

RITUALLY
YOURS

VIOLETEMERALS



Magic by Meredith

RITUALLY YOURS

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Draco had known about this strange ritual his family performed every generation, and how it was supposed to find the perfect partner for him and solve all of his troubles of being single. He knew it was supposed to help point him in the right direction to meet the witch of his dreams. The only problem was that, for him at least, it didn't work.

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ONE



THE RITUAL

Morning, Mother,” Draco greeted, entering the breakfast room at Malfoy Manor.

“Good morning, darling,” Narcissa answered, lowering her fork and knife beside her grapefruit bowl and daintily dabbing her mouth. “Did you sleep well?”

No, he very much did not sleep well. He’d spent most of the night tossing and turning, filled with worry and anxiety about today. He’d had to magically hide the bags under his eyes this morning, and it was only after a calming draught that his hands stopped shaking.

“Yes, mother,” was his answer.

Draco took a seat at the inordinately large table across from his mother. Tilly, the family’s house elf, popped in beside him asking what he’d prefer to have for breakfast this morning.

“Just some black coffee, please, Tilly,” he confirmed. Not that coffee would help either the anxiety or the jitters, but the comforting warm smell would be a temporary relief, and the caffeine would at least perk him up a little.

With a polite “Right away, Master Draco,”, Tilly disappeared. A moment later, a perfect steaming cup of black coffee appeared on the plate in front of him.

Narcissa eyed his choice of breakfast knowingly, eyebrow raised. She remained silent however, going back to cutting her grapefruit into small bite sized pieces and eating them one at a time.

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“Where is Father this morning?” Draco asked. He expected to see his father here at breakfast, like normal. But the high-backed chair next to his mother’s at the head of the table remained empty, its plush deep burgundy upholstery a taunting burn in his peripheral.

“He’s preparing the room for you” was Narcissa’s simple answer. “There’s quite a lot of work, setting up the ceremony and preparing the runes. You’d do well to pay close attention today, it’s important family history that you’ll need to pass on one day.”

Draco gave a quiet noncommittal confirmation around the edge of his cup, bitter and smooth coffee coating his tongue and soothing his nerves slightly as it slid down his throat. Feeling the liquid pooling in his stomach, mixing with the calming draught, Draco decided that was quite enough of that for the time being and put his cup back down. The smell, so alluring and comforting a moment before, was now almost nauseating.

“Well, better get this started so it can be over with,” Draco announced, standing up from the table abruptly without a proper excusal. Since he was standing directly across from his mother he did not miss the slight narrowing of her eyebrows at his poor manners. He stepped back, pushed in his chair (‘how is that for manners, mother?’), and started walking stiffly towards the door.

“Draco,” Narcissa said. Her voice was surprisingly soft and gentle, as if trying to persuade him to turn around and talk to her. He paused, hand resting on the doorknob, but made no move to turn around.

“I know there are a lot of things about the Malfoy family that are, well, less than desirable. The history and affinity to dark magic being something I’d like to fully leave in the past.”

Draco snorted indelicately. Ignoring him, Narcissa continued. “There are many rituals I’ve read in some of the older Malfoy histories that neither your Father or I have any intention of ever passing on. But this one is different. It’s.... light. It’s warm, and comforting, and gives you the opportunity for more joy in your life than you can ever imagine. Please, just give it a chance. You’ll see.”

Waiting a moment to make sure his mother was finished, Draco uttered a hollow “Thank you, Mother, I’ll consider that.” He had no intention to consider anything. He only wanted to get this stupid ritual over with so he could continue on with his life, pretending this entire day never

happened, and drinking more alcohol than was advisable to help him forget.

He opened the door and started down the hallway towards his father's office. He knocked once briskly when he arrived at the door, almost hoping that his father wouldn't answer and that this whole thing was just a silly joke, that Narcissa would pop out from behind the adjacent planter and shout "Fooled you!" while Lucius questioned how Draco could ever be so gullible. A very clear, calm and proper "Come in, Draco," answered his knock, and he sighed softly before squaring his shoulders and opening the door.

Lucius was sitting at his desk, reviewing a book so old it looked like it was held together only by hope and magic. It probably was, Draco thought. There were a few vials of differently coloured liquids beside his desk; one dark green liquid that was smoking softly, and a more vibrant thick purple concoction that seemed to bubble even though it wasn't over any heat. A third pale blue vial caught his eye; it seemed the least intimidating of all the options. He hoped he wasn't going to have to drink any of these, though he was sure he must.

"No need to worry about those just yet," Lucius said, setting his book down carefully on his desk and reaching below to pull out a bottle of brandy from one of the cupboards. "All in due time." He reached down a second time and came up with two crystal glasses. Draco winced at the clinking sound they made, and realised that on top of feeling tired and anxious he now also had a headache. This day just kept getting better.

Lucius poured two fingers of amber liquid into each of the glasses and handed one to Draco, who accepted. If he was planning to get sloshed right after this whole ordeal anyway, he might as well get started. Lucius picked up his own glass and lifted it to Draco before taking a sip. Draco followed suit, though in lieu of lifting his glass in reciprocation, he used the time to take an extra sip or two of brandy instead.

"Draco," Lucius said, his tone turning serious. "I know this is overwhelming right now, but-

"If this is where you're going to start telling me things about you and mother that I REALLY don't need to know, I'll ask you to stop just there." Draco didn't often interrupt his father when he spoke, but the sips of brandy on an empty stomach were already doing wonders at mimicking confidence.

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Lucius had softened in the years since the war. The embarrassment of house arrest and being forced to examine one's previous actions in the light of day could do that to a man. But even a softer Lucius was still intimidating at best, and Draco had never seemed to outgrow the fear this man could instill with the right look. It seemed Lucius was doing everything in his power to prevent such a look now.

"I realise I have been more open with you since... past events, Draco, but rest assured there are elements of my relationship with your mother that I shall never divulge."

Draco made a retching sound that was only slightly embellished. At the age of 25 Draco knew full well exactly how he came to be, but having that voiced aloud was a line he didn't think he'd ever be able to cross.

Lucius continued, completely unbothered by his son's discomfort. "What I was going to say was that this is completely normal. I recall feeling similarly when I was your age. It likely would have been easier had we been able to do this a few years ago as per tradition, however circumstances being as they were I would not have been able to prepare the potions and runes properly." He was, of course, referencing his Ministry-imposed restrictions from doing magic that only recently lifted. To anyone else Lucius' expression seemed unchanged, but Draco could see a slight change in his eyes that indicated his father did feel some guilt for the effects his part in the war had had on his family.

Lucius picked up his book once more with one hand and held his brandy in the other. "I'd like to go over this passage once more, and then we'll make our way to your wing."

Unsure whether he should feel happy that he didn't have to do anything yet, or upset that it meant the whole ordeal was going to drag on even longer, Draco picked up his glass and took another healthy swig, feeling the warmth creep down his throat in a similar but entirely different way than the coffee felt before. Two more sips and he'd no longer be able to pretend sobriety to anyone.

He thought back on what he knew about this morning's "ritual" already from his parents. He knew this was an ancient Malfoy tradition, and that every Malfoy patriarch for the past seven generations had gone through the same event. Without it, he would lose his rights to the Malfoy name and all of the protective and ancient magic tied to it. His mother told him it was created by Nobilius Malfoy, with the assistance of one of

the top runic wizards at the time. Nobilius was upset that all of his love interests had rejected him, and tired of seeing witches he favoured paired off with other wizards, he developed a ritual that would reveal the identity of his true amorous match.

The first iterations of this ritual produced a door leading to a magical room, housing only a single mirror that showed a foggy vision of your “match”. This person was, according to the magic, your match in every sense of the word. They would understand you for who you were, have the same core values, be so in tune with you that they could essentially hear your thought processes and sense your moods. It also ensured compatibility in more carnal ways, but as already discussed Draco had zero interest in contemplating that point any further.

Nobilius had some difficulty finding his match using the foggy mirror vision, however he was eventually able to find someone who appeared to physically match the image, down to the blurry red flower in her hair (a rose, as it were), and the light lilac colour of her dress robes. Nobilius and Carmella were married within weeks of meeting and lived their lives together happily, exploring and adding to the knowledge of dark magic that the family prided itself on so thoroughly at that time.

Over the generations, refinements were made to the spell to make it a little easier for the Malfoy men to find their partners. Draco wasn't sure what to expect of this now, as the manifestation happened a little differently each time. His mother managed to tell him that his Father was surrounded by a sea of flowers that smelled exactly like her favourite perfume before Draco covered his ears and walked out of the room. Others before had a desk with papers filled with the person's handwriting, a photo album filled with photos of the partner and their family, or even filled with some of their match's favourite activities. All clues to help you find out who that perfect person might be, delivered in the least straightforward way Draco could imagine.

All Draco knew was that there was not one witch he had ever met in his life that he'd like to be tied down with, and he couldn't imagine some runes and potions would be able to produce such a person short of creating a whole new witch. The idea of being forced to settle with someone he didn't even know, especially at such a young age, made his stomach turn.

Because there was a catch to all this magic, as there often is with family runes. Once you knew the identity of your partner, no other witch or

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wizard would ever measure up to them. The histories said, as his father continued to remind him, that if he chose to not pursue and marry this partner, he would progressively feel less and less towards other witches. It was nothing drastic, he wasn't going to die or become diseased or anything so barbaric. But other witches would lose their appeal for him. The thought of taking another witch to bed would become nauseating. Using his own hand to fulfil any baser urges would always be unfulfilling. And he would forever be plagued by dreams of his partner. These side effects were, apparently, designed by a lunatic in an attempt to encourage the Malfoys to pair up with their partner as quickly as possible to make sure their partner didn't get married off to someone else.

It was unsurprising that the Malfoy family relied on negative reinforcement rather than positive reinforcement to achieve their desired outcomes.

"Draco, did you hear me?" His father's question interrupted his thoughts. Draco realised he was holding a long empty glass in his hand, and that his father had apparently been talking to him, Lucius' book was laid back down on his desk beside his empty glass.

"Yes, Father" Draco lied. Obviously the brandy's courage was still in effect.

"Then let's go."

Both Malfoy men stood up from their respective chairs. Draco watched as Lucius stoppered the vials and placed them carefully inside his robe pockets. Draco also noted that he left the book on the table.

"You don't need the book?" Draco asked. He had thought the runes would be so complicated that they'd need to use it for reference.

"No," Lucius confirmed, already making his way to the door and opening it. "The runes themselves are simple. It is the pairing with the potions and the order they are written that is most important. Nobilus intentionally worked to make the process as easy as possible while still being difficult for anyone else to develop. He wanted to ensure the highest rate of success, and the ability to memorise the formula in the event that the book is lost."

Silence enveloped them. There seemed to be no more reason to talk until they arrived.

Both wizards left Lucius' study and made their way to Draco's quarters. His parents' rooms were mostly on the west wing of the house, which is where he stayed as a child. Now that he was an adult, he kept to the east wing. The Manor was so large that being in a separate wing was almost like being in a separate house, with the exception of shared meals. There were even ways Draco could adjust the wards to let him know if anyone entered his wing, or to even keep his parents out entirely without permission.

Lucius stopped beside the door to Draco's room and pulled out the dark green potion, handing it to Draco. "Drink this," he instructed unnecessarily.

Draco peered more closely at the vial. He could still see the tendrils of light grey smoke swirling around on top of the dark green liquid. Silver and green, he thought, bemused. How fitting.

He unstopped the vial and gave it one last unnerving glance before tilting back the contents. Better to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Unlike his other two beverages this morning, this one was cool. It felt thick even though visually it appeared quite thin. Oddly no traces of it were left behind in the vial; it looked and smelled completely clean. He thought he felt a tickling of smoke rising up his throat into his nostrils, but when he coughed nothing came out.

While Draco was drinking the vial, Lucius was carving the ancient rune for "home" into the floor in front of his room. The rune glowed golden when Lucius was done, and some of that golden light lifted up into the air and formed a small ball. The ball moved softly back and forth in a mesmerising pattern, up and down, left and right. It then moved through Draco's body seemingly in the exact place he could feel the cool liquid pooling in his stomach, continuing on down the hallway for only three or four feet before stopping. It dove back into the floor in front of this new spot, and an exact replica of the rune for "home" now appeared on the floor.

Draco looked at his father's face for any sign of whether this was expected or not. Lucius was his normal stoic self, and Draco learned nothing about the trajectory of the ritual so far. He followed his father as he started walking towards the second, duplicated rune.

Lucius handed the second vial to Draco and started inscribing more runes, this time onto the wall right in front of where the glowing light was

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still shining. He didn't provide instruction this time, but Draco immediately imbibed the liquid as soon as Lucius' hand was free of the vial. He didn't even spend time inspecting it, though it was hard to miss that this was the bubbling red potion.

Draco immediately felt a hot, searing sensation in his throat and stomach. His body felt effervescent, like he could feel the small pops of bubbles bursting as the liquid made its way down. It was beyond uncomfortable, bordering on painful, but he managed to keep it all down through sheer force of will.

When he reopened his eyes (he had closed them when he was fighting the liquid to stay down), he saw the ancient runes for "love", "acceptance", "lust" (here Draco cringed), and above the others and larger, the rune for "partner".

This time the runes glowed bright white. The white light seemed to crawl across the wall, the letters breaking up into small pieces, leaving the runes still darkly etched into the wall. The small pieces of light - almost like small blocks - arranged themselves into a rectangle roughly the size of a person, though a bit shorter than Draco. They formed perfect lines, connecting at right angles in the corners, and flashed intensely once more before slowly sliding their way back towards the runes and settling back in the dark crevices carved by his father. There was a crack in the wall where the light had been, perfectly rectangular.

Checking his father's face again, Draco was once again left with nothing. He supposed that was better than a negative reaction.

Lucius carefully removed the last potion from his robes and held it in his hand, seemingly more hesitant and careful than the others. It was as if this potion was the most important one of all of them. He unstopped it and dropped three glistening blue drops onto his index finger. The liquid pooled on top of his finger instead of running down the sides and dripping onto the floor, like a water meniscus.

Without speaking, his father slowly lifted his finger towards Draco's face. Draco flinched slightly, as any wizard might when someone's hands are coming so close to their face. His father expected this, and waited for the reaction to subside before continuing on his trajectory towards Draco's forehead.

Draco could feel his father's finger moving around tracing another rune on his forehead, but the nervous feedback on his skin wasn't sensitive

enough to provide the resolution needed to figure out which rune it was. His father must have figured out what he was doing because, without speaking, he mouthed the word 'wisdom' to Draco.

Lucius passed the still mostly full vial to Draco, and Draco once again tipped the contents into his mouth without much thought. He couldn't feel this liquid at all. It's as if it turned to air as soon as it passed his lips. He did however feel a warm glow on his forehead where the rune was written. This warm feeling appeared again in his right hand, and when Draco looked down he saw a faint blue glow, the same colour as the potion. It appeared in the middle of his palm, and seemed to provide buoyancy for his hand to lift up in front of him. He felt a slight pull from the warmth, urging him closer to the rectangle on the wall.

After a few seconds, Draco's hand made contact with the wall, just inside the rectangle about a third of the way up the wall. Draco had to crouch a little to reach it comfortably. As soon as his glowing palm pressed against the wall, another flash of light (this time blue) appeared, and he felt a hard handle materialise in his hand.

Surprised, Draco immediately let go of the handle and took a step back. All the runes had disappeared - there was no more glowing light, no etched markings in the floor or the walls. It's as if there had never been a ritual here at all.

Except right in front of him, where the cracked rectangle and the glowing runes were previously, was a door. A plain door, camouflaging with the wall, but with a distinct golden handle sticking out.

There was no need to look towards his father for confirmation this time. Draco knew that the appearance of a door meant that the ritual had worked. Inside, he would find clues to who his partner would be. The person who supposedly would give him all the things the runes said and more. He stood still, not wanting to go in, trying to relish in the last few moments of bachelorhood he could ever see himself having again. Hell, maybe he'd just walk away and come back to open the door on another day. Maybe he'd just -

"Draco."

Lucius' voice was soft, but commanding. It brought Draco's thoughts back in line, and he began to resolve himself to open the door. Lucius cleared his throat when Draco still hadn't moved after a few seconds.

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“Fuck,” he muttered, grabbing the handle and forcefully yanking it down to open the door. As expected, there was now a room behind it.

Unexpectedly, the room was completely empty.

TWO



THE ROOM

What??" Narcissa screeched. Lucius and Draco had just returned from the east wing and told her about what happened. "What do you mean the room was empty?"

Lucius pinched his nose tightly, resting his arm on his chest. "It's as we've said, Narcissa. We completed the ritual. Everything worked exactly as it was supposed to. The door appeared, it opened. But the room behind the door was completely empty. No furnishing, no flooring, no wall coverings. Not even a window. Completely and utterly empty."

Draco had stayed silent so far through this conversation - Lucius' "we" was of the Royal variety - and intended to remain that way as long as his mother continued to use her shrill voice.

"But how can it be empty?" For a word that meant "containing nothing", Narcissa certainly managed to imbue a lot of something - in this case, incredulity - within its syllables. Draco could see his father flinch slightly every time she repeated the word.

