most impulsive thing you've ever done before was to put your homework away, unfinished, during fifth year while Fred and George caused mayhem on the school grounds. As an afterthought, you realize that kissing Ron outside the

Room of Requirement would probably fit into that category as well.

The man running the stand recalls your attention, and as you pay the 2.3 euros for a small serving, you wonder if maybe he'd been an apparition, drawn from some deep, hollow recess inside the neglected corners of your mind.

Then he's next to you, ordering a large chocolate. It hits you that here is a chance to practice your mission, and you slap a five-euro note on the counter. He stares down at you as you wait with a contented smile for your change. He's curious, you can tell...it's pouring off him in waves. You take the deposited coins and give him a smile and lick your gelato and walk away, a strange sense of satisfaction washing over you.

You walk down the concrete slope leading to the beach, admiring the bright sun, brilliant, jewel-like blue-green water and gorgeous weather. Today you are going to hike seven miles from one end of the National Park to the other. You smile and think that there's no better way to start the day than with gelato.

The beach is not made of sand, but instead millions of tiny, polished rocks. There are larger rocks of varying sizes...some the size of apples, melons, or bludgers...scattered along the shore and as you stroll toward the southern edge, you marvel how one day, people will get those now-larger rocks stuck between their toes. You take comfort in the endless cycles of the Earth's natural evolution, in knowing that there are certainties in life.

Just off the beach, a small jump away, is a large rock jutting out of the water. You want to climb to the top and see the view, knowing it will be spectacular. You plan to finish your gelato and then scale the crag.

Ten minutes later you're sitting atop the rock, staring out over the Mediterranean Sea. You think about Ron. The day you left England was what would have been your five-year wedding anniversary had you gone through with the nuptials. Ginny had mentioned the date approaching and your stomach had dropped, and within the hour you had purchased a round-trip ticket to Italy. Something about the seeing the little black number in the white box on the calendar, even though you don't miss him, or wish things had gone differently, got to you and set a fire in your soul.

Your boss had nearly fallen out of her chair when you told her you were going on holiday for a month. You'd never taken so much as a sick-hour in the four years you've worked in the Department of Mysteries.

Ron had married Daphne Greengrass two and a half years after you'd called off the engagement. They had met in Prague when Ron was sent there on Ministry business. Daphne had been engaged to a Czech Quidditch player, but when she was introduced to Ron at a bar, they'd hit it off so well that they stayed until everyone else had gone, the employees had wiped down the furniture, cleaned the bathrooms, and were putting chairs on tables. A whirlwind romance followed, culminating in an elopement four months later in Barcelona.

Molly had been furious, Ginny delighted, and you didn't sleep for three days after you found out. To this day, you aren't sure why you'd reacted the way you did.

Since Ron and Daphne had met, courted and married in a foreign country, none of their friends had known each other or wished to associate at first. Even Harry had a hard time with being left out of something so important in his best friend's life. As a result, Ron and Daphne made a new set of friends, other couples, and you and Harry were left to scramble to fill the bottomless hole left behind.

You were still friends with Ron, but it wasn't the same. People grow, people change. You've always known it. You just never expected to be the victim of it.

The Mediterranean Sea below is pulsing, crashing wave upon wave against the immovable wall of solid rock. It occurs to you that Harry has always been your rock, and Ron the sea. Harry has been steady and unmoving, constant in his love. You've fought with him, disagreed, screamed across a conference table at a departmental meeting, but it never changed anything.

Ron's devotion has always come and gone. You and he have had a volatile relationship almost from the beginning. Warm, cool; on, off. Never hot and cold, and you know that was the problem. You've screamed and yelled at him, and he did nothing but hold his tongue, growing redder as your volume increased. He wasn't always there for you, couldn't be there for you when you needed him during the hardest times.

When you and Harry fight, Harry hugs you. Ron doesn't talk to you for two weeks and waits for you to apologize to him. And you always did, you always will, but only to maintain the part of the friendship you've managed to preserve. It was too hard being the only one who made any real effort, and you tell yourself that's why you ended it.

You ignored the growing feelings of repulsion at his touch, the way you'd take any opportunity to be away from him. You tried to believe that they were just phases; had you stayed together, eventually the pendulum would have swung back.

With a sigh you remember when Ron finally asked you out. You'd been waiting for over a year after the end of the war and you were both very busy, but you couldn't help but wonder what was taking so long. You chalked it up to hectic lives, and after all, rebuilding the entire structure of the wizarding world was a good, necessary thing.

When he finally did, you convinced yourself that the feelings inside were excitement, not a feeling of 'this is what's next.'

You hear the sound of children laughing and glance behind you at the beach. The children are throwing handfuls of rocks at each other, squealing in delight. The wind blows your hair in your face, and when you brush it away, your gaze falls on the sand at the base of the rock. He is standing there, eating gelato, and watching you. A shiver runs through you despite the warm air. He makes no motion, doesn't speak. You can't clearly see his eyes, but you know they are locked on you.

Another gust of wind blows your hair again, obscuring your vision. When you get it away from your eyes, he's gone. You scan the crowds, looking for a bright head of blond hair. You aren't even sure why...it's not like the two of you are friends...but you think it means something. He's here, you're here, of all the places in the world.

No luck. You can't find his standout hair among the mass of dark-haired tourists.

You slowly climb down the rock and jump the small rivulet of water and make your way to the start of the trail.