Narcissa moved seamlessly from frustration to despair. "But what does that mean, Lucius? Has this ever happened before?"

Lucius shook his head. "While the experience is different for everyone, I do not recall seeing any record of the ritual producing nothing to assist in finding a partner."

Starting to see the bright side in all of this, Draco finally chimed in. "Maybe the ritual sensed that I didn't want to be married to anyone.

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Maybe it said “hey, I have the perfect wife for you - surprise! She’s no one!” He started to smile genuinely for the first time today.

“This is actually the best outcome I could have hoped for. Let’s just bar up the door and forget it ever happened. I’ll continue on living my life as planned, none of this Malfoy ancestral magic codswallop, and we’ll all be better for it, yeah?” He could already feel the lightness in his limbs, and pep in his step.

Narcissa frowned at him worriedly. “I’m not sure it works like that, darling.” She was referring to the less than pleasant side effects, of course.

“But if it didn’t work,” Draco justified, “then who’s to say I’ll experience any of those side effects? They’re supposed to happen when you don’t find your partner, yes? Being as I evidently have no partner I fail to see what could trigger them.”

“Maybe there’s a time delay,” Lucius supplied to Narcissa, no longer paying direct attention to Draco and his hopes for a normal life. “We should check again in a few days, see if anything has changed.”

“Yes,” Narcissa agreed. “Yes, that has to be it. We’ll check again soon.”

Draco hoped his parents were again using the Royal We, as he had no intention of ever going back into that room again.



Draco chose to ignore the room. Two weeks had passed since he went through the ritual with his father, and his parents peeked into the room every two or three days just to make sure nothing had changed. It was just as barren as it had been on the first day. Allegedly, anyway, since he refused to go too close to it. He even made an effort to approach his bedroom door from the opposite side of the hallway so he wouldn’t have to walk by it.

Immediately after the painful conversation with his parents the other week, he decided to call up Blaise and Theo to celebrate the ritual’s non-results by having a drink or five. They were both happy to oblige, and he met up with them at Hemlock, an upscale spirits bar newly opened within Diagon Alley.

They had asked how things went - Draco had been whinging about the ritual for ages, so both Blaise and Theo were well aware of what it entailed

- and Draco happily told them the results while ordering a round of top-shelf gin for them all.

“To being single!” Blaise had said, holding up his drink once it arrived.

“To shagging whichever gal or bloke we like!” Theo echoed.

“To empty rooms,” Draco finished, clinking his glass against his friends’ and taking a hearty sip of his drink.

The night had quickly devolved, as it often did when the three friends got together. They were about four rounds in when Blaise suggested Draco do something other than drink to celebrate his recently renewed commitment to being single.

“You’re right,” Draco agreed, his voice surprisingly clear for the amount of alcohol ingested so far. “Excuse me, gents, I have a couple of floo calls to make.”



The first floo call was to Gloria, a young woman he met on a trip to Greece who lived in a flat near Diagon Alley. It didn’t take much convincing for her to invite him over and catch up, in spite of the late hour. It didn’t take much longer than that for the pair to leave an untouched pair of tea mugs on the end table and make their way into Gloria’s bedroom. Draco recalled some fumbling and having to work a little to get the angle right, but overall it was a pleasant and enjoyable experience, and a great way to confirm his bachelorhood once more.

A few nights later, he was with Elizabeth. Draco had met her a couple years ago at a Quidditch match, and the pair spent a handful of nights together between then and now. Fortune was on his side when he ran into her at the Quidditch supply shop one afternoon and she coyly announced that her roommate was out of town for the evening, and would he maybe like to come over for a cuppa?

Just like last time, steaming tea mugs lonely once more, Draco found his way into Elizabeth’s bed. This time there were no awkward angles or tricky snaps or zips, but Draco couldn’t help but feel there wasn’t quite enough friction as he remembered with Elizabeth. Well, it had been a while, and who knew who else she’d been with since him - neither of them were interested in monogamy at the moment, to say the least. After spending more time than he’d prefer chasing the edge, and thankfully

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bringing Elizabeth to orgasm twice during his efforts, he finally tensed and eased into a gentle orgasm. Not quite what he was hoping for, but it took the edge off.

This couldn't be a pattern, could it? It's not like the same issues were happening each time. A small niggling part of his brain tried to get him to consider the ill effects of the room opening and not being with the right witch, but he refused to believe it. Until he had absolute proof that something was off, he'd assume that these were one off circumstances and just a result of some poor luck.

After all, it took three results to create a pattern, didn't it?



Pansy was sitting on an over-lage velvet armchair when Draco arrived through the floo the following evening. Her legs were tucked up underneath her and she was holding a glass of white wine in her right hand, a small fiction book in the other. She looked up when he stepped through, observing him as he dusted off his shoulders and straightened his robes before walking over to her.

"Draco," Pansy greeted, a genuine smile on her face.

"Pansy," Draco returned, taking a seat on the sofa across from her.

"It's been a while," Pansy continued, putting the book down but keeping the wine glass close at hand. She was wearing a short lilac dress that ended just above her knees, making her creamy pale legs flicker in the reflected light of the fire to her right where Draco just came through. "Business or pleasure?"

Draco and Pansy had remained close friends since leaving Hogwarts. They didn't hang out as frequently as he, Theo, and Blaise, but whenever they got together they were able to pick back up from wherever they started. In recent years, Pansy was keeping herself busy with her new fashion business. She had expanded on her talents for beauty and fashion spellwork and offered her services to witches and wizards who needed to make themselves look as good as possible for an event. Draco had used Pansy's services many times in the past, allowing her to guide him in his clothing selection and hairstyle depending on what sort of entrance he wanted to make or persona he'd like to project.

That was the business part. Of course, he and Pansy also maintained other relationships from Hogwarts, as well. Having lost their virginities to one another in sixth year, they both felt a unique bond and attraction towards one another that he didn't think would ever disappear. Part of being able to pick up right where they left off was also being able to recall and recreate the intimacy they'd developed while they were dating, even though neither of them had any interest in being romantically involved with the other anymore.

"Pleasure," Draco confirmed. He noticed Pansy's eyes twinkle and start to darken at his admission.

"Good," she said. "I tend to prefer those visits a little more. Though to be honest my favourite is combining them." Her eyes traced down his dress robes from his neck down. "While you do have impeccable taste, Draco, nothing quite beats being able to take you out of one of my designs piece by piece."

The air between them instantly heated. This is how it always was between the two of them. They were perfectly capable of being friends, of promoting Pansy's business, of discussing their own separate relationship issues. But as soon as either crossed the line into intimacy, a familiar fire was lit that quickly spun out of control. Draco could feel the small spark of it starting with the look in Pansy's eyes combined with her sensual words.

Pansy stood up now, and placed her wine on the table. She picked up her wand on the small end table beside her book and quickly cast a few charms - their standard privacy, pregnancy and freshening charms the two had long since perfected - before standing just in front of Draco, her thighs brushing his knees.

He reached out and ran his warm hands up her legs, starting from her calves and moving up towards her dress hemline. She sighed breathily. Pansy was often vocal, and it was one of the things he enjoyed most about being with her. He traced the line of her dress around to her front and lifted it gently, running his hands up to the crease of her hip.

Pansy bit her lip and moaned, opening her legs wider to give him better access. They both knew each other well enough to know what the other wanted, and Pansy wasn't afraid to push things along if she thought they were taking too long.

Draco wrapped his hands around her upper thighs and pulled her down onto the chair with him. She had a knee on either side of his lap, her

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weight pushing down pleasantly against his slowly growing erection. Her lips were upon his soon after. She held his face between her hands as she rocked slowly, pushing against him firmly and moaning into his mouth. Draco dragged his hands up to her hair, trailing down her neck and back before holding her hips once more and dragging her even closer to him.

Pansy reached around to her side and took his right hand, leading it under the front of her dress and leaving it between their bodies. Draco chuckled, appreciating her straightforwardness in taking what she wanted, and happy to give it. Sex with Pansy was always heated and sensual, and he was happy this session seemed like it wasn't going to disappoint. Draco slipped Pansy's knickers to the side and brushed his thumb lightly against her clit.

Pansy started kissing down his neck, moaning her approval into the juncture of his neck and shoulder as she started riding his hand in his lap. "Fingers," she demanded, breath heavy and face flushed. "Inside, now."

Draco used his left hand to slip Pansy's dress over her shoulder, exposing her right breast and using the roughness of his tongue to scrape against her nipple exactly the way he knew she loved. Her hands moved to his hair, clutching firmly, as if not sure whether she wanted to pull him off or keep him where he was. Ambient moans, sighs, and gasps filled the room.

Just as Pansy was about to reiterate her previous direction, Draco slid two long fingers deep inside her, relishing in the deep groan she emitted when he spread her open. Knowing that she liked being fingered hard and fast, he immediately started pumping her, in and out, in and out, palm crashing against her clit at the same time his fingers scissored and spread inside her.

Moments later, Pansy was crying out as she was coming apart in his arms. Draco gently slipped his fingers out from under her dress when she finished coming down. Pansy pressed herself against him, gyrating her hips slowly against his, trying to find the friction that would give him pleasure and cause him to moan just as she did. He could feel himself continue to harden, reacting to the motions of Pansy's hips against his.

"Your turn," she whispered as she crawled off his lap and sank to her knees on the floor in front of him.

Draco opened his trousers and shifted in his seat to pull them down to his thighs, Pansy assisting eagerly. As much as Draco enjoyed Pansy's

sounds when they were together, her mouth was definitely his favourite part. He felt her nails scrape along his thighs, and then suddenly her mouth was right there, surrounding him with her wet heat. It felt just as he remembered, hot and tight when she sucked her cheeks in, and the warmth and weight of her upper body draped over his legs.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of her lips dragging up and down over his shaft, the vibrations of her moans resonating within him. He could feel his orgasm gently building within him, each suck and flick and pop pushing him closer and closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Fuck, still just closer.

“Faster, Pans,” he breathed. He placed his hands on her head, urging her to pick up speed without forcing her. Her pace increased imperceptibly.

No, it wasn't enough. He needed more. Growling, he pushed Pansy off of him roughly and gripped his cock in his hand, pumping vigorously. He closed his eyes, trying to force his mind to go blank.

After a handful of aggressive jerks, Draco finally reached the orgasm he'd been desperately searching for. He half groaned, half whined as he crested that barrier, grateful for the release but disappointed in how small it was. For such an extended build up Draco should have been a quivering mess in the chair, panting desperately and trying to come down from an orgasm so intense he'd barely remember where he was. Instead it felt like he barely tipped over the edge, gently rolling down the molehill of his orgasm before coasting to a complete stop.

He opened his eyes to see Pansy still kneeling on the floor close to him. His orgasm was so lacklustre there was no chance of any mess making its way to where she was kneeling. She had a look of mild confusion on her face, but thankfully she was confident enough in herself and her skills that she wasn't outwardly upset by Draco's actions.

“That was different,” she conceded. “Feel better?”

“Barely,” Draco scoffed, scourging himself and rearranging his trousers. Once he was fully clothed again he leaned forward on the chair, his head supported by his hands, elbows on his knees.

“Fuck.”

THREE



THE LOCKET

After the night at Pansy's, Draco had to finally admit to himself that maybe the room was having some effect on him. That maybe being with other witches didn't have the same appeal it had just a few short weeks ago.

Thankfully Pansy was able to guess what the issue was, Draco having told her about the Malfoy ritual years ago when they were dating. Their years of intimacy meant that instead of feeling inadequate or blaming herself like many other witches might, Pansy knew that something else must be wrong and didn't fault her performance for Draco's inability to finish. They had spoken for only a few minutes before Draco left, desperate for a shower and a drink.

Thinking back, Draco could notice some other differences that he didn't pay attention to at the time. How Pansy's moans, normally so loud and echoing, seemed to blend into the background, providing a generic background soundtrack to their performance rather than being the star of the show.

There was also the incredible need to finish, which at the time he attributed to just wanting to feel that sweet release orgasm offered. But it wasn't just that. It was also a strong desire for it to be over. Like his body couldn't fight the fact that it felt good, but his mind just wanted the whole event to be done and wanted to punish him for putting it in this position in the first place, rather than allow a toe-curling orgasm in reward.

Draco hadn't mentioned any of this to his parents. How could he? "Good morning, mother. I've noticed that shagging other witches just isn't

the same anymore - I've been with several over the past few weeks, you know - and I've even resorted to having to finish myself with my own hand. Can you believe it?"

He was currently in his bedroom at the manor. It was large, opening up to a lounge area with a couple dark high-back chairs and a chaise. A fireplace was located on the far wall, shared between the lounge and sleeping parts of his bedroom. He sat on one of the high-backed chairs, nursing a glass filled with an amber liquid.

His eyes were focused on the wall to the left, boring a hole approximately where the newly created door would be in the hallway outside his bedroom. Over the past couple of days since Pansy's he'd contemplated the use of several destructive curses against the door, but ultimately decided against resorting to destructive forces until he learned more about what was going on. His father was spending time going through journals in the Malfoy library, trying to see if maybe this had happened before. It's not like it's something that would be passed down proudly between generations like the success stories were. So far he hadn't had any luck.

Draco also knew his parents continuously visited the room, hoping to find a secret or hidden artefact that might give them a clue as to who his mystery partner could be. His mother in particular had taken to visiting every morning and evening recently, her desperation to resolve the problem manifesting as manic pacing and hyperfocused review of the room's interior.

That fucking room. His life was basically perfect before it showed up. His family had finally moved past all the post-war reparations and were starting to reclaim their place in the political world. Draco was a free agent, and after representing the Malfoy family while his father was under house arrest he felt much closer to being the head of the family than he ever had before.

Then this room appears and takes over every part of his thoughts, seeping into every aspect of his life.

Draco knew it shouldn't, that the effects of the room were relatively localised in his life. That this room would hinder his romantic relationship, but it shouldn't have any effect on his career aspirations, spending time with his friends, or exploring the world. But the damned room wouldn't leave his mind no matter how much he tried. He supposed that was part of

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the magic, too - making your partner the most important thing in your mind, to ensure you got together and had good little pureblood Malfoy babies like you were supposed to. But because he of course apparently didn't have a partner, his mind was set to be filled with images of a damned empty room for the rest of his life.

He slammed his glass down onto the end table, some of the alcohol sloshing out over the side. He stood up from the chair and stomped out of his room, into the hallway, and stood in front of that fucking stupid door which led to this fucking stupid room. He pushed it open aggressively, pleased to hear the sound of the door crashing against the wall inside the room.

"Hey, room," he yelled into the darkness. With no windows and no lighting, the room was extremely dark. "Fuck you."

If he couldn't burn the room literally, he'd have to settle for a figurative burning.

He began a long tirade using every curse word he'd ever learned. He didn't stop in English, but added French, Italian, and Spanish as well. And when he exhausted the list of expletives in his repertoire, he began again, using them in new and inventive ways to express his frustration.

When his anger finally subsided and he found the limits of his cursing creativity, Draco leaned against one of the walls and dejectedly slumped down, sitting on the floor with his knees drawn up to his chest and forehead resting atop them. He'd felt like he did during sixth year; completely helpless and devoid of free will, tied to the whim of something completely beyond him.

When he finally lifted his head from his knees and peered once again into the empty room, he noticed something. A small glint on the floor, reflected in the light coming in from the hallway. He shifted to reach forward, fingertips reaching for where he could still see that faint reflection, until they brushed against something. Did he drop something on his way in? Was it a piece knocked from the door when he thrust it open moments before? It felt smooth and cool, and he brought it closer to his face to inspect it.

It was a locket. Silver, hanging off a delicate silver chain. It was simple and nondescript except for a collection of three differently coloured stones on the front, sprouting as different branches on an etched tree. The gem stones were red, blue, and green, and he recognized them as ruby,

sapphire, and emerald based on other Malfoy family jewellery he'd helped his mother inventory after the war. Having gone through several days of that inventory, he felt confident that this particular piece of jewellery was not a part of the extensive Malfoy collection.

He noticed a small clasp on the bottom of the locket and saw that it flipped up to reveal two photos, one of a young man and the other a young woman. They looked to be about Draco's age.

"Yes," Draco breathed, clutching the locket. As much as he didn't want to be tied down to a single witch for the rest of his life, being with one witch sounded better than being with none, and this felt like the first clue to her identity. If he knew what she looked like, he was one step closer to finding her. He took a moment to study the photo more closely, ignoring the man completely for now. The photo was in black and white and was not moving; possibly an artefact from the malfunctioning room. The woman had short, slightly wavy hair and a bright smile. Her eyes were almond shaped and she had a small dimple on her right cheek. Her skin appeared clear; no freckles or blemishes. She was wearing what appeared to be pearl earrings. The photo was a closely cropped portrait, and did not include any clues about the mystery woman's whereabouts.

Draco was sure he'd never seen this woman before, but there was also a sense of familiarity somehow from the photo. Was this the magic telling him that she should feel familiar, because she was his preordained partner? Or had he possibly seen her somewhere before in passing and this was his subconscious subtly recalling that?