You've been told by dozens of people that the seven-mile walk from Montorosso to Riomaggiore is well worth the time and energy. You brought your camera, just in case. At eight-fifteen you begin.

There are no words to describe the beauty. You walk through orange groves, beside vineyards, along cliff edges, always with the Mediterranean Sea as a backdrop. At some point on the trail, you come upon an old man sitting outside his gate. He has a basket full of lemons sitting beside him, and you subtly cast a spell on yourself to speak and read Italian and ask him if the lemons are for sale. They are, and you buy two.

You take a couple of pictures after that when you think about it, but you know they'll never be able to convey the grandeur of what you see.

There's a bubbling, a tingling welling inside you, a strange sensation, a kind of premonition that something huge is going to happen. There is something waiting for you at the end of your journey, and you are anxious to discover it.

Vernazza



You step off the trail...which was really a climb through narrow, twisting alleys...onto the main road running through Vernazza. To your right is the sea; to the left, breakfast.

At 'Il Pirata,' two twin Sicilian brothers run a restaurant and bakery. One, Gianluca, is the chef, who creates every delectable offering under the glass displays. The other, Massimo, mans the counter, jovially greeting each guest.

You walk in and the smell is intoxicating. It's sweet, yet doughy, and there's a strong scent of coffee. Massimo greets you and says you look like a young Julia Roberts. You blush and smile and order a cup of coffee and the panzerotto, a much-recommended ricotta cheese pastry topped with cinnamon and sugar created by Gianluca. You squeeze into a table with people you don't know and leisurely drink your coffee. The pastry is more amazing than you'd imagined...hot, sweet, smooth, cheesy...and the coffee is some of the best you've ever had.

You order a second ricotta pastry to go and leave the café, heading toward the water. You stroll down the street, admiring the old buildings, the intricate ironwork, and people. A group of boys are playing soccer in the street, using the doorframe of a building for a goal. You pass a couple of gelaterias, and a cart full of different cheeses sitting on the sidewalk catches your eye, and you step into the shop behind it.

For sale are local fine foods, including a variety of spreads, flavored olive oils, and wine. The Cinque Terre is known in part for a prized dessert wine, Sciaccheta, from prime grapes dried to the point of holding only a few drops of sweet juice. You locate a bottle and are surprised by its size of only 375 ml. You have been waiting for this wine since you first read about the National Park, and without a second thought, you move to the register. An Italian woman gives you a welcoming smile, and her eyes twinkle when she sees the bottle you have placed on the counter.

When she tells you the price fifty euros you are so stunned that you simply stare at her, self-conscious about the twenty-euro note in your hand.

You feel the presence of another customer approaching the counter and the woman glances behind you. The other customer steps beside you and places a bottle of Limoncino, another dessert wine made from steeping lemon peels in pure alcohol and then adding sugar and water, beside your wine. You glance at the newcomer and are greeted with a pair of steel grey eyes, light with mirth and playfulness.

Without a word, he pays the seventy euros for both bottles of wine and accepts them from the woman.

"I thought I asked you to wait for me," he says for the woman's benefit, lightly placing a hand on your elbow and guiding you out of the shop.

You follow mutely, gobsmacked and confused. Once outside, the warm breeze brings you out of your daze. "What are ... why did you ... Malfoy?"

He laughs and a thousand tiny sparklers converge into a single point of light inside you. "Consider us even," he says, handing you the Sciaccheta.

"Even?" you repeat. "Not even close!"

He shrugs and starts walking away, toward the water. "Let's say ... this is a beginning in my attempts to rectify my past misbehavior."

There's something about his casual manner, the light-hearted way he mentioned the history between you, that sets your blood boiling. You rush to catch up with him and grab his arm, wrenching him around to face you.

"You cannot be serious!"

He's surprised at your actions, and his eyes, holding just a shadow of condescension, chidingly travel from your eyes, down your arm to where it's holding onto his. You let go as though burned and then consider the double standard.

"So you can drag me out of a shop, but I can't touch your arm?"

Once again, his eyes are full of mischievous light. "First, I did not drag you anywhere. Second, the amount of pressure being applied to my arm would have caused bruises, and I'm quite partial to its pale, even tones. Third, I see nothing wrong with the simple gesture of helping you obtain a much-wanted item. Fourth, I simply acted, didn't think. Buying you the wine seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

You're speechless at the tone of his voice, as though he were trying very hard not to laugh. Your first reaction is anger, but in an instant you realize you have nothing to be angry about. "I ... what do I owe you, then?"

"Nothing," he says and steps around her to resume his walk.

"Malfoy," you say as you follow him. "Gelato is one thing; this ... it's too much."

"Maybe for you. Gelato to you is like that wine to me. We're even."

You're not really sure what to say. It's true that he's very wealthy, but that isn't really the point. The point is that Draco Malfoy just purchased an expensive item for you, of all people. He even did so without a single sneer, smirk, hateful word or disparaging comment on your heritage. The latter was probably the most surprising aspect of the entire exchange.

"Well, then ..."

"Don't say anything more. You'll ruin the moment." He glances at you as he leads you near the open promenade where the fishermen leave their boats after a day's work. "Are you doing the hike, Granger?"

"Yes," you answer warily. "Why?"

"I happen to be as well. Perhaps we will meet again on the trails." You aren't sure, but you think you can detect the faintest hint of hopefulness in his tone.

"Maybe," you say, unsure how you feel about the prospect. On one hand, it is nice to see a familiar face; on the other, that face belongs to a man you have never liked, to

put it mildly. Company on the remaining five and a half miles sounds nice, and yet you embarked on your journey alone, intending to remain that way throughout.

Still, one of your goals is to exercise your spontaneity muscles. You will simply have to wait and see what happens.

In silence you walk together to the rocks that make up the edge of the dock. Waves crash against them and one of them nearly soaks you. You squeal with delight and mock fear when it recedes and you dart back to safer, drier ground.

"What's in your bag?" he asks, pointing to the wrapped ricotta pastry and lemons.

"A snack," you reply.

"Very practical," he says. "That will come in handy."

You're standing a few feet apart, and the sun is shining in his face, giving his eyes a look of intensity you've never seen before; they resemble liquid tin. Another wave crashes, breaking the magic of the moment.

"Know where the trail starts?" he asks, shoving his purchase into a sack he has slung over his shoulder.

"Follow the road back up," you say, pointing. "Head right, follow the signs."

He nods and without another word walks away. You watch him until he disappears, the tingle and sizzles dissipating as the distance increases.

--- ooo ---

The trail from Vernazza to Corniglia is the most strenuous of the four you will travel. You're glad to be getting it over with in the morning, instead of toward the end of your hike if you'd gone the other direction.

Corniglia is the only town without a beach. It sits approximately 100 meters above the Mediterranean Sea. You seem to go up and up for hours; always before you are more steps going up. Your legs are burning and the sun is beating down from its highest point in its celestial journey. Sweat trickles down your face and back and still you're going *up*.

You round a bend and get your first glimpse of your destination. It is still a long way yet. With an exaggerated sigh you push on.

After another fifteen minutes, you turn another corner and see a long set of stairs. You groan and move aside to let other people pass, relishing a moment of standing and the small amount of shade provided by a nearby tree.

"Merlin, you're slow!"

You know that voice, as if it's been inside your head next to yours all of your life. You shade your eyes with your hand and look up the steps. He's there, about two-thirds of the way up, standing under an overhang and leaning against a small house. His arms are crossed over his chest, and he's smiling, his hair recently mussed with sweaty pieces sticking askew.

You have nearly a hundred steps to go before you reach the shade where he is, and you haven't quite caught your breath so you remain where you are until your heart rate calms. He simply stands in place, watching you through the stream of other tourists passing by.

Finally you decide you're ready to continue. When you reach him, he extends his hand. In it is a full cup of

"Orange juice," he says, answering the curious look on your face.

"It's red," you say, still hesitant to accept his offering.

"It's made from blood oranges. From Sicily." He motions over his shoulder. "Bloke in here makes it freshly squeezed. It's a real treat on an afternoon like this. Of course, it's not as cold as it was when I ordered it. What took you so long?"

With a suspicious narrowing of your eyes, you accept the beverage and take a sip. It's the most refreshing thing you've ever tasted, and you take another long drink.

"I was enjoying the view," you say.

His eyes turn into soul-searching devices, and they're boring through yours and out the back of your skull. You can't look away, no matter how much you want to and it seems to last a lifetime but it's over in a flash as he grins and enters the orange juice house. You follow as though you're being pulled by a tractor beam.

The inside is very plain. To your left is the counter where the owner is currently pressing oranges for his customers. There are a few tables and chairs in the small space, all gathered around two wide-open windows.

You gasp.



It's the most incredible view of the entire trip, framed by the windows of the shop. You go to the window that has no glass and you can feel the warm, sea breeze lightly blowing in. Through the window, Corniglia sits majestically on a tall cliff, perfectly highlighted in all its glory. Vaguely you're aware that Malfoy has taken a seat at one of the

tables near the window.

"I think this place was designed around that view," he says.

You nod.

"Have a seat," he says, kicking the chair opposite his out from under the table. "Take a break."

You do, thinking you're in the most perfect place in the entire world. Silently you sip your orange juice and stare out the window, enjoying the view and the fresh air. Malfoy sits beside you, finishing his own juice that he'd started before you'd arrived. He doesn't speak and you are grateful for it; there is something magical in the moment, and you don't want anything to break the spell.

You have no idea how long you've been sitting, but eventually you're out of juice. You look at Malfoy to find him watching you, his cup empty as well.

"Shall we go on?" he says.

"We?"

He turns to the window. "Why not?"

"Why are you here?" you ask before you've even thought the question.

"In Italy, you mean?" he says and you can tell he's been waiting for you to ask.

"Yes ... No. Here, in the Cinque Terre."

He glances at his empty cup, then at the door. "Let's walk and talk, shall we?"

You agree and after tossing your cups, you head back onto the trail and the seemingly endless upward steps.

--- ooo ---

He tells you that he's in Italy for business, that because of his family's role in the war, his father's business has been expanding into other European markets. Draco is in charge of the branches in southern Europe: Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland and Greece. He's been living in Rome for two years and was introduced to this region by a friend, who owns the only wizarding shop in the Park, located in Manarola.

This is his fifth visit to the Park, second time alone. You ask why alone and he tells you, after shrugging, that he can hear the earth better, can listen more intently. You ask him what the Earth is saying, and he stops and shushes you, tells you to hear for yourself.