Regardless, he finally had his first piece of evidence to show that the ritual had worked, and that alone heightened his spirits. Knowing who his partner was would be the first step to fixing this whole mess. He slipped the locket into his pocket and left the room, closing the door far more gently on his way out. It was time to talk to his parents about this new discovery, and see if either of them were familiar with the identity of the witch in the locket.

He found his parents in the sitting room, which was normal for their regular post-dinner nightly schedule. Once formal dinner was over, Draco would either sit with his parents or retire to his own quarters until late evening (which he did tonight, in order to have a glass or two of firewhiskey on his own, wallowing in self pity and contemplating what the

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rest of his life was going to look like), at which point Narcissa and Lucius would sit with their last cup of tea for the day before retiring.

They both looked up at him when he entered the room. “Draco,” Narcissa greeted, as she always did when he entered a room in her presence.

“I found something in the room,” he said, almost breathless from his quick sprint from his quarters to his parents’ sitting room. He was not in the mood for polite conversation and needed to get right to the point. “It was a photo, a photo of her.”

Both of his parents looked startled at that news. “Really?” Narcissa asked, hand clutched over her chest.

Lucius, ever the pragmatist, said “Show it to me.”

Draco was all too happy to oblige, since having his parents look at the photo was the main goal of the evening. He reached into his pocket to show them the locket, but found nothing.

Frantic, he began checking his other pockets, even though he was certain this was the one he’d slipped it into. Where was it? It must be here somewhere. Maybe it had fallen out on his run here? That must be -

“Draco,” his mother interrupted gently. “I know this has been difficult. But your father and I promise that we’re doing all we can to look into it.”

Draco gave her a slightly confused look, not really understanding how that was supposed to help him find the missing locket.

Lucius again to provide the more direct comment. “How many drinks have you had tonight, Draco?”

Merlin, they think I’m drunk and imagining the whole thing, Draco thought. They were wasting time that could be better spent identifying his witch. He gritted his answer through clenched teeth. “Two.”

It was mostly honest. That was the number he’d had after dinner, anyway, which he felt was the most relevant to the conversation, since he obviously wasn’t drunk at dinner.

“I’m not drunk,” he continued, levelling Lucius with one of the looks he’d been perfecting in his time as effective head of the household. “And the locket was there. I put it in my pocket in the room, and now it’s not there.”

Narcissa was always the first to take her son's side. "Let's walk back to the room then, shall we? Maybe we'll spot it on the way." Draco wasn't sure if that meant she believed him, but he was grateful to her for steering the conversation in a way that led them back to the locket.

Without a word, Draco turned on his heels and started retracing his steps, not waiting to confirm whether his parents were following him. His eyes ran along the ground as he walked, flitting left and right and left again looking for any glint of silver reflected off the hallway lights. He was again standing outside of the ritual room before he realised where he was.

His parents stood on either side of him, unsure of what to say. He hadn't found the locket, and based on their reaction he knew they never expected him to.

"Let me check if it's still inside," he said, realising how pitiful it sounded even to his own ears. He opened the door and stepped inside the room for the second time tonight, and gasped. The locket was sitting on the floor in the same place it had been previously, the reflection of the light making it almost as if the damned thing was winking at him.

He snapped it up quickly and turned to his parents, holding it out to them. "See?" he exclaimed, starting to walk out of the room so they could all examine it better in the light of the hallway. "I don't know what happened, but I think an apology is in order - "

As soon as he crossed the threshold of the room, the locket disappeared from his hands. Blinking at his empty palm for a second, Draco then turned behind him to see the locket again sitting on the floor, winking prettily at him once more.

"It can't leave the room," Lucius noted, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

"Fine," Draco said, anger rising again. Could nothing go right with this whole process? "If we can't bring it outside, we'll just all have to come in here to look at it."

Narcissa made to step into the room when her foot suddenly brought up against something solid. "Lucius?" she asked, turning to her husband for answers.

Lucius tried to enter the room as well, but found himself up against the same barrier.

"What is going on?" Draco yelled. "I thought you'd both been in here every day for the past three weeks!"

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“We have,” Narcissa insisted, before Lucius continued with “Perhaps the room now recognizes this area to belong to your partner, now that there’s something in it. If that’s the case, your mother and I may be unable to enter until permission is granted from the owner.”

“The owner being my partner?” Draco confirmed. Lucius nodded.

Fantastic, Draco thought. Not only can I not bring anything out of the room, now no one other than me and whoever this woman in the locket is can enter.

Hoping that this mystery would soon be solved when his parents saw the photo, Draco held the locket out as close as he could to the open door to let his parents see. He opened the locket and indicated the woman in the top photo. “Her. Do you recognize her?”

Draco’s face paled as he watched both of his parents shake their heads ‘no’.

FOUR



THE GIRL

For the next two weeks Draco stayed in his wing in the manor, obsessing over the room and its contents. Every day there were more items added, though none yet as interesting as the locket.

The morning after he showed his parents the locket he went back into the room to find the locket no longer on the floor, but laid out on a beautiful yet simple wooden vanity. It still twinkled in the light of the hallway just as it had the day before.

Over the next few days even more furnishings were added. A window, a small settee, an undressed bed, small end table, a couple of unblemished Hogwarts textbooks (Ancient Runes and Transfiguration, to be exact, showing up in that order), three more pieces of jewellery (two pairs of earrings and a pearl necklace), a soft rug, a purple dressing gown that was far too small for him, a pair of matching purple slippers, and just yesterday a single silk covered sleeping pillow. Two weeks of slowly adding items to the room, and he wasn't any closer to finding this mystery woman.

He spent his time pouring through his Hogwarts yearbooks, especially after he saw the standard issue textbooks appear in the room. He looked in his year, then the year above and below, and when that proved unfruitful he looked at every year he had available to him, even through some of his parents' older yearbooks. None of the witches he saw matched the photo in the locket. He even tried looking for the man, thinking he could at least lead him to the witch, but he too was nowhere to be found.

The strange thing about the photo was the more he looked at it, the more familiar it seemed. Not all together, but small pieces. Like the arch of

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her nose, or the shape of her eyes. It still wasn't enough to form a real strong association, but he couldn't ignore the feeling he was getting that on some level he knew who she was.

He was now sitting with his parents at breakfast, contemplating what he was going to do with his day and considering it might be time to finally leave the manor after spending the last two weeks cooped up and obsessing over the new items in the ritual room. His mother was enjoying a bowl of fruit and yoghurt, and his father was alternating bites of soft boiled egg with sipping hot tea. Draco enjoyed coffee in the mornings and tea in the afternoons, and this morning he'd paired it with a couple slices of buttered toast.

"I've been thinking about the locket, and the photographs inside." Narcissa's words cut through the silence of breakfast, seeming abrupt and out of place. It took Draco a moment to parse what she'd said, but when he did he was extremely attentive.

"And?" he prompted when his mother remained silent. She looked like she was considering her words heavily before proceeding.

"I don't think the image of the woman is your partner." She gave Draco a soft apologetic look, as if it were her words condemning him to his fate rather than this bloody ritual passed down through his father's side.

"I've been thinking about the gemstones on the outside of the locket. Ruby, sapphire, and emerald. They're all birthstones, and when used together in jewellery tends to symbolise family. The other items that have appeared in the room allegedly seem to be personal belongings of your witch." Narcissa emphasised the word to show her distaste at being barred from the room when there was much important sleuthing to be done.

"As one doesn't tend to put photos of oneself in one's own locket, and since there is a photo of a man and a woman of about the same age, I would guess the photos in the locket are your witch's parents."

Narcissa paused here, waiting for either Lucius or Draco to make the next connection. It didn't take long for Lucius to comment. "And if neither your mother or I recognize the girl's parents in the photos, and the Hogwarts textbooks in the room are indeed hers, then she is very much unlikely to be a pureblood."

Silence blanketed the table once more at that revelation. Blood didn't mean the same to the Malfoys after the war as it did before. Going through

those battles and seeing Voldemort torture muggles and muggleborns was enough to change their ways, replacing all resentment with empathy and sorrow.

But that didn't change the expectation that Draco would marry a pureblood anyway. That's what was planned, that's what the whole fucking ritual was for, wasn't it? To make sure the Malfoy line continued to be strong and proper, to fill it with as many pureblood babies as he was able?

"Well," Draco broke the silence, tired of waiting for his parents to follow up with their opinion on that new piece of information. "Whoever she is, the sooner I find her the sooner I can figure out how to move on from this and live the rest of my life."

That seemed to be enough of a confirmation for now that his parents didn't have any serious reservations about the possibility of the witch being halfblood or muggleborn. Draco quickly finished his breakfast and left without speaking another word to his parents.

After checking in with Blaise and Theo, Draco made plans to meet them for dinner and drinks at Hemlock later in the evening. He sat in the ritual room for a while, flipping through the Hogwarts textbooks trying to find any identifying marks on the books or other clues to their owner. They looked absolutely pristine, like they'd just come out of a bookshop. He'd toyed aimlessly with all of the other items in the room, trying to find meaning where there certainly was none. What could the type of wood in the furniture have to do with anything? Was the colour of the pillowcase really going to lead him to the identity of his mystery witch?

He'd managed to make enough time pass that it was finally late enough that he could be early to dinner and be a drink or two in by the time Blaise and Theo arrived. He was looking forward to catching up with them, as he hadn't seen them in weeks.

After a quick check in the mirror he apparated from his bedroom straight into Hemlock's receiving room. Blaise and Theo were nowhere to be seen, as expected, so Draco grabbed a seat at one of the overlarge booths near the back where they often sat.

One of the servers came by and asked him what he'd like to drink. He and his friends came out here often, but not quite often enough that he was a regular with a standing drink order. After requesting a gin and tonic with an olive plate for an appetiser Draco was once again left to his thoughts, which inevitably led back to the bloody same place it always did.

Thankfully Draco didn't have to wait long. A few minutes after his drink was delivered he saw Blaise appear, followed just a few moments later by Theo. Soon they were all sat around the table nursing their respective drinks and taking turns munching on the olives from Draco's plate.

Theo was unusually silent, his eyes shifting around the table. It didn't take long for Blaise to call him out on his odd behaviour. "What's up with you, mate? C'mon, out with it."

"I, um... well, I may have done a thing."

Draco groaned. With Theo, having 'done a thing' could mean anything from having knocked over his juice glass in the morning to accidentally burning down half of his manor. It was hard to know what to expect with that kind of lead in.

"Go on," Draco urged, not quite sure whether he truly meant it.

"You see, err, well, I've had eyes on a particular wizard for a while--"

"We know," both Blaise and Draco said simultaneously, cutting him off. It was no secret to them that Theo was interested in blokes, and it was even less of a secret which bloke in particular had captured Theo's attention. Theo had been taken with Harry Potter during their last two years of Hogwarts, and even if he had wanted to hide it from his friends it would have been impossible to miss the look in his eyes whenever Potter was in the same room.

"Yes, well, of course you do. That's silly of me. So, you see, we happened upon each other in the hallway today at the ministry and--"

The door between the receiving room and the main restaurant opened, and Harry Potter walked out and gave a little wave.

"and-I-kind-of-invited-him-along-for-drinks-tonight-I-hope-that's-ok!" Theo's explanation for Potter's presence rushed out in one breath before he stood up and turned to greet his friend.

"Potter," Draco greeted indifferently as Harry sat at the table beside Theo.

"Harry," was Blaise's contribution, along with a nod.

Potter, for his part, seemed completely unfazed. In the time since the war, all four had run into one another at various functions or Ministry events, in the halls while on Ministry business, or even at the quidditch

shop in Diagon Alley. While certainly not friends (to Theo's eternal disappointment), he and Potter were amicable to one another and were able to leave the war mostly in the past. They'd all been through so much trauma at the hands of Voldemort on either side of the war that the common theme with everyone in their year was just try to heal and move on, and let go of everything else.

As such, Harry was used to the somewhat aloof nature of the Slytherins and took it in stride, never faltering in his Gryffindor friendliness.

"Malfoy, Zabini. Pleasure to see you both again." Potter turned to Theo. "Thanks for inviting me." A pause before finishing the sentence. "Nott."

Theo grinned. "Was that a joke, Potter? You know that's 'Nott' the first time I've heard that." The emphasis on his surname was something that Draco, Blaise and Theo often joked around with when they were children. Draco could clearly see the glint of amusement in Theo's eye, and if it was anyone other than unobservant Potter on the receiving end he'd think them blind for not noticing.

Draco had known Theo had been speaking to Potter more and more at the Ministry, but apparently it had been more than he'd thought for Theo to invite Potter out for drinks, and even more for Potter to accept.

"Hermione should be here any minute, she was just running a little behind at work."

Draco gave Theo a look. Granger was coming, too? What next, was Ron Weasley going to pop up from under the table? Theo's sheepish return look did not make up for springing this on them in the first place.

True to Potter's word, not five minutes later Hermione Granger was also sitting at their table. She'd slid next to Potter in the booth and smiled at Nott, giving him a far more friendly greeting that Draco would have expected.

"Theo! So lovely to see you outside of the ministry. Thanks for the invite today, it's been quite a day and I'm looking forward to a nice glass of chardonnay." She beamed at Theo in a way Draco had only ever seen her look at Potter and Weasley. What was happening?

Granger then turned to the other Slytherins at the table. "Blaise, Malfoy." Draco was the only one she called by surname, and he wasn't quite sure what that meant. "Nice to see you again." Her voice was more

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genuine than he'd expected, and he couldn't sense any trace of malice in her words.

"Hello, Hermione," Blaise answered, finishing off the extended round of hellos for the evening. Draco settled on a "Granger" to complement her "Malfoy".

There was a somewhat awkward atmosphere as everyone got settled with their drinks and a few snacks for the table. Potter and Granger were talking to each other and Theo about work related business - Theo had taken up a part-time job at the Ministry assisting with going through all of the confiscated dark artefacts. He was a good person for the job considering nearly 30% of them came from his house. Apparently Granger was fascinated by Theo's new career choice and she hounded him with questions.

Draco wasn't even sure what she did at the Ministry. He knew she was in a middling position - not part of the bottom lackeys, but not as close to the top as he'd assumed she would be. Some sort of middle manager parchment pusher, he thought.

By the second round of drinks the conversation was flowing much more naturally.

"There is no way you brewed Polyjuice potion in second year." They were discussing who had brewed the most difficult potion recently when Granger came out with a ridiculous story of brewing an incredibly complex potion in second year in the girls' lavatory of all places.

"I did," Granger insisted. "You were there, Harry. Tell him."

"She did," Harry repeated as directed.

She smacked his arm lightly. "Oh, as if they'll believe you with how convincing your voice just sounded." She eyed Potter almost playfully. "I think you owe me a drink for that one, and while you're on it, you might as well get one for everyone else at the table too."

Potter scoffed. "Why's it me that has to buy these rich arses their top shelf booze when they have galleons spilling out of the windows of their manors." His tone was in jest, but the words were true.

Granger shifted in her chair to give Potter space to get up and flag down the server for the next round. As she leaned over Draco caught a small reflection of light from her neck. He watched as Granger's hand rose

up to her neck, clutched a silver chain, and carefully placed a locket with three gemstones back underneath her shirt.

Draco's face paled immediately. No. No. It couldn't be Granger. Her eyes landed on him, questioning why he was looking at her. He realised belatedly it looked like he was staring at her chest. It was because he was looking at her chest, just not for the reasons a wizard might typically look at a witch's chest. He cleared his throat and tried to compose himself. Thankfully Potter had just arrived with the next round of drinks and a chorus of cheers echoed from around the table.

That was definitely the same locket, he was sure of it. The same gemstones on the outside, in the same places. When was Granger's birthday again? Was her birth month one of the stones on the front?

He supposed there was a chance if this locket was not one of a kind that some other photos resided in the locket instead of the photos he'd seen in the ritual room back at the manor. But the more he thought of those photos and looked across the table at Granger's face, the more he convinced himself that the bridge of her nose was the same as her mother's, and the shape of her upper lip the same as her father's. Merlin knew where she got that wild mess of curls she called hair, though; it wasn't present in either of her parents' photos.

Draco managed to distractedly make his way through the third round of drinks before announcing that he had to get back, bidding everyone an enjoyable rest of their evening. Granger apparently also decided this would be a good time to leave, and she copied his farewell before offering to walk with him to the apparating room.

"Thanks for tolerating me coming out tonight, Malfoy."

Draco scoffed. "While it wasn't my decision, Granger, I'd hope we can both acknowledge that the time in my life that I would be unable to tolerate your presence has passed." Unable to resist adding a barb, he continued with "Unless, of course, you begin reciting excerpts from our seventh year transfiguration textbook, of course."

She laughed, and the sound was.... Different than he'd expected. Nice, even.

"Noted," she confirmed. "Transfiguration is out, but Ancient Runes are on the table."

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Draco wondered what it meant that the two textbooks they'd named were the same two sitting in the room beside his back at the manor.