A hundred yards below you, thousands of rocks, of all sizes, rest on a narrow beach. The waves come in and out, and at first all you can hear is the sea. You tell him this and he tells you to listen harder, listen differently. You do and suddenly you hear what he wanted you to hear. As the waves retreat, water runs through the rocks, rushing, tumbling to return to the sea. The sound is like a muted maraca or bamboo wind chimes, atonal but euphonious. It's incredible and you look at him, your eyes full of delight, and he's smiling at you knowingly.

You ask him why, if he enjoys solitude on his vacation, he has asked you to accompany him.

He tells you that you're different, that you're part of his past. You frown and he laughs. Not a good part, of course, but still his past and it's the only one he's got. Besides, he enjoys speaking his native tongue and seeing your hair constantly in your face.

You don't buy it and you demand to know what happened to him after the war. He grows somber and stares over the water, resting his arms on the railing. You remember your ricotta pastry snack and pull it out of your bag. He glances at it, then you, then back to the water. You rip the delicacy in half and offer him a piece. He accepts it and takes a bite. He tells you this is his favorite morning treat.

The food has either energized him or convinced him that he can tell you because he starts his story with the last day of the war. After the fiasco in the Room of Requirement, after losing a friend, the only thing he wanted was for everything to end. He had been near the breaking point before that...his second breaking, he informs you...and that event tipped the scales. He had hid in a dark classroom, terrified with each blast that shook the very foundation of the castle.

Though he'd only been there perhaps twenty minutes...he'd tried to determine the length by piecing together a timeline of that night...it had been the most liberating twenty minutes of his life. He knew he was going to die, knew it deep in his bones. Every shout, every scream was for him. He knew he'd done rotten things, but he also knew he no longer meant them. He would take them all back if he could.

He had sat and imagined how the end of the end was playing out. Never in his wildest dreams did he think Voldemort would lose, so every cheer of triumph came from a Death Eater and every cry of agony from Potter and associates. Whenever he heard sounds outside the classroom, he knew he would be discovered by a Death Eater and killed for hiding. He'd likely be tortured as well, for disgracing the creature represented by the horrific scar emblazoned into the flesh of his left arm.

He was going to die, and as he waited he saw, heard and felt his entire life dwindle to a single point. He loved his parents, for good or bad. They loved him and he wanted to see them again. Nothing else mattered, not his pedigree, not his money, his looks, his name ... not even blood. He'd give it all up if it would guarantee that he and his parents made it through.

You reach Corniglia just as he's finishing. You both stop before going in and he concludes his story. He tells you that after an experience like that, after knowing he was dead and then getting his deepest heart's desire, life changes. Priorities shift, meanings are altered ... In essence, he has changed.

You don't know what to say ... What could you possibly say?

He laughs and tells you that he doesn't expect anything. It occurs to you that he's laughed a lot since you first saw him. Still, your mind is racing and you have just one more question.

"Why?"

He looks at you, puzzled. "Why what?"

"Why did you tell me all of that?"

His eyes are intense once more when they meet yours. "You asked. I reckon you wouldn't have asked if you hadn't really wanted to know. I didn't think you'd trust me if I didn't tell you the truth."

"Why do you want me to trust you?" you ask, knowing that you should just stop and accept and allow things to move.

A wistful smile flits across his lips and he shakes his head. "I really don't know."

You get that, and you finally listen to the voice that's been stabbing your brain, and stop talking.

"Maybe you'll tell me your story," he says, and you look away, the blood in your veins shuddering to a halt.

"I'm starving," you say and move away, only then aware of how close you had been...so close that you could feel the warmth radiating from his body, and now you miss that heat.

He allows you to ignore his comment and follows you into the town.

Corniglia



You wander into a restaurant on the main street where you order pesto lasagna...a plate of thin, wide and flat noodles smothered in pesto...and he orders *Pansotti*, ravioli with ricotta and spinach served with a walnut sauce. He also selects *Tegame alla Vernazza*, a plate of anchovies, potatoes, tomatoes, white wine, oil, and herbs for an appetizer. Anchovies are another local specialty and he seems surprised when you like them and eat three.

Pesto, made from basil, pine nuts, Pecorino Romano cheese, garlic and olive oil, originates in the Liguria region of Northern Italy, into which the Cinque Terre falls. You have had pesto in Italian restaurants back home, but it's nothing like what you're eating now.

After your late lunch, you spend time exploring the town. It definitely has a different feel from the others. The buildings seem a little more solemn, stark. You follow the main street to the outer edge of town and find yourself at the top of a cliff, the sea roaring far below. You remember your camera and snap a few inadequate pictures, and then a man with bright red hair offers to take a picture of you and Malfoy.

You're hesitant but he quickly agrees. You stand together, and the red-haired man moves around until he likes the view and tells you to get closer. Malfoy slips his arm around your waist, and you move into him slightly. The man is pleased and you hear the click of the shutter. You thank him, and when he's gone, Malfoy tells you he wants a copy.

--- ooo ---

The trail to Manarola begins with a 368-step set of stairs that zigzag from the town to sea level. About two-thirds of the way down, Draco challenges you to a race, but he cheats and jumps over the railing to get ahead. Then he taunts you from the bottom, a wide smirk on his face. He's still devious enough that he has retained the essence of his personality, but the razor-sharp, cutting, biting edges are gone. You aren't surprised to realize you find him very charming.

Just after the halfway point to Manarola, he stops you and tells you that there is a trail down to the rocks and beach below where you can dip your toes into the water and see minnows and jellyfish. It's a little difficult, but he trusts that you won't fall. There are signs on the gate leading to the side-path, so you know it's an approved trail.

When you reach the bottom of the steps, Draco encourages you to follow him onto the rocks. You protest, citing the risk of head injury and broken bones. He laughs and tells you to live a little. You are once again reminded of your mission to do precisely that and you nod. He holds his hand out to you.

You stare at it, and it hits you that you're more afraid to take his hand than to venture onto the rocks. Then you're astonished at yourself...what a silly idea! With gusto you accept his hand and it...the thing that scares you, that you've been hearing about your whole life, the thing you have wanted more than anything since you first saw pictures of your mum and dad on their wedding day...doesn't happen right away.

When it does, bolts of tingly pleasure skyrocket from the points where your hands are touching straight into your brain. You stumble and he catches you, pulling you close. It's a bloody warzone inside you now, as you're close enough to smell him, close enough to see the flecks of platinum in his eyes.

"See?" he says. "I'm not going to let any harm come to you."

You nearly swoon; the gut-inverting and reverting sensations are now even more alive and active. Coupled with his piercing eyes, his words are reassuring, offering you safety and protection. You've always known you could take care of yourself, that you didn't need anyone to look after you and you made sure everyone else knew it. Maybe that's why Harry and Ron never thought to comfort you when you were sad or had a bad day.

They have an image of you as a tough, no-nonsense woman, and you want that, so you accept and perpetuate it, even when all you really want is to collapse into a friend's long embrace.

You've always had so much to prove, from the very beginning, and you couldn't afford to let others see you weak, not for a second. Ron was pureblood, Harry was ... well, Harry Potter. You were just a common Muggle-born witch, automatically spurned by some because of your birth. You have always tried to present an impassive front, even when the words and barbs cut you deeply.

Those close to you have been led to believe that you *are* impassive. They see what you have shown them; they cannot see the wounds as you suffer them, the passion burning inside you. The closest you've come to showcasing it was when you sought to fight for the rights of house-elves. For that, you were ignored at best, openly ridiculed at worst.

It occurs to you that Draco doesn't trust you enough to leave you to fend for yourself. He hasn't been around you in situations where you felt like dissolving into a useless puddle, when others around you collapsed while you didn't. Therefore, he has taken it upon himself to keep an eye on you. It's the most startlingly flattering thing anyone has ever done for you, and he has absolutely no idea he's doing anything special other than keeping you from twisting an ankle on the rocks.

You feel a flood of relief and gratitude for the man holding you in his strong arms, and without thinking, without even deciding to be spontaneous, you stand on your tip-toes and lightly brush his cheek with your lips.

You feel him stiffen but he doesn't pull away. When your eyes meet, his are unreadable, and you feel a little foolish.

"Thanks," you murmur, hoping he will accept that the kiss was simply to thank him.

He nods and his arms loosen, but he still holds you in place. "Reckon we should get off these rocks."

"All right," you say, disturbed that you probably would have agreed to just about anything he had said.

Finally he releases you and clasps your hand tightly to pull you along behind him until you are both securely on the steps.

Once back on the trail, it is as though nothing had happened. You resume your conversation about the magnificent fauna along the trail, stopping frequently to examine a new species or watch the myriad of homeless cats chasing each other along the path.

Manarola



When you arrive in Manarola, Draco leads you up the main street to a pizza and foccacia shop. Focaccia, bread made with olive oil and salt and topped with herbs and vegetables, has its origins in the region, and locals say the best is made between the Cinque Terre and Genoa. The man behind the counter smiles brightly when he sees Draco, and the two share a hearty handshake, exchanging greetings in Italian. After a moment, the man looks at you and cocks an eyebrow at Draco.

"Vincente, this is Hermione Granger. Hermione, my friend Vincente. I told you about him and his shop on the way."

You nod and shake Vincente's hand. "Pleasure to meet you," you say.

"You as well. Are you, by chance, *the* Hermione Granger?"

You blush and say, "If you mean the one who is friends with the famous Harry Potter, then yes, that's me."

He grins widely and gives Draco a slap on the shoulder and a not-so-subtle wink. "I've got your order in," he says quietly but not so that you can't hear. Then he looks at you. "Come on into the backroom, Bella."

You follow them through the door, and Vincente taps a portrait in the hallway with his wand, and the door at the end of the hall opens. Once through, you see a crowded shop displaying a wide assortment of wizarding products, from wands to robes to potions ingredients.

"We have to provide a little of everything," Vincente explains as he moves further into the shop. "You never know what people might need."

You pause to look at a book entitled "Magical Italy," and Draco and Vincente move on to the counter. They begin speaking in hushed tones, and when you realize it, you look up. Vincente gives something wrapped in brown paper to Draco. Draco sets it on the counter to examine and your curiosity is piqued.

As you approach the counter you hear the words 'poison,' 'untraceable,' and 'quick.' The blood in your veins freezes solid and you stop, staring wide-eyed at Draco. Vincente notices and pales, prompting Draco to turn around. Furtively you glance at the items displayed between the two wizards before they can be hidden and see black leaves with three points, a bottle of what looks like caviar, cinnamon sticks, and a small, silver olive fork.

"Granger," Draco growls, not bothering to cover his purchases.

You shake your head in disbelief, not at what you're seeing but at the fact that you'd ever thought he might be trustworthy.

"Stop it," he commands, approaching you and gripping your elbow. "Stop it, stop...thinking. You cannot possibly make an accurate judgment about what I'm doing."