Her posture changed as they reached the door. Just before he reached out to open it for them, she spoke in a small voice. "I'm just so tired of all the hatred, of constantly being reminded of things in the past that I'd just rather move on from. So being out here tonight, having Harry and I sitting at a table filled with Slytherins and genuinely having a good time, it was nice. Gives me hope for the future, I guess."

She shook her head. "Sorry, seems I get a little morose after three drinks. I think five is where I start to get fun."

Not really sure what to say to all of that, Draco opened the door for her and offered for her to head into the room before him. Just before she turned to apparate away, he offered with a small smile "I think it's six drinks for me. We'll aim for that next time."

He carried the image of her return smile with him all the way back to the manor.

FIVE



THE DANCE

It turns out that Blaise had left Hemlock just a few minutes after Draco did, leaving Theo and Potter alone together to finish the last round of drinks together.

Draco was not really sure how it happened, and certainly didn't need details, but apparently Theo and Potter were now somewhat of an item. It was equally nauseating as it was quick to progress.

It did mean that Draco was now seeing much more of Potter, and as a consequence, Granger. In an effort to get out of the house, Draco had taken up with meeting Blaise and Theo at Hemlock every Thursday evening, and Theo had taken up with inviting Potter and Granger along for most of those.

It had been three weeks since that first meeting, and the group was slowly warming up to each other more and more. Draco was even looking forward to the evenings with everyone, since it meant having some distracting conversations. Keeping up with both Theo and Potter's quick wit was challenging, let alone trying to figure out what Blaise was thinking as a silent onlooker.

And then there was Granger. She'd shown up almost every week since that first night, though they hadn't yet got to six drinks together like they'd previously agreed to in the apparating room. It was the same song and dance each week. Draco would spend more time than was healthy in the ritual room - Granger's room, he supposed - looking through the new additions and trying to piece together parts of Granger's life he had no business trying to puzzle out. He'd then pull himself out on Thursdays to

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make sure he was clean and well dressed before heading out to Hemlock to meet what was quickly becoming his new friend group.

The more items that appeared in her room, the more questions he had. Since their first meeting the room had shown him a pair of knitting needles attached to what he was pretty sure was a knotted and frayed ball of yarn; two smaller books he'd never heard the name of before, written by people with odd names like Pratchett and Gaiman; a photo with what looked like a much younger Granger with both her parents, and a medium sized rectangular box that proclaimed itself to be a 'board game' about some people on an island called Catan? It was all incredibly confusing, and Draco didn't think it was helping him learn more about Granger at all, other than the fact that she had a lot of odd trinkets and seemed to leave them about wherever they lay based on their location within the room. No matter how many times Draco moved the knotted ball of yarn away from the bed, it diligently reappeared in the exact same spot the next day. The only time any of the items changed their location was when a new piece of furniture seemed to sprout up from beneath it, like the locket.

So this Thursday evening, sitting at their normal table at Hemlock and waiting for the first round of ordered drinks to arrive either before or after his friends actually showed up, Draco was considering that he knew Granger probably wasn't very good at knitting or tidying up, spent too much time reading muggle fiction books and reviewing Hogwarts textbooks, and seemed to have poor taste in bedding quality with the exception of a single silk pillowcase. Draco figured that was more than enough to go on, wasn't it?

His attention turned towards the noise in the apparating room. It went from relative quiet to a loud, anarchistic overlapping of voices.

"Honestly, the nerve of some-" He recognized Granger's voice clearly.

"-hard to believe that it really-" This was Potter.

"-know what the fuck is going on, Harry-" Theo.

"-just want to forget about it and move the bloody hell on." A voice he didn't recognize, though he didn't have to wonder for long as Potter, Granger, and the red-headed woman he instantly recognized as Ginevra Weasley walked out of the apparating room and into his line of sight.

The three Gryffindors seemed to be in a heated conversation, though they all looked pleased enough with one another that Draco could only

assume that the focus of their ire must have been something external. Theo was contributing little to the conversation, merely a confused look and a raised eyebrow to Potter every once and again. The jumbled conversation continued, and although Draco tried to keep up the constant speaking over one another made it difficult.

By the time everyone sat down and began sipping on the first round of beverages for the evening, the story began to reveal itself slowly; the gradually calming conversation littering clue fragments over Draco and Theo. As far as Draco could tell, the female Weasley was seeing a bloke who had bugged off with no notice, and Granger and Potter were both offering their support in the form of insulting the man while he was gone. An interesting approach, but one that Weasley seemed to find effective.

By the time Blaise had shown up and sat at the table, giving Weasley a questioning look before seeming to accept her presence and sitting down, everyone had returned to their normal pace of conversation and were no longer trying to speak over each other.

“Ginny,” Blaise greeted, raising his glass towards her in greeting before taking a drink. Mimicking the same actions but this time facing the rest of the table, Blaise continued “Everyone.”

Weasley barely even seemed to notice Blaise, she was so focused on finishing her second drink in spite of barely just being sat down. She thumped the bottom of the glass down onto the table and jumped up from her seat. “I feel like dancing. Anyone want to join?”

Before even giving a chance for anyone to respond, Weasley headed off to the dance floor, picking up Granger’s drink from the table as she’d walked by and starting to drink that as well. Uncharacteristically, Granger didn’t even say anything. Potter gave Theo a somewhat pained look. “I’d better go after her,” he said, almost apologetically. “She’s obviously had a rough day and Hermione and I have promised to commiserate with and/or take care of her this evening.” He stood up, far more reservedly than Weasley had, and told Theo he could stay at the table with everyone else if he wanted to.

He did, for a while anyway. Theo wasn’t much of a dancer, and he’d not had near enough alcohol yet to head into a barely populated dance floor to show off his lack of moves. For a time there were just the Slytherin boys and Granger sitting at their regular table.

Draco was surprised that regardless of the topic they'd chosen to talk about, Granger had something relevant and interesting to add. He supposed "surprised" wasn't quite the right word - he'd known she was a know-it-all for many years now, so it was no wonder that she had something to say about everything. But it was interesting that he found himself mostly agreeing with the pieces she chose to add to the conversation, and enjoying the back-and-forth repartee that ensued when they didn't agree. It was exhilarating, unlike talking to any other witch he could remember, and he was sure it must be the room's magic working into him somehow.

Draco's eyes were just resting on the silver chain he could see around the top of Granger's neck before it dipped hidden beneath her blouse when Theo announced he would be joining Potter on the dance floor, and asked if anyone of the rest of the table would like to join him. Draco and Granger both immediately declined, however to everyone's surprise Blaise actually said yes and followed Theo towards the centre of the room.

Conversation seemed to stall once Theo and Blaise left, and Draco and Granger both worked to find a new topic of conversation that would be more suited to two contributors rather than four. It didn't take long before Granger came up with something to fill the silence.

"Tell me, what does the sole Malfoy heir get up to in his spare time? I don't recall seeing much in the papers about the Malfoy family and what they've been doing since the... well, recently."

That was an unknowingly loaded question, he thought, considering he'd been spending most of his recent spare time pilfering through the selection of Granger's personal belongings that had made their way into the ritual room. Deciding that would not be the best approach to take in this conversation, he instead focused on what it was his family had been doing while his father was still on house arrest.

"Staying out of the papers has been the goal ever since my Father took a step back from independently leading the family, so I'm quite happy to hear that it appears we have been doing nothing." Draco picked up his empty glass and was contemplating the benefits of getting another as he continued answering. "We've been dabbling in a few ventures, keeping a low profile in some of our financial contributions in order to have a little more freedom with our choices."

He wasn't really sure why he was telling her this. Bloody room again, he supposed.

"How... altruistic of you," Granger noted, seeming to have to force the second word from between her lips. "Wouldn't have anything to do with the advantage of being able to publicly release such information at a more opportune or beneficial time, would it?" She gave him a smirk to rival his own, and he admired the inner Slytherin cunning she'd evidently been hiding.

"Not at all," he denied. He paused when one of the serving witches walked by their table and he decided that yes he would have that next drink, and at Granger's nod, ordered one for her as well.

When the drink arrived, Granger leaned over to reach for her beverage and the silver locket once again slipped out from where it was hidden behind her shirt.

"That's a nice locket," Draco said, feeling the impulse to at least have them both acknowledge the wretched thing that started this whole fiasco.

"Oh, um, thanks." Granger's voice was softer than he expected. "It's a gift from my parents. I've had it since I was a girl."

"Are those birthstones?" he asked, testing his mother's hypothesis about the colours of the gems.

"Yes," she confirmed. "The sapphire is mine, here in the middle. The other two are my mum and my dad." Granger twirled the locket in her hands a couple more times before settling it back within the hidden depths of her top.

Suddenly, there was a whoop from the dance floor, and Draco looked over to find Harry and Theo engaged in a questionably appropriate lip lock in the middle of the dance floor. Knowing what he did about his friends, Draco was sure this had been staged by Theo, who would undoubtedly find snogging in front of an audience far less embarrassing than dancing in front of one.

Weasley and Blaise were standing together not too far from Potter and Theo, and quite a bit closer to each other than Draco would have thought. He'd always had a hard time figuring out who or what interested Blaise, he was always so stoic and reserved. If he didn't know better, he'd almost guess that Blaise was somewhat interested in the youngest Weasley. Were all his mates going to pair off with Gryffindors? He'd need

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to check on Pansy later, to make sure at least one of them still had some sense or free will.

The lip-locked couple eventually broke apart to another chorus of cheers from a few tables who had far more to drink than Draco had, and Theo made his way back to the table dragging Potter behind him.

“That’s it, I’m tapping out. It’s your turn for Ginny duty, Hermione.”

Draco scoffed at Potter’s word choice. “Based on that performance a moment ago I’m surprised out is the only thing you’re tapping, Potter.”

Without missing a beat Potter turned back and said “Based on you sitting on your arse at this table I’m not surprised your glass is the only thing you’re tapping, Malfoy.”

Granger was just sitting here as well, Draco noted, but Potter conveniently forgot to include her in his reprimand.

Weasley’s voice carried to their table from her spot on the dancefloor. “Oi! Hermione, Malfoy, get your arses out here!” The beat of the song changed and Draco could see Weasley’s eyes light up from here. “OH!” she said emphatically, recognizing the tune. “This is our song, Hermione! Now you have to come out!”

“Oh alright then,” Granger huffed, standing up and moving closer to the Weasley girl. “Just one dance.”

Draco was glad that Potter and Theo were caught up in one another back at the table, because he was transfixed on Granger’s figure as she twirled, shook, and danced her way around the dance floor. An up-beat song he’d not heard for some time was playing, and Granger was laughing and smiling and spinning around with Weasley. The dance floor was starting to fill up - it seemed that Granger and Weasley weren’t the only ones in attendance tonight who recognized the tune - but regardless of how many bodies populated the dance floor Draco’s eyes automatically tuned to Granger at first glance.

He’d thought he might’ve escaped Weasley’s invitation to join on the dance floor when the song faded into the next on the list and the red head immediately made eye contact with him and beckoned him to join. Granger was looking the opposite way and didn’t seem to notice.

From beside him, Theo also gave a nudge and said “Go on then, mate. Have a round on the dance floor. Your gin will be here when you get back.”

Theo paused for a moment before adding “Besides, if I could do it, you sure as fuck can. Your mother had you waltzing as a toddler, hadn’t she?”

Draco grumbled. It’s not exactly like the type of dancing happening around him was anywhere close to a waltz. Also it was a little off-putting to feel like he had to get up and dance just because Weasley was having a bad night and was forcing him to. He ought to have an ounce of choice in the matter, hadn’t he? He was just about to tell Theo exactly that, sod Weasley and her requests, when Granger had swapped places with Weasley and turned to face him. Her eyes lifted up and met his from across the room. Her bright smile, flushed cheeks (partly from alcohol and partly from exertion), and twinkling eyes had him reconsidering his position.

Theo grumbled from beside him, apparently frustrated that Draco was taking so long to move. “Alright Malfoy, apparently you need us to baby you into it. Blaise, you know what to do.”

Blaise and Theo stood up on either side of Draco’s chair, grabbed his arms, and hoisted him up onto his feet and dragged him onto the dance floor. Not wanting to be the only one left at the table, Potter trailed behind the Slytherins to join.

The music changed again, this time to something silly and upbeat with decidedly unattractive dance moves that everyone knew. It helped break some of the tension, and even Weasley was laughing genuinely at Potter’s akimbo stance and Theo’s complementary leaning tower move. The girls somehow made the moves all seem flowy and purposeful, instead of the chaotic shifts and moments he felt he and Blaise were managing. Anyone looking around the dance floor now would have seen much the same from all of the other dancing witches and wizards, a vaguely choreographed wave of incorrect poses, careful balancing, and barely contained laughter.

Right off the endorphin high of the last song, the beat changed to something more slow and sensual, immediately setting the tone for something more intimate. It was later in the evening now and most people had imbibed enough to start to partner off or loosen some inhibitions, and that was no less different for the unlikely group of Slytherins and Gryffindors.

Theo and Potter immediately paired off; the eyes they’d been giving each other all night finally seemed appropriate to the ambiance. They quickly blended into the crowd of dancers, disappearing from Draco’s peripheral entirely.

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Weasley surprised him by marching straight up to Blaise and asking (demanding, really) that he should dance with her because tonight was about her and that would make her feel better. Draco noticed the corner of Blaise's mouth tick upwards in the smallest hint of a smile before agreeing to Weasley's demands and joining her. Their bodies were a respectable distance apart, though Draco wasn't convinced it would stay that way for long if Weasley had her way.

Draco looked at Granger questioningly. Did she want to do this? Did she want to maybe pop back to the table and wait for the others to be done? He could feel a thrum of excitement in his chest at the idea of maybe getting to dance with her, to wrap his arms around her and feel her pressed up against him. He could almost feel the warmth and tingling of the potions he'd taken during the ritual emerge within him, and he knew this feeling must be linked to that old magic.

Answering the question in his eyes, Granger offered her hand. He tentatively held out his own until their palms met and fingers intertwined. The warmth inside him shot all the way down his arm and practically buzzed where their hands were connected. He schooled his features to make sure nothing showed on his face.

He held Granger's hands and they faced each other, swaying softly to the music and leaving a respectable distance between their bodies. Draco was thankful for this for now, as just the warmth he felt at their joined hands was enough to distract him to the point of almost tripping over his feet. He regretted Theo's earlier comments about his dancing abilities as it took away an excuse for his potentially faltering steps.

"I didn't expect you to join us out here, Malfoy," she said. Her voice was quiet, but they were so close he could hear her clearly over the sound of the music.

"I didn't quite expect to be here either, Granger." He'd meant this whole situation, being closer to her and wanting to be close to her. But he supposed it also counted for this precise moment out on the dance floor as well.

A tall wizard bumped into Hermione from behind, a sheepish "Oops, sorry!" on his lips, but his expression as he turned back to his group told Draco that he'd done it just to get close to the public figure that was Hermione Granger. Draco couldn't say he was too upset with the bloke

considering it resulted in Granger pushed up even more closely against him than she was previously.

“That happen often?” he asked, noting that Granger was completely unfazed by the encounter, and happily noticing that she’d chosen to remain more closely tucked against him.

“Sometimes,” she said nonchalantly. He got the impression it happened far more than sometimes but it wasn’t something she wanted to get into with him right now. He filed it away for later - a growling anger in his chest was unhappy that other people felt like they could treat her as a commodity or a tourist attraction.

He turned them around sharply and moved them to the other side of the dance floor, further away from the clumsy wizard and his friends just in case they decided to repeat the move. He glimpsed a look at Potter and Theo as they passed, lip-locked again and really pushing up against each other in a way he’d rather not have observed; he was happy to talk to his mates about their shagging partners but did not want the visuals to accompany it.

Granger of course couldn’t let it pass that easily. “They seem like they’re enjoying each other’s company, don’t they?” Draco could see a faint blush on her cheeks. “I mean,” she continued, “perhaps it’s getting to the point where they might consider somewhere more, erm, private, but honestly I’m happy Harry’s found someone who he feels comfortable being with in... that way.”

The awkwardness of her speech didn’t stop her from forcing her way to the end, though her cheeks were flaming by the time she was done.

“And what about you, Granger?” Seeing the blush on her cheeks and feeling the palpable tension in the air all around them, Draco couldn’t help but ask “is there a wizard or witch in your life who you feel that comfortable with?” His hand came up almost without his permission and tucked a stray curl behind her ear, trailing his fingers along the outside of the lobe so lightly it almost didn’t count as a touch.

“No,” she breathed, looking straight into his eyes. “Not yet.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Draco said, sounding distinctly not sorry, and tried his luck at pulling her even closer to him. He could now feel the warmth of her hips pressed against his thigh, and feel the softness of her stomach contrasting with the firmness of his own hips. He knew he was

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pressing his luck - this was Granger, after all - but she'd not given him an indication so far that she was unhappy, and Draco's currently ritual-room-magic-flooded brain was happy to translate that in the most optimistic way possible.

They moved subtly to the music; almost not at all to any observer. But Draco could feel every shift and slip of her body against his. A quick glance around the dancefloor told him they weren't doing anything more than what every other couple was doing - quite a bit less, actually, if you consider how much Potter and Theo were currently skewing the results.