"I'm sure it's very convoluted," you say patronizingly. "The little Mudblood isn't smart enough to understand."

You hear Vincente gasp, but your eyes remain locked with Malfoy's.

He shakes your arm and scowls deeper. "I will explain, when I am done here, if you will let me."

That stops you mid-condemnation and you narrow your eyes. "You will?"

"Yes."

You can tell he isn't happy about the prospect, but he isn't backing down from his promise. You nod slowly, his eyes searing through yours, and then turn to check out the prepared healing remedies.

The transaction takes only a few minutes, voices muttering in Italian, and soon Vincente is leading you back to the front of the store. He offers you a square of foccacia, and despite your worried nerves, you accept, knowing you're going to be hungry very soon. You choose the onion and garlic foccacia. Draco orders his favorite, the cheese and tomato. Vincente heats the food in an oven and chats amiably with Draco while you pace nervously.

The ingredients he purchased are ingredients in a variety of poisons, the most deadly of which requires all three and the silver fork to add the caviar to the cauldron. You shiver, wrap your arms around you, and watch Draco talk from the corner of your eye.

When the food is ready, Vincente gives it to you, and you try to pay for it, but neither he nor Draco will let you. Uneasy, you go outside to wait and sit on a bench next to the main road.

Draco joins you after a few moments, and you silently eat, trying not to think the worst of the man you'd felt compelled to kiss not an hour before.

He finishes first.

"The tale is simple, though I don't want it broadcast," he says, leaning very close and talking quietly.

Your body doesn't take into consideration your mind's concerns and reacts to his proximity. Your stomach flips and your heart races, and you can't help but picture his lips as he speaks, though you aren't looking at him.

"I have a friend whose mother is very ill. She is slowly dying of a disease that has ravaged her mind and body. She knows no one, but lies in bed all day, screaming in pain when she's awake. It's getting so bad that the sedatives are starting to fail. I have ... connections, the ability to procure these items that will help to end her suffering."

You wait until the words, the meaning, sink in. "A mercy killing?"

His eyes are burning. "Whatever term you prefer. And before you go all self-righteous on me, I ask that you put yourself in my friend's shoes, her mother's shoes. What would you do if it was you? What if it was *your* mother?"

Unrelated tears fill your eyes and you furiously blink to expel them. He frowns, puzzled, and you shake your head. "No, I ... understand."

"Then ... why are you..."

You stand up quickly and walk away. He stays on the bench, you suspect because he thinks you'll come back.

You're surprised when ten minutes pass and he hasn't caught up with you. You can't imagine that you'd managed to offend him. You stop to rest your legs and lean on a handrail.

You know you're still not okay, still carry open and festering wounds. Malfoy's words had heaped piles of salt into them, though unconsciously done. Your heart constricts painfully as you think of your parents. You miss them terribly and wish that things were different, that you could go home.

Every time you see your mother, you think it might be the day when she smiles and holds her arms out to you and tells you everything will be okay. You will see her again the week you return to England, and a few tears run down your face as the hope...painful, constricting, suffocating...threatens to suck you down like a riptide.

You feel a presence behind you and silently will the person to move, to leave you alone. Then he's beside you, and part of you wants to push him away, and part wants to collapse into him. You look away and try to wipe your eyes but you know he can see what you're doing.

"What took you so long?" you ask, not looking at him.

"Figured you needed some time," he replies, running a hand through his hair. "Why don't we go a little farther? There's something I want to show you."

You are infinitely grateful that he didn't mention catching you crying or ask what's wrong, and so you follow him, behind and slightly to his right. He doesn't slow down to walk beside you and you realize he already knows you well enough to understand when to leave you alone. You have no idea how it's possible.

The trail winds away from the water, and when you round a certain corner, you find yourself in an olive grove. The trees are beautiful with their dark, grayish green leaves and the splay of their branches.

Draco stops, staring intently at something you cannot see. Then, when there are no people on either side of them, he grabs your hand and pulls you into the grove, up the hill, until you are hidden from the path below. You're both breathing hard, and it takes a few seconds to catch your breath. He sits under a tree and motions for you to do the same. Then he pulls out the bottle of Limoncino he'd bought in Vernazza and magically removes the cork.

Your mind runs through a list of scenarios: he will share, or he won't. If he does, will he offer you the first drink, or take it himself? If you, will he drink after you? It's a silly train of thought, but your mind is always churning and thinking, and you've learned by now that there's nothing you can do to change it.

He hands the bottle to you and you drink from it. It's sweet and bitter and burns going down, but it's delicious, and you take a second sip before returning it to him. He's laughing and you ask him what's funny. He tells you the look on your face was brilliant. You scowl, and he tells you not to be upset and to watch what happens when he drinks.

You laugh then, as his eyes scrunch up and his nostrils flare and his mouth catches somewhere between a grimace and a smile.

"Delicious, isn't it?" he says, offering you another go.

"Very much so." Your third drink is the best so far, and you savor the mixture of flavours as they make their way to your stomach.

He's looking at you with mild interest as you return the bottle, and you know he's offering you the chance to speak if you want. You do and you don't. You do because he's someone new, someone detached from everything and everyone involved, even from you. He would have a fresh perspective, a new set of ideas and maybe suggestions for you. But you don't because he is who he is, and even though he is so glaringly different, he is still Draco Malfoy.

You look at him and remember the moment on the rocks. You've never really shared everything with Harry or Ron, not wanting them to see your weaknesses and not wanting to see them fail to live up to your expectations.