Draco's arms were now around Granger's waist, gently guiding her movements against his to keep them both in rhythm. The song's slow repeating pattern was extremely suggestive, recreating that undulating push and pull energy Draco directly associated with more carnal activities, and the warmth inside his chest seemed to pulse exactly in time with it. He felt Granger's hands on his shoulders, once in a while brushing the hair on the back of his neck.

Draco felt a subtle change in pressure; Granger's arms tightening the slightest bit against his neck, and a slight life of her pelvis, and fuck. Merlin, that felt good. The heat of her core was now pressed squarely against his thigh, and his cock was gently rubbing right against her right hip bone. His blood had only just started rushing south, so it was only a matter of time before she would feel it.

Fuck, but he didn't care. That warmth in his chest expanded and burst with that shift in position, so much that he closed his eyes against the explosion of brightness occurring within him. He felt his hands clench on her waist, and her hips moved along with the music, rubbing herself on his thigh and forcing him to swallow down a moan. He'd dare anyone to stand here with Granger shifting her hips on top of them and not react.

His hands crept up her back, rubbing and massaging on his way up to her shoulder blades, and he could swear he felt the breath of a sigh leave her lips and wash over his neck. The added pressure on her back caused her chest to press firmly against his, and gods if that didn't feel perfect too. Her hands around his neck moved to slide down his chest down to his waist, slipping under the bottom of his shirt to rest her fingertips directly against his skin, just above his trousers. He sucked in a breath and bit his tongue as her hips moved again, reigniting that inner warmth until he felt like he was standing at kiln with bellows running full tilt.

Suddenly, Granger shifted away from him and pulled on his forearm, trying to steady herself. Another bloke, presumably from the same group as earlier, had bumped into her with another “Terribly sorry, oh dear, are you Hermione Granger?”

Granger plastered a fake smile on her face and nodded in the affirmative, immediately wishing them a good evening, and turned to apologise to him as if it was her fault.

If Draco had less of that strong warmth inside him he probably would have been more angry at the bloke and less concerned for Granger, but as it stood he could sense she didn’t want to make a scene and so he left it at that.

“No need to apologise for someone else’s faults, Granger,” Draco said. Whatever energy there was between them earlier seemed to have dissipated, and the notes of the song were transitioning into something a little more upbeat.

“I’d better be getting back home,” she rushed out, already on her way back to the table to grab her things. She seemed flustered, and Draco could only assume she was embarrassed by how close they’d just gotten. He was concerned he’d gone entirely too far this evening, pushing boundaries so far that they snapped back and wrapped around him, until she turned and gave him one of those smiles he was so pleased to be getting used to.

“See you next week?”

“See you next week, Granger.”

Draco excused himself shortly after Granger had left. Well, he attempted to, though one look at Potter and Theo had him turning around on the spot - he was not interrupting that at any cost. To his utter lack of surprise, Blaise and Weasley were no better off, both of them having had just enough drinks to strip away any inhibitions and deciding to apparently compete against Theo and Potter for first couple to be asked to leave to find a private room. He’d left without saying a word, assuming they’d either figure out that he’d gone home or not care at all.

He’d flood directly into his bedroom at the manor and immediately crossed the hallway into Granger’s room. He didn’t notice any new trinkets right away, but he felt compelled to lay down onto her bed, somehow finding the scratchy cotton sheets and juxtaposed silk pillowcase to be more comforting than his own bed. The warmth in his chest hummed in

appreciation, as if it agreed with Draco's decision to go to the room and be surrounded by his partner's things.

Memories of the night flooded his mind, the increasing clarity of impending sobriety only enhancing the recollection of her hips pressed against his and the feel of her heat rubbing against him sensually. He let out the moan he'd been suppressing at Hemlock, using his hand to futilely attempt to recreate the heat and pressure of his memory.

Within minutes, he'd unbuttoned his trousers and pulled himself free, grasping his length firmly in his right hand and beginning to pump quickly. He'd not had any success recently with pleasuring himself, but he was hoping the recent memory of Granger's warmth would encourage his body to let go, to convince whatever enchantments were on him that this was linked to his partner and therefore ok.

He felt the pressure building quickly, which was a great sign. His moans turned to quick pants, finding it hard to catch his breath with the efforts of his wrist and forearm pumping up and down, pace turning frantic. He slipped his hand over the tip of his cock and sucked in a sharp breath.

He felt himself pushing up against the edge, felt like he was ramming himself up against a brick wall, knowing that the feeling of letting go was just on the other side. His pumps became erratic, his hips pushed up from the bed, and his teeth sunk into his bottom lip, turning it white.

He closed his eyes, and brought up the image of Granger's smiling face telling him she'd see him next week. Her eyes twinkled and were focused directly on his, the corners of her mouth lifted gently, just enough to start to show some of her front teeth, and the sound of his name vibrated from her throat.

Immediately his body threw itself over that wall. His eyes clenched, his palm gripped his cock so hard it was difficult to even move it up and down, his thighs stiffened so intensely they lifted his hips off the bed and angled themselves up towards his chest. He felt his release start at the coiling ball of hot light inside him, felt it travel down into his cock and tear its way out of him. The tip of his cock erupted violently, coating his hand and stomach in white hot liquid more and more with every pump. He groaned with every pump, body shuddering and twitching with the efforts of his release, clutching those perfect scratchy cotton sheets in his other hand in an effort to keep himself tethered to the bed.

Eventually his hips lowered, his hand stopped pumping, and he began to cool down from the intense heat that just escaped him. He took several moments to just breathe, calming his racing heart and placing his clean hand on his chest to convince his breaths to even out. Even if his mind was capable of more advanced thought, which it distinctly wasn't, Draco didn't think he'd even want to consider the meaning behind the most spectacular orgasm of his entire life being the result of his hand and a single image of Granger's smiling face.

All he knew was that based on this experience, he was pretty sure sex with Granger might actually kill him. He was also pretty sure he was ok with that.



The title 'SIX THE KISS' is presented in a stylized, hand-drawn font. The word 'SIX' is positioned at the top, with the 'S' and 'I' having multiple parallel lines through them, and the 'X' being a simple cross. Below 'SIX' is a decorative horizontal line featuring a central diamond shape with a smaller diamond inside it, flanked by arrows pointing outwards. At the ends of this line are circular symbols resembling stylized eyes or faces. Below the decorative line is the word 'THE KISS' in a similar hand-drawn font, with 'THE' in a smaller size than 'KISS'.

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western spiral arm of the galaxy lies a small unguarded yellow sun.”

Draco read the first line of the odd guidebook aloud. It had appeared on Granger’s dresser sometime between last night and this morning, and the unfamiliar title intrigued him. He’d already peeked at several of the other volumes that had appeared previously, though he hadn’t yet spent the time to read one through. He continued scanning this volume, intrigued by the premise, and learning it was hardly a guidebook at all, leaving him more confused about the whole idea of hitchhiking than he was before he started.

A soft knock sounded through the door, and Draco begrudgingly pulled himself away from the book and up off of Granger’s bed to answer it.

His mother was on the other side, her concerned eyes moving slowly across his face before speaking. “Draco, darling, I was just about to pop downstairs for tea. Care to join me?”

“No thank you, Mother, I’m happy to stay here until heading out to Hemlock later this evening.”

Narcissa bit her lip worriedly. “It’s just that you’ve been in this room for days, dear. I know you’re eager to find out the identity of your witch - believe me, we all are - but I’m not sure it’s healthy to be spending all your time here in this room.”

“I don’t spend all my time in this room, Mother,” Draco countered. “I go to Hemlock every Thursday evening.”

“I hardly think having drinks with Blaise and Theo once a week counters all the time you spend holed up in here. Besides, who’s to say you won’t meet your partner by happenstance? You’ll never find her if you only spend your time in here, trying to piece clues together with no context.”

Draco hadn’t told his parents that he’d figured out the identity of his witch. He wasn’t entirely sure how they’d react - they seemed open to the idea that his partner might not be pureblood, but announcing to them that it was the Golden Girl Hermione Granger herself was something different. Besides, he wasn’t certain their relationship would progress beyond this weird stalking-her-copy-bedroom version they were in now, so it didn’t seem worth it to have that conversation with his parents just yet.

“It’s not just Blaise and Theo,” Draco muttered, leaning against the door jamb.

“No, I’m sure it isn’t,” Narcissa said spitefully. “And I hope whatever ‘other company’ you choose to spend your time with is made well aware of your.... situation.”

Draco’s anger rose at her words. Did she think he was just slugging around these past few weeks? Well he supposed he did set that precedent pretty early on and did nothing to convince his parents otherwise. “I’m not-” he started defensively before taking a deep breath and reconsidering his words. “I know what I’m doing, Mother. I just ask that you and Father both give me space to keep figuring it out.”

Features softening, Narcissa reached out a delicate hand to Draco’s face, resting her palm against his cheek motherly. “I know we’ll get through this, Draco. Whoever she is, I know she’ll fall for you as soon as she gets to know you. Just you wait and see.”

With that, Narcissa left Draco to his own devices in the room while continuing on downstairs for tea alone. Draco closed the door and collapsed against it, sighing as his back hit the solid wood. “I know what I’m doing,” he repeated to himself. “Merlin, what a joke.”

He left the door and flopped back onto the bed, the scratchy cotton sheets now almost comforting against the line of exposed skin on his back between his jumper and trousers. He rubbed his eyes harshly with his

palms, attempting to relieve the pressure of a headache he could feel building.

After dancing with Granger last week he'd felt fantastic. He'd come home and had honestly the best wank of his entire life before falling asleep effortlessly in Granger's bed. He'd spent the next few days in a haze of picking through any new belongings that appeared in the room, cat napping in Granger's bed, and having a couple more wanks to the image of her sultry eyes looking down at him through a halo of brown curls. It was no wonder he'd never left the room, instead choosing to have the elves deliver his meals to his bedroom where he popped out briefly to grab a bite before returning to the ritual room.

That had started to change by Monday. Waking up from another delicious night of sleeping in Granger's bed, Draco's mind and hand both started to wander to more explicit territory. He'd imagined Granger in bed beside him, curled up against his side, head resting on his shoulder as she slowly started pumping him awake, a sensuous and gravelly "good morning" leaving her delectable lips.

He gripped his cock desperately, already close to coming with these thoughts in his mind. Imaginary-Granger sped up her pumps to match his own, her breaths coming out in little pants as she worked her arm muscles to keep up with his aggressive tempo, never missing a beat.

Imaginary-Granger's face started to show signs of strain, and her smile broke into a slight grimace when she realised she wasn't going to be able to keep up. Clever as she was, she kept pumping him while she bent down and deftly took the tip of his cock into her hot, wet mouth.

"Merlin, fuck," Draco groaned, using his other hand to rub the tip of his dripping cock in a pale imitation of Granger's imaginary mouth. His thighs clenched so hard his hips lifted up off the bed, straining to reach his hands even as they pulled away to pump ferociously down once again. He could almost feel his cock pulsating in his hands.

Draco was now groaning loudly with every thrust, face flushed and eyes clenched shut focusing on the version of Granger that existed only behind his eyelids. Imaginary-Granger's mouth took him in even further, and she hollowed her cheeks as she pulled back up. Her eyes darted up to meet his, and she gave a single deep moan that vibrated all the way down his cock deep into his core where he could feel his release just waiting to explode.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he panted, coiling and tightening in preparation to again come spectacularly all over his stomach and chest. “I’m so fucking close, Granger. Merlin, don’t stop, please” His voice turned desperate, pleading with the imaginary witch to let him crest over that wall of release.

“Come for me, Draco,” Imaginary-Granger instructed, speaking at the tip of his cock, never stopping her up and down movements. Draco’s movements turned frantic, fighting against the weakness in his arms that was quickly developing from overuse. His palms were raw, burning from the friction against his cock.

“Merlin, I’m almost-” A gasp. “Granger, gods, keep going, fuck, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop” The mantra continued, both in his head and aloud, until he angrily pulled his hands away from his cock and slammed both fists against the bed.

“Fuck!” he yelled, his voice now angry instead of just desperate. His red swollen cock stood angrily between his legs, begging for a release he couldn’t give it.

It had been several days since then, and Draco had only tried wanking once more within that time to make sure there was a pattern. He couldn’t bring himself to try anymore, he was already as excited as a 16 year old around Granger as it was, and adding more failed jerk sessions to his memories wasn’t going to help anything there. He felt on edge, like anything could set him off at any moment, and he was certain he needed to avoid any dancing tonight as he was so randy he was liable to embarrass himself if he tried.

Draco blearily opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, arms falling to either side on the bed as he drew himself out of his memory. Growling, he slowly sat himself up, deciding it probably wouldn’t be too early for him to start getting ready to head out to Hemlock. He’d grab a quick cold shower and get dressed into fresh clothing before arriving just early enough to be firmly settled at the table and one or two drinks in before anyone else got there.

When he entered his room, a piece of parchment folded into the shape of a peacock immediately crashed into his forehead, continuing to tap against him until he reached an arm up to grab it. He knew it to be a message from either Theo or Blaise, as the three had developed this annoyingly unique method of Floo communication - the white paper peacock - while they were boys, and the tradition persisted into adulthood.

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He uncrumpled the parchment and immediately recognized Blaise's slanted script.

Not coming tonight. Ok, maybe coming tonight, but not at Hemlock. Have fun. I know I will. -B. and Weasley

Well that was interesting. Draco knew the pair had seemingly hit it off last week, but to already be skipping out on drinks and presumably spending the evening at Blaise's manor seemed quick. Draco had no worries of Blaise being used as a rebound from Weasley's recent breakup; knowing Blaise, this was the perfect way to expand his horizons into the Gryffindor house without any worries of commitment.

Draco quickly got ready, trying his best to not think of Granger in any fashion lest it lead to inappropriate thoughts being top of mind when meeting her later. He managed a successful shower and selected a nice but normal set of clothes before grabbing a handful of floo powder and heading out.

No one was there when he arrived, as expected, and he took his normal seat at their normal table. Promptly ordering a beverage for himself, he settled into his Thursday evening routine quite thoroughly. He caught the sight of a large bushy head of hair out of his peripheral vision and immediately knew it to be Granger.

She rushed down onto her regular chair in one of the most unladylike fashions Draco could imagine. He thought about Granger plopping down on one of the manor chairs in such a fashion as he introduced her to his parents, which caused an amused smile to grace his lips.

"What's so funny?" Granger asked, without introduction. She was notably the exact opposite of prim and proper pureblood lady.

"Nothing," Draco answered. "Where's Potter?"

Hermione turned back from speaking with the waiter (a polite "Yes, good evening, doing well, thank you, and you? Lovely. Yes I'd love a gin and tonic, extra splash of lemon if you please. Yes, thank you very much"; she seemed to have manners for the wait staff, anyway) and said "Harry's running late. There were a few things in the office he said he needed to take care of first and suggested Theo and I head off ahead of him, and he'd catch up in a few."

Noting a distinct lack of Theo with Hermione, Draco waited for the next part of the story. "Of course you know how those two have been

basically joined at the hip for weeks now, so instead of coming with me, Theo decided to stare longingly at Harry's shoulders as he finished up his work."

Draco snorted. "Well at least I know where I stand compared to Potter's shoulders. And I'm sure they've been joined at more than just the hip, Granger."

Hermione blushed, pausing to again politely thank the waiter for delivering her beverage. She took a gentle sip before continuing "I suppose you've heard from Blaise that he and Ginny won't be in attendance tonight?"

Draco nodded in confirmation. "Yes, I did hear. Though I can't say I'm sure how I feel about two of my fellow Slytherins crossing enemy lines to be with Gryffindors." The jest in his tone was apparent.

"I suppose it doesn't much matter how we feel, does it? It's not like we can change anything." Taking another drink, she seemed to ponder over her next words before saying them aloud. "Maybe they know something you don't about us Gryffindors. Maybe there's a Gryffindor out there willing to help you learn."

He felt his whole body heating in reaction to her words, and he was sure his eyes must have darkened noticeably. She was looking directly into them.

"Perhaps there is," he said slowly, attempting to keep his voice flat.

She seemed to notice his discomfort, and though he wasn't sure she knew exactly why, she did seem to think it at least a little amusing based on the smile she was trying to hide behind her palm. Eyes twinkling, she instructed "Don't Panic", in a voice that indicated she was quoting something while mocking his uncomfortable look.

"It's the first helpful or intelligible thing anyone's said to me all day," he said automatically, having just been reading the book this morning and therefore very familiar with the rest of the "Don't Panic" quote.

Her jaw dropped, and she fumbled to catch her drink after accidentally loosening her grip on the glass in surprise. "You know Douglas Adams?" Her voice was almost a screech, it was so filled with incredulity.

How did he tell her that yes, he was familiar with the author because he was reading a book by him this morning because he'd found it sitting on

her dresser in the magical copy of her bedroom he'd been essentially living in for the past week?

"A bit," he decided, casually. "Just getting into him really."

"Oh, Malfoy, you are in for a treat! What have you read so far? The first in the Hitchhiker series, obviously. Such a coincidence as I had just finished re-reading it yesterday."

"Only that one," he admitted. Interesting that she was just done with the book when he happened to find it. He wasn't sure if there was any link between the timing of when things appeared in the ritual room and what Granger might be doing with them, or if there even was a link. No one had experienced the ritual quite like he was, with objects showing up one by one.

"When I get home tonight I'll pull out the others in the series and bring them to you next week," She decided, seemingly taking for granted that he would of course accept a free offering of books. "I can hardly believe you read Muggle fiction!"

"Er, just getting into it, really," he repeated dumbly in an attempt to head off any future probing into a subject that he knew next to nothing about.

He could see the gears turning inside her head, and imagined she was planning which books for him to read next and prioritising the order based on what she assumed about his preferences from Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. He recognized the name "Pratchett" from her almost indecipherable ramblings, though he didn't think any of the other books or authors she was muttering had shown up in his room just yet.

Merlin, how many books did this witch have? Already more books had appeared in the room than Draco kept in his own, and from the sounds of it there were even more still.

Granger asked how far along he was in the book, and the two began discussing some of the parts he'd already read. They ordered another round of drinks, then another, discussing the parallels of demolishing planets for an expressway - interrupted by explaining what an expressway was in the Muggle world - and destroying animal habitat to make way for human development. This further devolved into what a car was, how muggles used them for transportation, their advantages and limitations when compared with magical means of transportation.

It wasn't until their fourth round of drinks that they noticed Potter and Theo still hadn't shown up.

"Do you think they're alright?" Draco asked. "They should have been here by now, yeah?"

Granger nodded. "Yeah, Harry made it seem like he didn't have too much left to do."

"You suppose we should check on them? Floo in and maybe convince them to-"

"NO!" Granger's interruption was abrupt, and a large red flush stained her face. Grimacing, she elaborated "The last time I walked into Harry's office when he was running late I found Theo on his knees in front of him and a look on Harry's face I NEVER want to see again." She shuddered. "Not ever."

"Fair point," Draco acceded. "We'll assume they've both decided on alternate company for the evening." Tilting back his glass and finishing his last round of beverages, steeling himself to find courage in the handful of drinks he'd imbibed so far tonight, Draco asked "So Granger - what's the plan for the evening?"

With the blush still gracing her cheeks, she smiled coyly. "I have an idea, if you're up for it."

Fifteen minutes later, Draco found himself standing in the middle of Granger's flat while she shucked off her shoes and went into the kitchen to pour them both a glass of wine. Popping back out a moment later with two glasses filled partway with straw coloured liquid, she handed one to Draco and used the now free hand to drift along one of the several bookshelves crowding the main living space, looking for a particular volume.

"This is a lot of books," he said dumbly, taking the glass from her hand. Their fingers didn't brush, but even just this proximity caused the burning warmth in his chest to ignite once more.

"Hmm," was her noncommittal response, as if it was something she'd heard many times already. Her fingers suddenly stopped, and she pulled out a title called *The Restaurant at the Edge of the Universe*. She handed it to him, and he flipped it open with his one free hand. He could see the same photo of the man in the book he'd been reading earlier - Douglas Adams, he supposed - and assumed this must be the next book in the series. He'd noticed the space left in the bookshelf where the book was

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removed seemed larger than it should be, which made sense if the first volume was currently sitting in Granger's room about three quarters of the way along her dresser, close to where she kept her necklace when not wearing it.

"Thanks, Granger. I'll get to reading it this week. My life of leisure offers lots of time for it, as you know." He poked fun at one of their earlier conversations about whether he'd been actually doing anything at the manor since their Hogwarts days.

"I expect a full report next Thursday, when I'll deliver your next assignment."

"Don't let Blaise hear you say that," Draco warned. "He's got a bit of a professor / librarian thing going on. Not sure how that developed with the likes of McGonagall and Pince in our school years, but I try not to think about it."

Hermione laughed. "I'm sure I'll be hearing far more about Blaise's kinks than I'd like to once Ginny and I next chat."

Draco filed that piece of information away for later. Apparently Granger and Weasley chatted about their more explicit affairs. He wondered what he might be able to learn from Blaise in time if his friend kept seeing Weasley.

Draco shrunk the book and placed it in his pocket to make sure he wouldn't forget to take it. They were both still holding their half-drunk glasses of wine so he assumed he wasn't expected to leave straight away.

"Would you like a tour?" she offered. Draco thought it was a bit silly to tour a flat as small as hers appeared to be, but was happy to stay in her company for a while more, so he obliged. They started in the living room, with Granger spending a disproportionately large amount of time talking about her books and bookshelves more than anything else in the room. They moved on to her modest sized kitchen, an unused looking front entranceway with a few pairs of flats and an umbrella visible near the door, and a spare bedroom which was filled, unsurprisingly, with more books.

She hesitated before opening the last door, and Draco suspected this must be her room. She sputtered a couple of obligatory "don't mind the mess"s and "I try to keep it tidy but it keeps getting away from me"s before opening the door and entering the room, leaving space behind her for him to enter as well.

He would have known it to be her room immediately, even if it wasn't here in her house. It looked exactly like the ritual room, but more full and vivid. He immediately spied many of the items he'd been browsing through the past few weeks, in exactly the place he'd expected to find them.

"I'll just run in and grab the first book while I'm in here so I can pop it back on the shelf," Granger said, walking across the room to her nightstand beside her bed. Shaking his head, Draco took two steps towards her dresser and reached for the book with hardly a glance. "Here Granger," he offered.

She looked at him in surprise. "Oh, you found it quickly."

"Sometimes a fresh pair of eyes helps," he said, starting to feel uncomfortable with the knowledge he was keeping from her.

"Well that's the end of the tour. Not as large as your home, I'm aware, but it's enough for me."

"It suits you, Granger," he said, stepping backwards into the hallway and waiting for her to follow him. He waited for her to lead the way back into the living room. "Small, predictable, filled with books."

"Hey!" she protested playfully. "I'm not predictable!"

Draco's eyes moved towards the spare room down the hallway that was filled with books, then pointedly back at her. "Really?" he drawled.

"Liking books is hardly a defining characteristic. Just because I like books and keep them in my house doesn't mean I'm predictable."

"I think that's exactly what it means, Granger. There's nothing wrong with being predictable. Some of the greatest witches and wizards in history got to be so great precisely because they were predictable. In fact, I'm fairly certain that-"

His voice was abruptly cut off by Granger's lips pressed up against his.

His eyes widened, then closed as the fire within him ignited. Sparks, flames, starbursts and lightning all exploded within him at once, forcing themselves through his body and out through his skin in waves of intense warmth alternating with tingling coolness. Her lips pressed gently against his, unmoving, but not retreating either. Before she could decide to pull back, Draco moved his lips to slant over hers in a gentle caress.

Granger emitted the tiniest, softest moan at this change in position. It was barely audible, and Draco would never have heard it if he hadn't been

so close to her and so keenly attuned to her every movement. Holding back what would have been a much louder, intense vibrating moan into her mouth, Draco tried again to move his lips against hers, feeling the heat and softness surrounding him.

He heard Granger's wine glass fall to the floor and he felt her arms wrap around his neck, pulling him down to better meet her. The kiss was moving from shy and gentle to intense and demanding, and he was surprised again when he felt her wet tongue probe against his lower lip, teasing before demanding entrance. His own glass fell to the ground now, surely spilling his remaining wine all over Granger's hardwood floor.

Her tongue in his mouth felt as good as he remembered fucking a witch to feel. His whole body reacted, and he could feel her kiss from his lips to his toes. She made another soft moaning sound against his lips, and the sound amplified as it passed over his ears and shot directly to his centre.

Draco's thighs clenched. He could feel her warm stomach pressed against him, just as when they were dancing. Except this time her tongue was in his mouth, his in hers, and he was grasping the back of her head as if she was going to disappear and his hands were the only thing keeping her here. Her soft chest pressed against his stomach, encouraging him to imagine the weight of each breast in his hands and hovering over his face as she was riding him.

Their kiss slowed, and Draco had contemplated continuing on down the side of her neck to see what other sounds he could pull from her, but a timely shift of her hips rubbing against him in just the right way made him groan and reminded him that he hadn't been able to orgasm for days and he was going to certainly embarrass himself if she made one more breathy moan...

"How was that for predictable?" she asked, arms still around his neck and eyes peering straight into his.

"It's-" Draco tried to speak, but his voice came out thick and gravelly so he cleared his throat. "It's certainly less predictable than the books."

She frowned, but in such a way that he could tell she was just teasing.

"I think it's time for me to be heading back now," Draco said, pulling himself out of her arms and carefully sidestepping the fallen glasses on the floor. This was incredibly awkward, he so wanted to keep kissing her and

rubbing himself against her, but wasn't sure that they should progress any further tonight, and he was sure he'd make a mess of things if they did.

"Sorry about the wine."

"It's ok," Granger cajoled, turning her gaze to the floor and sounding slightly distant and unsure. "I'll clean it up later."

Realising that he needed to clear up this awkwardness in a way that didn't allow any further kissing tonight but certainly allowed further kissing going forward, Draco decided to adjust his retreat.

"Granger," he said, waiting for her to look up at him once more. "There's nothing wrong with predictable. I'm a big fan of predictable, really. Such a fan, in fact, that I'd be happy to turn this very surprising, very unexpected situation into something... well, familiar. Regular. More predictable, one might say.."

He watched her eyes light up and her smile break through once more. "I suppose predictable isn't all bad. I'm sorry I interrupted you before you were able to tell me which witches or wizards used it to their advantage."


"I am very much not sorry you interrupted me, and I would gladly attempt to share that information again if I thought it would get the same reaction." He stepped closer to the fireplace where a ceramic pot of floo powder was hanging on the wall. "On another night. It's getting late, and I've an assignment to complete by next week, if you recall."

"Goodnight, Malfoy" Granger said, giving him a small wave as he announced "Hemlock" and tossed the floo powder into the flames.

"Night Granger. Until next time."

He stepped through the fire, and as the flames flickered and dimmed behind him as he exited into the Hemlock foyer, the intense light and heat inside him dimmed with it.

SEVEN



THE CHAIR

Life was good.

Scratch that, life was more than good. Life was fucking fantastic.

Other than the fact that he could only wank once or twice after seeing Granger, it felt like everything was finally going right. The soft hum in his chest, right where that pesky little ball of light flew through all those weeks ago, was comforting and kept his mind more relaxed than it would otherwise be with this much pent up sexual frustration.

He'd again spent most of his time in Granger's room, waiting for new items to appear each day and reading through the actual physical copy of the Restaurant at the End of the Galaxy at the same time. It was odd, at first. He couldn't compare this book to the first book in the series anymore, as Granger had taken it out of her room and placed it back in her larger collection in the living room. But the weight of the sequel in his hands and the colour of the cover was distinctly different from any of the other books in the room.

It was subtle; it's not as if the other items were ghostly or ethereal. But they were just not quite as heavy as they should be, and the colour slightly washed out, like they'd been sitting for too long in the sun.

The other new items were interesting. His brief glimpse in Granger's room didn't give him enough time to compare the details of the items and inventory what might be coming, so he unfortunately didn't recognize anything that appeared.

The first was a small device, somewhat circular shaped, with a long thread stretching from it, attached to another pair of foam discs held together with a bent metal bar. There were several buttons along the front of the device, and after some experimenting he found one that caused the device to break in half.

Upon closer inspection, the device wasn't broken - it was still attached to itself, and pushing it together caused it to close up again, and the process of button pushing, opening, and closing could be repeated again. Inside the device was another disc, shiny and reflective on one side, and with the image of a band silhouette and the letters "Franz Ferdinand" written across the middle on the other.

It took him until the next day to figure out that by hitting the correct combination of buttons sound would come out of the foam discs, and another several more minutes to determine that the shape of the attachment would fit nicely over one's head. He'd spent the rest of the evening listening to the various songs on the disc, sitting on the edge of Granger's bed and sipping on a tumbler of whiskey with the sounds of guitars and drums washing over him, stoking the warmth that was glowing in his chest.

The other strange item appeared just this morning. It was another device, medium-sized with a lot of buttons, most of which had only a single letter on them. Half of the device appeared to be covered in these buttons, while the other half appeared to be a brightly illuminated screen covered with photos and text.

Draco didn't know anything about how to work this device, and there were too many buttons for him to attempt to play around with them like he did the music disc, considering that only had seven buttons and it took him the better part of two days to figure out how it worked. He could however read what was already on the screen without having to touch any buttons.

The largest part seemed to be a box filled with lines of text. There were some odd symbols and text at the top that he didn't really understand (what was a font, and why would you want to break a page?), but his eyes were quickly drawn to the bulk of the text that was far more familiar.

Dear Mum and Dad,

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I keep trying to write these letters, and they come out awful every time. I've even resorted to drafting them on the computer instead as my wrists have been getting sore with the number of revisions and rewrites. Even though I know they'll never get to you, I still want them to be perfect.

My therapist says that it would be good for me to write to you both as if you could hear me. They of course think you're both dead, not that you're living on the other side of the world and have completely forgotten about me. I suppose it amounts to the same thing as far as the therapy is concerned.

I want to say I'm sorry, but I also want to say I'm not. I'm sorry you got caught up in this. I'm sorry that the magical world was such a dangerous place for me, and therefore you, for all those years. I wish I knew what would happen when I made the decision to erase your memories. I wish I could tell you that I did it because I love you and I couldn't imagine living in a world without you in it.

Draco stopped reading and turned away from the device. His stomach hurt, that imagined glowing orb in his chest contracting painfully and imploding in on itself. Did she... did Granger obliviate her parents and send them away during the war?

He thought back to her pendant, how she seemed solemn whenever she twirled it between her fingers and would sadly tuck it back beneath her shirt.

He wanted to make the words go away. He didn't feel comfortable reading words that weren't meant for him, and the feelings in his chest were like he was experiencing them first hand, rather than feeling empathy for Granger. He'd never experienced anything like it before, and he assumed this connection to your partner was another lovely feature of the ritual.

"Great, now not only do I get to feel upset whenever I'm upset, I also get to feel upset whenever she's upset." He rubbed at the sore spot in his chest for a moment, as if an external massage would help alleviate the ache he felt.

Deciding that a break from the room was needed if the words weren't going to go away, Draco prepared to head downstairs to grab a bite and maybe pen a letter to Granger telling her how he'd finished her second book, seeing if he could twist it into an excuse to see her privately again soon.

His parents were both in the sitting room enjoying some tea and sandwiches. There were three place settings and more than enough food for him to join, and he was surprised to see his parents still set their tea as if he would be attending.

“So nice to see you, dear,” Narcissa greeted, sounding warm and genuine. It caused another uncomfortable twinge in his chest, seeing his mother’s adoring face while thinking about Granger’s letter to her parents that would never be delivered.

Lucius peered at him from over the top of his book, holding it in one hand and his teacup in the other. “Dare I assume you’re staying to join us for tea this afternoon?” His voice was not upset, but sounded resigned, as if he already knew the answer.

“Actually yes, I think I might. I’m famished.” Draco sat down roughly in the upholstered chair next to his mother, wincing at the similarities in etiquette between himself and Granger, and reached for a sandwich before even making his tea.

Narcissa gave Lucius a look that Draco didn’t quite understand before she turned her whole body to face him, setting her teacup and saucer down onto the small table and folding her hands in her lap.

“I don’t mean to rush into things before you’ve even had a chance to have a drink,” Narcissa began, and Draco thought he might have heard the disdain in her voice related to his decision to jump into the sandwiches before the tea. “But your father has found something.”

Draco looked at his father questioningly. “About the room?” he asked. Lucius nodded and placed his things on the table next to Narcissa’s.

“I’ve been doing a lot of reading while you’ve been holed up there in that room of yours, and I’ve come across a few interesting points I thought you might like to know.”

Draco glanced at the book his father held and saw it to be one of the many diaries that were housed within the Malfoy library. He wondered who it might belong to.

“It seems you are definitely the first in the Malfoy line to have been given an empty room that slowly populates with paraphernalia. After doing a little more digging into the ritual itself, I’ve learned that it draws on the ancestral magic not just from our family, but also from the family of the witch or wizard you are paired with. This adds to our suspicion that this

witch is likely not pureblood, as having fewer generations of purely magical blood would decrease the potency of their line, causing a delayed reaction between the initial creation of the room and the appearance of its items.”

“Alright, so, I’m paired with a m- a non-pureblood witch. Sounds like that’s solved the problem, doesn’t it?”

“It solves part of the problem, yes,” Narcissa continued. “You see, in all other accounts the room provides items that are intended to lead you to your partner. Photos of them, pieces of clothing they would be wearing when you meet, perhaps a hand written letter for you to recognize their writing. This room seems to have given you the contents of their personal bedroom, items that you would not be able to easily see in public and that are not directly helpful to locating your partner.”

“Lucky me,” Draco confirmed. “Couldn’t possibly have been easy, could it?”