The tears start before your words, and before you know it, you're sobbing and he quickly pulls you close. You're so confused, enjoying the nearness but heartbroken at what you're about to tell him.

He holds you tight and lets you cry, and then you're better and you begin. He leans back against his tree and gives you the Limoncini.

You tell him everything. Soon after your sixth year ended, you modified your parents' memories and sent them to Australia. You wanted them to be free from worry and more importantly free from harm. If they had stayed in England, not only would you have been in a constant state of worry over their well-being, they were prime targets for the Death Eaters.

After everything was over and the fighting had ceased, you returned with Harry and Ron to collect them. You were stunned beyond imagination to discover that Wendell Wilkens was in a mental ward and that Monica Wilkens was suffering from split-personality disorder, barely controlled on medication. You had never in all your wildest nightmares imagined that your parents weren't perfectly safe and happy and oblivious.

You contacted the Australian Ministry of Magic and had your parents returned to England. Your dad is now a long-term neighbor of Frank and Alice Longbottom's, slowly recovering. Your mother's condition was reversible, but she still goes to counseling. You go with her, because she has had to deal with not only expelling the remnants of Monica Wilkens from her psyche, but the hurt and betrayal she feels at what you did.

The little you know about your parents' experiences in Australia you have gleaned from your mother. They had one good month before things started to deteriorate, and then she began having nightmares about a daughter that she had lost, the mechanisms of which varied: she died in childbirth, a car accident, cancer. Eventually, your name surfaced in her dreams, and after that, she began having hallucinations and flashbacks while awake.

Soon she was unable to differentiate between reality and the pictures and stories in her mind.

The police were called by a neighbor of your parents after three weeks passed when neither of them had been seen entering or leaving the home. Your father was found pacing through the house muttering, his eyes glazed; your mother was trying to put a nappy on a melon.

They were sent to hospital, and the Muggle doctors declared that your father had gone through a psychotic break and your mother was a delusional, paranoid schizophrenic. They put him in a padded room. The medicine they gave to your mother helped for some reason you still don't understand despite your research, and she was eventually released.

She didn't know who you were when you found her, but after an hour, she did. Then she forgot again, or thought you were the ghost of her dead daughter. It completely ripped you apart.

It's been seven years, and even though your mother is nearly fully recovered, there are still times when she doesn't know you for a few seconds. Every Tuesday you meet

her for coffee in addition to attending all of her counseling sessions, twice a week. Sometimes the counselor calls you in, other times you sit in the hallway for hours, but you don't mind at all.

She spent her first three months back in England at St. Mungo's where the Healers tried to reverse the damage. Then you were told that it would be better for her recovery if you didn't see her for a while. After six more months, you were invited to a session, and she spent the entire time crying while you felt lower than pond scum.

After another year, she finally accepted that you had made the best decision you could and with the best of intentions.

You pause in your story and Draco hands you a handkerchief. After thanking him and using it, you close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. His face is unreadable.

You can't forgive yourself for what you did, even though your mother finally did. Fourteen months earlier, your father recognized both you and your mother for the first time since you retrieved them from Australia, and his prognosis was upgraded to hopeful. Your mother took you to dinner, and before your entrees were delivered, you were both a mess of tears and tissues as she told you she forgave you. She doesn't understand your motives, but she neither does she want to spend the rest of her life separated from you.

Since then, your relationship has improved greatly. You and she went to visit your father last Christmas, and he had presents waiting for you. Both of you were on the verge of tears the entire time and you had to leave after opening a box of hospital gloves from your father.

No one can possibly understand...at least, you admit, you haven't given anyone the opportunity to. You always executed every spell with precision, mastered wand movements almost on first exposure. You've gone over that night, when you modified their memories, a thousand times in your Pensieve, pored over spell books, consulted as many experts as you could, and you still have no idea what went wrong. One of the Healers you spoke with wanted to do further research on what happened to your parents, and you eagerly agreed, hopeful for some explanation. As if an explanation will erase the pain and hurt you've caused.

"She says she forgives me, but I know it's not forgotten." You're ripping blades of grass into pieces, the lump in your throat painful. "I catch her looking at me sometimes like she's trying to figure me out, or understand me, or like she has no idea who I am. It's hard, and things are better, but I know they'll never be the way they were. I'll have to go through all of this again when my dad recovers."

"At least you've got your mum," Draco said. "And friends."

You nod, feeling a release at finally sharing the deepest pieces of your soul. You even smile, just a little. He returns the gesture, and you're a bundle of nerves and tingles again. You don't want to tell him that you've only got your mother, that Harry and Ron don't know the half of what you've been through with your mother. When they asked, you told him things were "good," "better," and "all right." So telling Draco, even though it's Draco, has been the best thing you've done for yourself in years.

"Well, I'm ready," you say.

He's surprised. "That's it?"

"Yes," you respond, reaching for the Limoncino. He hands it to you and you finish it off. "Thank you for listening."

"Anytime," he responds. The look in his eyes is so sincere, so open, that you believe him.

Riomaggiore



At some point after leaving the olive grove, your hand brushes his, and you blush and apologize. He tells you not to worry, but then it happens again, and again. He finally takes your hand in his and refuses to let go, playfully telling you he would rather know exactly where your hand is than be constantly knocked by it.

You allow it and the feelings are indescribable. You stop trying and simply enjoy it.