“It’s more than that.” Apparently his parents were trading off verses, as now his father was speaking again. “The ritual is written in such a way that showing clues to the partner is the primary function, and that part should be maintained throughout any iteration of it. Since it’s evidently not doing that, I’m concerned that the ritual didn’t take properly, and that it didn’t successfully identify a partner for you. That perhaps these items showing up in the room are appearing at random, trying to piece together a person that might not really exist.”

Recalling the heaviness in his heart and the reactions of his body around Granger, he didn’t believe for a minute that this might be the case.

“If you like” - his mother’s turn, of course - “your father has found a way we might be able to redo it; perhaps undo this version and try again. I keep thinking maybe there was something a little off with one of the potions. I’m sure your father brewed them correctly, it’s just you can never be sure of those ingredients and if they’re sourced properly, and I-”

“No,” Draco interrupted. “I’m not redoing it. Just because it’s a little different than your version doesn’t mean it didn’t work.”

Lucius again. “Based on my research there is far more evidence to support that this was a failed ritual than a successful one, so I don’t see why you’d choose to deal with these side-effects while waiting for a witch who you aren’t even sure exists.”

The constant switching back and forth was starting to get to him. How long had they planned this ambush? Was the idea of a non-pureblood match so insane to them that they had to spend their time thinking up reasons why the ritual didn't work and trying to convince him to undo it? The pressure in his chest began pulsating in time with his increasing heart rate, his whole body undergoing a visceral reaction to the idea of severing the connection between himself and Granger, no matter how faint.

"I know she exists because I've met her!" he exclaimed. "I've met her and I've been in her bedroom and I can tell you with certainty that she is the one the room is leading me to - she is my partner."

The shocked look on both his parents' faces would almost have been worth it, if not for the ringing in his ears and tension in his chest that followed his outburst.

"What do you mean, you've met her? Draco, how long have you known? Have you told her about.." His mother's words fell short, failing to come up with a generalisation of the ritual and the room and all it entailed.

Lucius gave Draco a questioning look, but stayed silent.

"No, I haven't spoken to her about any of this. We're just fr--"

Draco cut himself off. He was about to say that they were just friends, but were they? Acquaintances, maybe? Two people whos friends just happened to be fucking each other? Perhaps a change in approach was best.

"We haven't gotten to speaking about it yet, but I'm working on it."

Finally, Lucius spoke up. "How do you know it's her?"

His father didn't indicate anything directly, but somehow Draco sensed that Lucius' question wasn't related to how the items in the ritual room maybe matched up with those in Granger's room. No, he felt his father's question was leading him to the connection he felt around Granger, that pulsing warm presence in his chest, that connection between the potions and the person and the room all rolled into one.

Not sure how to have this type of conversation around his parents, and not wanting to reveal too much of his hand in the event this wasn't what his father was hinting at, Draco decided on an "I just know" while subtly moving a fist towards the centre of his chest, in exactly the spot he could feel the warmth. He saw Lucius' eyes follow his hand knowingly before turning his attention back to his tea.

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“Then see to it that you fill her in on her.... Status sooner rather than later. You do not want to drag the process out more than necessary.”

Draco verbally agreed, but had no intention of changing his current plans of wanting to enjoy Granger for as long as he could, knowing that she'd run as far away as possible as soon as she learned about any of this.

Draco left his parents shortly after that conversation, not willing to share any more information than he already had. He skipped out on writing a letter to Granger - the conversation with his parents had him no longer in the mood for flirty banter with the witch, and he instead ruminated on the undoubtedly shortlived time he'd get to spend with her before things started going downhill.

He only started perking up again on Thursday afternoon as he was preparing to once again head out to Hemlock to meet the now usual gang. He arrived first again, like always, but was surprised to see that Potter and Theo were the first ones to join him several minutes later.

After a few quips about how it was nice of them to leave the bedroom for long enough to come out, Draco asked about whether Granger was still intending on joining them this evening, as she normally came at the same time as Potter.

“She said she had to pop back home to grab something first,” Potter said, his arm casually slung around Theo's shoulders. “No idea what it was, but she should be here any minute.”

True to form, Granger showed up precisely on time and took her usual seat across from Draco. “Sorry for being late, everyone. What'd I miss?”

Theo jumped in to answer. “Oh, just Malfoy keeping tabs on where you are, Granger. If you don't already I might make a habit of walking with my wand out after dark if I were you.”

Potter's eyes waggled suggestively at Theo as he said “I'm ok if you want to make a habit of walking with your wand out.”

Draco and Granger both made gagging noises into their drinks. Merlin, those two were really meant for each other, weren't they?

Not long after Blaise and Weasley also showed up and took their seats. From the outside you would never be able to tell there was anything between them. They weren't hanging off each other or giving each other eyes like Potter and Theo always were. But the fact that they arrived

together said more about their connection than Draco would have expected.

It was a very normal evening for the first hour. Everyone was catching up after missing each other the previous week, though he and Granger were careful not to share too much about what they'd gotten up to last week.

"Did you know Malfoy reads muggle fiction?" she asked the group.

"Does he really?" Theo asked, intrigued. Blaise's glance was sceptical and calculating.

"Well, he says he's just getting started," she mimicked his favourite line from last week. "But--"

Potter interrupted her. "But you've already got his next year's reading planned out, along with a set of discussion questions for after each book, yes?" He was speaking as if from personal experience, though the affection he had for her was still very strong in his voice.

Granger bit her lip - Merlin, what a sight - and was unable to contradict Potter's statement.

Weasley stood up and stepped away from the table, citing a need to use the ladies room. She invited Granger to come with her, and the two women started making their way towards the back corner of the room where the toilets were.

As Granger passed by him, he overheard her saying to Weasley "Of course us girls are heading to the loo together - how predictable."

The word sent a pavlovian response racing through his body. He didn't dare turn to look at her to see if she meant it for him. He attempted to control his breathing and slow his heartbeat, concentrating on counting to thirty in his head before also excusing himself from the table for the same reason.

He managed only two steps around the corner separating the hallway from the main room when he felt warm arms wrap around his shoulders and soft lips crash against his.

Draco wasted no time, pushing Granger up against the wall and further into the shadows. She moaned into his mouth and opened her legs slightly, allowing his thigh to slip between them. The intense warmth of her core spread from his thigh up through his whole body, and he instinctively

grabbed her hips to hold her in place, keeping that damp warmth as close to him as possible.

She gasped, tilting her head back and pushing her body weight down onto his thigh, gently rubbing back and forth and pushing her breasts out in an effort to get more friction. Draco moved seamlessly to Granger's neck, trailing his lips over the right side slowly until he found a spot that made her gasp, and then covering it and sucking hard enough to leave a mark. Her hands twisted and tightened around his shoulders and her movements on his thigh quickened.

"Malfoy," she moaned, seeking his lips again and reclaiming them. He moved his left arm from her hip up her side and rested it on the underside of her breast, caressing firmly with his thumb until the digit slipped between their bodies and flicked against her nipple.

She moaned again, and Draco couldn't help the growl of "Granger" that escaped his lips as his hips pushed into her, pressing his cock into her stomach and mimicking her rocking movements. He felt her hike her leg up further, allowing his cock to press more directly against her core and causing them both to moan again. Lips still locked, Draco gave an experimental thrust, knowing that this was all too fast and they were in a fucking hallway for Merlin's sake, but fuck this felt better than anything he'd ever felt before and he wasn't sure what would have to happen to make him stop. Granger pushed back against him with equal fervor, her hands now splayed across his chest while fucking his mouth with her tongue.

"Well don't mind me," a voice behind them announced, piercing through their lust-filled brains and grounding them in their surroundings. Weasley. Of course, Granger was supposed to be in the loo with her, not out here practically fucking him in the hallway.

"Ginny," Granger spluttered, jumping away from him. She also seemed somewhat surprised to see the redhead standing there. "It's, um, I was just--"

Weasley waved a hand at her, dismissing her excuses. "I don't need the details of what you were doing, it was quite obvious, thank you. But if you're not prepared for everyone else at the table to tell you about how not surprising this all is to them, I suggest I wait here while you" here she looked at Granger "compose yourself and come back out with me. And you" now she was looking at Draco "should probably take a minute to

figure yourself out before heading back, and spend some of that time thinking of an excuse to get you and Hermione out of here for the rest of the evening before you decide to do something really spectacularly stupid like actually have sex on the dancefloor.”

It seemed Weasley wasn't in the mood for mincing words, though now that some of the lust fog had cleared he could see sense in what she was saying. They had just been spectacularly stupid already.

Weasley was already tugging at Granger's hair and adjusting her clothing with a “tsk tsk” when Draco announced he'd just “pop into the loo until enough time had passed”, though Granger's blush and Weasley's eerily Blaise-like look told him that they both knew what they thought he really needed the time for.

He headed into the loo and splashed some cold water on his face, again trying to even out his breathing and force his body back under control. Each deep inhale caused his cock to shift in his trousers and the light change in pressure with every breath was so distracting it rendered the exercise completely unhelpful. He stepped into a stall and shut the door, reaching into his trousers to adjust himself in such a way that there would be less pressure and friction.

He didn't expect the low hum of pleasure that fell from between his lips as he grasped his cock in his hand. His body was still riding the high of having Granger's body literally pinned beneath his own, and the images of her heated body and sounds of her breathy moans were sweeping over him, drowning him.

He didn't even realise he was moving his hand until he'd already developed a steady rhythm and was leaning back against the locked stall door. He barely managed to mutter a quick silencing charm to make sure his activities weren't noticed by anyone else who might enter the room before a much louder groan erupted from him. His trousers were now sitting at the top of his thighs and his fist tightened on his cock, continuing the same rhythm. Each pump of his fist matched the grind of imaginary-Granger's wet centre on his thigh.

Merlin, was he actually going to cum in the bathroom stall because he couldn't get his body under control enough to make it back home? Imaginary-Granger's lips were travelling down his neck, skipping quickly over his midsection before purposefully stretching over the head of his cock and slipping him all the way inside.

Draco managed two more pumps with that visual in mind before he roared, arching his hips away from the stall door and feeling hot spurts of his own release soak his shirt and drip down over the hand grasping his cock. It wasn't until he felt the chill of dampness on his skin that his mind began functioning again, and he cleaned himself and his clothing up with a quick charm before tucking himself away and straightening his hair and clothing.

After applying some finishing touches in the mirror and casting a temporary glamour to remove the redness from his cheeks, he felt like he was ready to head back to the group to hopefully get Granger somewhere a little more private to see if they could continue what they started.

By the time he joined the rest of the group he realised he hadn't actually thought of an excuse to get Granger away from Hemlock. Weasley eyed him knowingly - fuck her and Blaise for their bloody looks - but didn't offer any help. Granger hadn't made eye contact with him since he last saw her in the hallway.

He was still standing at the table awkwardly, refusing to sit down lest he forfeit whatever opportunity he'd imagined for himself in his head. Theo and Potter had noticed now as well, which was a sign that Draco was really losing whatever subtlety he thought he had.

"Gonna take a seat, mate?" Theo asked.

Before Draco had a chance to think of a response, Granger said "Actually, Malfoy, I was thinking a little more on which book might be best for you to read next, and I couldn't help but think it might be beneficial for you to stop by to take a look at several different options. I stopped by to grab a few titles on my way here but the more I think on it you may really enjoy a more whimsical read like Narnia, or maybe something a little more chaotic like Kafka, or even poetic like-"

"Merlin, Hermione, you are the worst liar I have ever known." This came from Potter who was hanging his head, as if ashamed of her performance. "Please, both of you, floo is that way, and don't come back until you've ... talked." Potter's emphasis on the word implied he knew exactly what they were getting up to.

Unsure whether to proceed now that they'd basically shared with the table that they were heading off to snog and/or shag, Draco sat and waited for Granger's Gryffindor bravery to make the decision.

“Um, well, I suppose we’ll be off then?” Granger’s voice was more of a question, and when he looked down at her he saw her making eye contact with him.

“Yes,” he answered, perhaps more forcefully than was required. “Yes, let’s be off.” He held his hand out for Granger to take as she stood up.

“Everyone,” he said, dismissing the table’s occupants all at once.

“We won’t wait up,” Blaise commented, smirking.

“Have fun!” From Theo.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Potter.

“I’ll look forward to catching up with you tomorrow, Hermione.”
Weasley.

Their words went in one ear and out the other as soon as Granger took his hand; that warmth buzzing through his whole body, thrumming loudly.

They made their way to the floo together and made sure to grab their outerwear before realising they hadn’t actually decided where to go.

“Should we, erm, go to my place? It’s a little messy; constantly, it seems, even though it feels like I’m always casting cleaning spells. Not that I’m averse to going to your place, as long as we avoid certain areas. I mean, maybe I’m being presumptuous; I am also fine to head back to my place and you to yours and we can pick this up again another day?”

Apparently Granger had a habit of biting her bottom lip when she was nervous and rambling. The sight of her teeth biting down on her lips caused heat to surge through him, his eyes nearly rolling back in his head. Immediately images of her in his bedroom entered his mind, and he couldn’t shake the primal, possessive urge to get her in his quarters.

“Come to my place,” he said suddenly, reaching for her hand. “The floo is connected directly to my personal sitting room. The idea of seeing you - hearing you - in my room, surrounded by all my things, Merlin Granger.”

He thought he could see her eyes darken to match his own. She nodded, and he announced “Malfoy Manor, East Wing” before they both stepped through.

When they came through on the other side, Draco couldn’t help but reach out for her immediately, running his hands up her arms until they

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reached either side of her face. He cradled her head in his hands as his own slowly lowered, trying to give her time to back away if she wanted, if things were moving too fast.

But she didn't. Their lips met, and it was immediately just as heated as it was in the hallway at Hemlock. Draco's hands moved from Granger's face back to her hips, once again pulling her towards him. His cock had softened after his earlier relief in the bathroom, but he already felt himself hardening again, pressed against her soft body.

She moaned, this time deeply. "Fuck, I love it when you moan like that," he whispered against her lips. He picked her up and walked her over to his wingchair, sitting down and settling her on top of him.

She wriggled on his lap for a moment until she found a position that pushed his cock right up against the warmth of her core. They both groaned, Draco putting his hands behind her back and up onto her shoulders and pushing her down even more firmly as he rocked up into her.

"I don't-" Granger began, pausing to catch her breath when his hands slipped under her shirt and kneaded the flesh of her back. "I don't normally move this quickly with anyone." Draco paused his movements, not sure if this was going to be her telling him she wanted to stop.

Granger shifted her hips against him again, whimpering as she did. Draco didn't move against her. "Do you want to stop?" he asked, needing to be sure that she was ok with things progressing this quickly. He didn't know what she felt, but he knew the connection between them made it so that he couldn't think straight; he needed to be sure that he wasn't pushing too hard.

She started kissing his neck, sucking and scraping and causing him to shudder under her touch. Moving towards his ear, she whispered "No. I want more. I want to make you fall apart for me."

His hands, which had been still on her back while waiting for her answer, shifted deeper under her shirt and started kneading her breasts over her bra. "I already am, Granger. Falling apart for you."

She leaned back and pulled her shirt up over her head, leaving her black lace bra covering her breasts. Draco immediately moved his mouth to the uncovered top of her mounds, feeling the flesh move and undulate beneath his lips as he kept kneading and flicking with hands and fingers. Granger rewarded him with a chorus of exquisite moans and increasingly

rough rocking of her hips. His eyes looked up to see her biting her lip again, and he growled.

“I love it when you do that,” he said, pausing his kneading to uncover one breast and take a nipple into his mouth.

“Nnngh, do what?” was her response. Her head tilted back.

“When you bite your lip like that,” he answered. As if to demonstrate, he pulled back from her nipple, replacing his mouth with his thumb, flicking gently. He then took her bottom lip between his teeth and bit down firmly, moaning into her mouth as she deepened the kiss and let her hands begin roaming beneath his shirt.

“Can I-” Draco moved one hand to the front of her trousers, tugging at the button and zip.

She dropped her head to his shoulder and nodded frantically against him. “What about you? Can I-”

Draco had already undone the fastenings on her trousers and was starting to tug them down around her hips. “Yes, Anything. You can do anything.” Granger lifted her hips up and helped him slide the garment down her legs. He felt her fingers at his buckle, loosening the fabric enough to allow her hand to slip inside.

He immediately surged up into her hands, trying to maximise the friction and pressure against his cock. Gods, but this felt better than any dream he’d ever had. Her hand was soft and warm against him, gripping him with perfect firmness. His head was swimming and he knew if he wasn’t already sitting down he would have collapsed at the feel of her hand wrapped around him.

“Merlin, Granger, that’s-”

“Hermione,” she interrupted, shifting her hand so she could start pumping him earnestly. “I’ve got my hand on your cock, I think you can call me Hermione now.”

“Hermione” he growled, sliding his hand down the front of her underwear and pushing his thumb against her folds. Draco could feel the intense pressure building in his cock already, and knew he had to work quickly if he wanted to make Hermione come before he did; he wasn’t sure how much of his brain would be functional after his orgasm.