He tells you about the woman his potion is going to, about how he had made a promise to the woman's daughter to do whatever he could to help, not knowing what it would come to. He'd sworn after the war never again to be involved with the Dark Arts, but they seemed to keep finding their way to him, trying to be involved with him. This isn't the first time, and he doubts it will be the last. He is trying, and he's come a long way, but his past is deeply ingrained, and he cannot rid himself of it completely.

You understand that feeling and squeeze his hand in support. He rearranges your hands so that your fingers are entwined, and you walk the rest of the path in companionable silence, deep in thought over the days' revelations.

When you reach the final village, the first thing you do is find the nearest gelateria. You order the kiwi-flavored and he gets the chocolate. You comment that he had ordered chocolate that morning, and he grins and takes a lick off the top. Everything seems forgotten, and you tease him for his lack of diversity in his flavor selections. He quirks an eyebrow and scoops a generous heaping of gelato onto his little spoon, then threatens to fling it at you.

"Oh, very mature," you say with a giggle. "Try mine."

He does and says he likes it, but that he prefers his favorite flavor. He assures you that he's tasted every variety of gelato offered in Italy, and still chocolate remains his top choice.

You finish your snack in a small landscaped area you find, filled with flowers in bloom and a fountain. He finishes his first and goes into a nearby shop, emerging a few minutes later empty-handed. You ask him about it, and he shrugs, saying he didn't find anything he wanted.

When you finish, you both walk back to the train station. You notice that you're now walking at a snail's pace, dragging your feet and taking very small steps. You stop at every shop that catches your eye. You tell yourself it's because you're tired that you're walking so slowly, interested so you stop to browse. It's surely not because you want to extend your time with him, though he seems just as eager to postpone your separation. He insists on showing you various ideal photogenic spots through the town.

Inevitably, you reach the train station. The next one is due to arrive in just five minutes. You've rented a room in Vernazza and are going to take the train; you've walked enough for the day, and it will be getting dark soon.

You make small talk, sitting on a bench, while you wait. The train arrives and you stand. He grabs your wrist and you whirl around. He's standing very close, and you remember the feel of his skin under your lips, the fire that roared through you and the look in his eyes.

"Have dinner with me," he says in a rush as the train doors open.

"Why?" you ask as people get off and on the train. The next one isn't due for another twenty minutes.

He rolls his eyes. "It's nearly dinnertime. There's an incredible trattoria in Vernazza, and I bet by the time we catch the train and get back, you'll be hungry. We've both got to eat."

You don't have any time to think; you should be spontaneous and accept his invitation. Your heart, your gut instincts are telling you this.

Your head, however, wants you to save yourself, to protect yourself and get away from him. It's too good to be true; he's been too perfect today. Tomorrow...maybe even at midnight, you think with a silent chuckle...he'll morph back into the Draco Malfoy you've always known. You don't think you could handle it. Maybe it would be better to leave after your perfect day with him and never see him again. You would always have a perfect memory of him and be able to speak well of him, fondly even. With longing and wistfulness over what might have been, perhaps.

You're about to tell him no, that you're tired and about to fall asleep standing up when he kisses you. It's sudden...he wraps an arm your waist and pulls you so close that you would swear you heard the sounds of the air between you rushing to get out of your way.

All of your senses are heightened as his lips, soft and gentle, yet insistent and unrelenting, move in rhythm with yours. With each breath, each touch, you feel music all around you, as though your hearts and bodies are composing a symphony meant only for your ears and his. You know he can hear it too because his pulse is racing and his other arm finds its way around you, drawing you even closer than before, a feat you hadn't thought possible.

In moments you're feeling light-headed and you know you have to breathe, but you don't want to stop, not ever. You've never been kissed like that, like you're the most desirable woman in the world. You aren't sure if it's just the way he kisses or if he really feels that way about you. You can't imagine it's possible already, but you have never felt so wanted and you'd only spent a few hours with this man. You can't imagine what it would be like to be with him, to be the one who makes him smile, the one he comes home to.

You could know his favorite brand of soap, see his hair in the morning, guess which films he would prefer to see, and order his favorite Chinese take-away.

Time is nonexistent as he kisses you, but soon...all you know is that it's too soon...he pulls away, a smoldering look in his eyes. He glances at your lips and smiles. You return it shyly and awareness slowly returns. There are people around; some of them are staring. You redden.

He lets you go but takes your hand. "Dinner?"

You let out a chuckle because you'd been about to tell him no. Now the very idea is absurd.

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Later that night, when you're sitting together on the rocks by the water in Vernazza, he asks you what you're thinking.

You know there are a thousand questions to be answered, much to be worked out, and you swear you won't leave Harry out of this, but there's just something about the way you feel right now that mixes with hope and sends your mind on long trails of thought. But one thing stands out in your mind, because you can finally admit that you occasionally need an arm to rest on, someone to help support you, especially on Tuesdays.

In the spirit of the spontaneity you are still cultivating, you ask him what he thinks of weekly coffee dates with a Muggle. He smiles knowingly and says nothing could keep him away.

He reaches for your hand and gives it a squeeze; you know he's telling you more, that he wants to be there for you. You thread your fingers through his, a wistful, hopeful smile curving your mouth and you ask him why he kissed you. He says he could tell you were thinking of all the reasons you should say no, and he wanted to give you a reason to say yes.

The End

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End Notes: Thanks for reading! Title taken from "Friday I'm in Love" by The Cure. All photos taken by me.