He moved his hand to the top of her underwear and slid inside, spreading her folds apart and feeling the dampness surrounding him. He

traced around her entrance with his fingers, spreading her wetness over the digits and circling around her clit with his thumb. He felt her hands speed up on his cock and he clenched his thighs, trying hopelessly to draw blood away from his cock to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

He slowly slipped one finger inside her and felt the stuttering of her hand against him as she adjusted to the sensation. Once that finger was fully coated he slipped a second. She clenched around him tightly, moaning and starting to thrust against his fingers.

Her reaction ignited something within him, and he could feel pleasure from the centre of his chest at the same time as he felt the pressure continuing to build in his groin. It was too intense too soon, like his body didn't remember that he'd just gotten himself off less than an hour ago, and he could feel the beginnings of his orgasm stirring. He groaned loudly, desperate to hold off as long as possible.

"I'm not gonna last," he admitted, too desperate to even be ashamed of his lack of stamina. "I want you to come with me."

"I don't normally" - she gasped as his mouth moved back to her breasts, suckling each nipple, one exposed and one still clothed in a thin layer of lace - "It takes longer for me to-"

She buried one hand in his hair, pressing him against her chest, while her other hand continued to diligently pump him, steady pressure and rhythm testing his limits.

He curled his fingers inside of her and started using his thumb to rub against the side of her clit. His tongue and lips were still moving over her breasts.

"So fucking close," he breathed against her. She tightened around him again and gave another sexy whimper. He could feel the increase of friction as he pumped his fingers inside her; her tight cunt continuing to clench and refusing to release the pressure.

"Faster," she instructed, moving her hips up and down over his fingers, helping him to increase his pace. Frustrated with the fabric forcing the angle of his hand, Draco wandlessly vanished the clothing and fucked her properly with his fingers.

He drove them in aggressively, revelling in the cries she made when he pounded inside her. His palm pressed up against her clit with each thrust, causing wet slapping sounds to fill the room between moans and grunts.

Her hand on his cock lost rhythm, giving him a second of reprieve before she caught on again. Her moans got louder, closer and closer together. He wasn't going to make it. He could feel his himself tighten, feel the beginning of his release starting,

“Fuck, I'm going to - Hermione, please”

He felt her cunt clench more tightly than ever before. Her voice changed pitch, her words coming out as breathy moans. “I'm - I'm - oh gods, Draco, I'm -”

Draco had the briefest second to appreciate the look of rapture on her face and the whimpering moan echoing through the room before his body finally found the release it had been craving.

A deep groan erupted from his mouth, he could feel it start deep within him at the same place the pressure was finally ready to burst. He wasn't even sure if her hand was still pumping him, all he knew was that whatever she was doing was fucking perfect and he was so fucking close to bursting it almost hurt. By the time he recognized it was the sound of his first name on her voice as she came, he was gripping her hip so hard it must be bruising and pushing his erupting cock into the space between them, releasing his groan as he felt his warm sticky cum spurting onto his chest and flowing from his cock over Granger's hands. His fingers were still moving inside her through intuition alone, helping her ride out her orgasm.

He had to rouse himself out of the fog of his orgasm. His whole body felt exhausted, every muscle twitching and spasming, his heart beating in his chest so strongly he could hear it in his ears. Granger's comforting warmth surrounded him, and he barely recognized the feeling of her curling into him as she was coming down from her own pleasure. He slowed his movements inside her to a stop, keeping the warmth of his hand pressed up against her core.

He had never felt anything like this before. It was like every other orgasm he'd ever had in his life was nothing; a pale comparison to the feelings he just felt here with Granger, from just her hands no less. It was as if all other witches were like the phantom books and items in the ritual room, but this - this was the real thing. The swirling in his chest began cooling from a searing heat to a gentle warmth, humming contentedly in a way it hadn't since this whole thing began.

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Granger - Hermione? - began rousing on top of him and begrudgingly pulled his hands away from her core, relishing in the gentle sigh she made as his fingers slipped out.

“I’m glad we talked.”

Her voice rang fuzzy in his head, his brain trying to parse the words together. His brows furrowed in question and she must have seen as she elaborated.

“You know, like Harry suggested. To not come back until we’ve... talked.” Her eyes were twinkling and he took it as an excellent sign that she was interested in joking with him right after this mind-blowing experience rather than deciding to change her grip on his cock to something far less pleasant and substantially more aggressive.

“You know, I think that might just be the first good idea Potter’s ever had. Remind me to thank him the next time I see him.”

Draco felt the coolness as Hermione removed her hand from him. He cast a quick *Evanesco* on them both to clean them up.

He could feel his heart still slamming against his rib cage. He was eager to actually talk to her now, to figure out what she was thinking and whether this was a one off or something she’d be interested in doing again.

“So tell me, Draco,” - he was pleased to hear she was still using his first name, and even more pleased at the delicious shivers it sent down his spine - “Do you still think I’m predictable after that?”

“If us repeating this performance again in the future would make you predictable, I have never before been so excited to describe someone that way.” His heart stuttered, realising that he’d given her a perfect opportunity to shut this down, to tell him that she’s not interested, that this was just a one-off to prove to him and to her that she wasn’t what everyone thought she was.

But her gentle smile immediately calmed his nerves. “And if us repeating this performance again in the future makes me predictable, well, I guess I can swallow that truth.” He wasn’t sure if he imagined her emphasis on swallow or not, but his cock didn’t care and gave a strong twitch anyway.

“As long as my legs aren’t jelly I’m going to stand up, locate my missing clothing, and figure out how to get to your loo.” Before standing,

she leaned forward slightly and gave him a gentle but sensual kiss on the lips. "I'll be back."

Draco laid back on the chair with his eyes barely open, feeling lethargic but wanting to continue to appreciate Hermione's form as she moved about the room. When she was again fully clothed (well, almost fully - he did vanish her underwear, after all) he gestured to a door at the opposite end of the room and said "Loo is the first door on the right."

He let his eyes close when she left, no longer feeling an urge to keep them open now that she wasn't there to look at anymore. His whole body felt fulfilled in a way he didn't know possible, the comforting hum of light still floating in his chest. He eventually shimmied his trousers back up over his legs and adjusted his shirt. They hadn't even got far enough to properly disrobe. He hoped next time he'd be able to lay her out on his bed and thoroughly appreciate all parts of her body.

Just as he was about to wonder what was taking Hermione so long, the light in his chest flared and clenched painfully. His hand shot to his heart, clutching at the fabric of his shirt. A feeling of dread, of wrongness, shot through him like an arrow and had him gasping for air.

Something was wrong. Something was wrong with the connection between him and the light inside him. He burst out of his bedroom door, his heart sinking when he saw the door to the Ritual Room open. He looked inside to see Hermione standing in the middle of the room, eyes burning holes through the items in the room.

She turned to him, a look of hurt and anger and resentment on her face.

"What the fuck is this, Malfoy?"

EIGHT



THE ARGUMENT

Draco felt his heart plummet even further as he stared at Granger, her eyes glaring daggers into his own.

“What is this?” she repeated. “Are you spying on me? Is this some - some sort of game?”

He took a step closer, hands raised in the air. “Granger, please, I can explain-”

“Explain? What is there to explain?”

Draco paused. How could he start? Where could he even begin? He’d thought about how to tell her every day for the past few weeks, but nothing he’d come up with was coming to mind.

In the short time that he was thinking, Granger had evidently found the screen with buttons. Her eyes narrowed and she immediately began tapping some of the buttons, grabbing for a device he hadn’t seen before that looked like a medium-sized rounded stone attached to a string.

“This is my desktop! Have you hacked into my computer?”

Her hair was practically sizzling, with magic or with anger Draco wasn’t certain.

He had to come up with something. “There’s a spell, a ritual-”

“I’ve seen ‘rituals’ like this before, Malfoy, and I never would have pegged you as sick enough to partake in them.”

She’d heard about these rituals before? How? Why would he need to be ill to participate?

“I don’t think it’s the same kind of-”

She cut him off again. This was starting to get frustrating.

“I don’t care what it is, Malfoy. I’ve seen enough. I don’t know what game it is you’re playing, but consider it over, and I hope to Merlin you won’t consider yourself to have won.”

She stormed past him, and while he wanted nothing more than to stop her, he realised that his words meant nothing to her right now and she needed some time before she came around. If she would ever come around.

He watched pathetically as she grabbed her cloak and shoes and headed for the fireplace, a fistful of floo powder in her hand. “Granger residence,” she said clearly, not caring if he overheard, before stepping through. She didn’t even turn around to face him again before she was gone, the green flames licking the empty air behind her.

Draco stormed back into the ritual room.

“What the fuck?” he yelled into the room, mimicking Granger’s earlier accusations. “Aren’t you supposed to be helping me find my partner, not luring her in here and making her storm off because she thinks I’m a fucking creep who’s been stalking her?”

Looking around the room it wasn’t hard to see why. In the weeks since it first opened up, the room was practically fully furnished in the exact current layout of her own bedroom. Of course she would think the worst.

Unsurprisingly, the room did not answer. Even his voice sounded weaker than he wanted in here, as if it were just a ghost of himself. He slammed his fist on the desk, causing a hairbrush and a couple of trinkets to shake in its wake.

He could feel a cold, sunken darkness in his chest where there used to be warmth and light. He could feel the pricks of tears beginning in the corner of his eyes. He’d never cried over a bloody chit before, he couldn’t believe his body was reacting this way. He took a gasping breath and tried to get his emotions under control, but the overwhelming sadness in his core prevented him from returning to his normal stoic character.

He heard a noise at the door and he turned away from it, not wanting to face whoever was there.

“I heard some yelling, dear, and I wanted to check in to see if everything was alright?” Narcissa’s voice was soft and comforting. Draco

kept facing away, knowing that his mother couldn't enter the room without Granger's permission, which obviously wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

"She's gone, mum. She found the room and now I've lost her."

Narcissa's voice fell. "Oh, Draco."

It had been a long time since he had felt this cold and alone, not since he'd been a child. As much as a part of him longed to run into his mother's arms and listen to her comforting words, he knew there was only one witch who would help him feel better now, and she had left through the floor several minutes prior. He stood there in the ritual room, back to the doorway, feeling the coldness seep through his veins until returning to his room hours later to fall into a depressed sleep.

When Draco awoke the following day, it felt like his whole body was cold and unfeeling at the same time. He habitually dressed and performed his morning care routine without thinking, scrubbing his face without feeling the soap or water on his skin, not caring or noticing whether the water was hot or cold.

He had to do something. Maybe he'd write her an owl. He sat down at his desk and penned a brief but apologetic missive to her.

Granger,

I'm sorry you found out about the room this way.

Please give me a chance to explain.

Malfoy

He had contemplated signing off as 'Draco' but thought that, based on the most recent events, that might no longer be appropriate.

He headed down for breakfast. He didn't feel hungry, but the growling in his stomach was obvious even in this state. Both of his parents were at the table, his mother's eyes drawn in concern as soon as he entered.

"Mother, Father." He assumed not greeting them at all would rouse more suspicion than he already felt.

Lucius gave him a look that he'd never seen before. It wasn't quite pity, it wasn't haughtiness, but it seemed to show Draco that he regretted not having a solution to the problem.

Draco sat down at the table and reached for the cup of coffee that appeared in front of him. The knots he felt in his stomach were similar to

those he felt on that day all those weeks ago, when his father was preparing to perform the ritual ceremony on him. Except this time the fluttering feelings in his stomach were dampened by the cool, damp weight that pressed upon him with every breath. It wasn't going to be like this for the rest of his life, was it?

Lucius cleared his throat, which interrupted Draco's morbid train of thought. "Your mother told me that your... partner... visited last night, and found her room." His disdain for not knowing the identity of the girl was clear in his voice. "I am sorry that events unfolded this way, son."

Draco wasn't sure he remembered the last time his father said "I'm sorry", let alone to him. He wished he could appreciate the novelty of the situation a little better.

"Me too," Draco commiserated.

Lucius reached into his robes and pulled out a small leatherbound book. Its pages were frayed and the leather looked like it was about to fall apart in places. He placed it on the table and slid it towards Draco.

Draco lifted it up and opened it slowly as Lucius explained "This is the diary of Nobilius Malfoy. It explains some of the more nuanced details of the ritual. I had found it to be helpful when I first met your mother, to help explain how I knew so soundly that we would be together.

"I understand your circumstances are a little different, and the way things were found out was unfortunate. However I am hoping that if your witch is a fan of books" - here Draco couldn't help but scoff - "that she might glean some insights through reading it."

Draco thought Granger might burn any book he sent her in the near future before reading it, and anyone who knew her would know what a testament that was for how angry she likely was with him.

"Thank you, Father. I will do my best."

Draco paused for a moment, taking another measured sip of coffee. "Does his diary get into details on what happens should a witch reject their partner, by chance?"

Lucius' eyes looked vacant for a moment before he replied "No. Some Malfoys have taken a long time to find their partners, however your existence is proof that each one was eventually able to find and settle with their partners."

Narcissa chose this moment to join in. “I am sure she’ll come around, darling. She’ll just need to learn more about the ritual. Just give her some time, you’ll see.”

Draco agreed with his mother verbally to placate her, but inside he knew that the chances of him reconciling with Granger were slim.

Several days (and several unreturned letters) later, Draco found himself needing to send a message to Theo and Blaise letting them both know that he wouldn’t be at Hemlock tonight, or maybe ever again.

Shortly after the message, Draco had two folded paper peacocks pecking at his head, one on either side. Before he even had a chance to open either of them, Blaise and Theo both stepped out of his floo one by one.

“No need to open those up, mate,” Theo commented, taking a seat on one of the chairs as if he belonged there.

“They only say we’ll be there in a minute, and we’re bringing drinks.” Blaise continued Theo’s train of thought while pulling a bottle of firewhiskey out of his robes and summoning three tumblers.

Draco frustratedly grabbed at the fiendish peacocks and angrily threw them into the fireplace.

“Thank you for the advanced notice,” he said sarcastically, fixing his hair where the paper fowl mused it. “Please, take a seat.”

Theo and Blaise, both already seated, continued on in their conversation as if he hadn’t spoken.

“So you fucked it up with Granger already, have you?” From Theo.

“Certainly didn’t last long.” Blaise.

“I wouldn’t have guessed you were so bad in bed that once was enough to abandon ship.”

“Thought she would have given it at least three tries. The scientific method, you know.”

“The what?”

“I don’t know. I heard Granger talk about it one time.”

“That’s enough.” Draco’s roar cut through their back and forth, finally causing them both to quiet. He slumped down into a chair beside them, snatching one of the glasses of firewhiskey that Blaise had poured.

“It’s her,” he said. “It’s Granger. She’s the one the room was trying to tell me about.” And with that admission, Draco began to share with them how the once empty room began to fill with trinkets and other items linking to Granger, and that he confirmed it when he saw her bedroom the other week.

Just as he was about to share how Granger had walked into the copy of her own room, his floo roared to life once more and Pansy stepped out, brushing the dust off her tightly fitted midnight blue lace dress.

“Sorry I’m late, boys. What’d I miss?”

Hours later, Draco had imbibed more alcohol than was strictly appropriate. They had switched to vodka once the firewhiskey was done, Pansy helpfully calling for some soda and ice to be delivered to help cut the pure alcohol.

Draco had shared more than he meant to, and his friends now knew everything he did about the Granger situation. Pansy, who had last seen him a few weeks ago when they had their lacklustre tryst together, was very interested to know how sex with Granger compared, and he accidentally shared more about that than he wanted to as well.

“Well I’m certainly happy for you that you were able to get some relief,” Pansy noted, eyeing him over the rim of her glass and smirking.

Draco groaned. “For a short time, anyway. Now she’s never going to speak to me again, and I’ll have to figure out how to live without - with all the side effects.” He wasn’t prepared to think of an orgasm-less future so explicitly.

He was happy his friends were there. While talking to them didn’t resolve anything, it was nice to know that he had their support, and that they didn’t seem to be unimpressed (or even surprised, for that matter) that Granger was the second half of his destined pair.

Eventually the lateness of the evening crept up on them, and Theo announced it was time to get back to his flat. He spent more time than Draco thought was appropriate speculating about all the various states of dress that Potter might be waiting for him in, and Draco was only too happy to assist with ushering him out hastily.

Blaise followed quickly afterwards, thankfully more discreet about whether he had any plans to meet up with Weasley or not, leaving only Pansy.

She approached him slowly. This felt different than normal. He and Pansy had a fairly significant history, with both of them being each other's firsts and continually coming back to each other whenever there was a lull between relationships. This was the first time it felt like they were approaching each other as friends and nothing more, and he could see the hesitancy in her eyes as she got closer.

He reached out and pulled her in for a hug. This too felt different; once all of the sexual undertones of their relationship were squashed in his brain, he was able to appreciate how comforting and warm Pansy's embrace really was.

"Thanks for coming out tonight, Pans," he muffled into her hair.

"Of course, Draco. You know I'm always going to be here for you, right?" Her eyes were glossy when they met his, though she made quick work of blinking the emotion away as soon as he'd noticed.

Pansy stepped back and shook her head lightly, changing the tone of the conversation to something more hopeful. "You'll figure something out, I know you will. You're brilliant and handsome - I should know." Here she gave him a sly wink, her self confidence returning quickly. "And she'll eventually understand all the crazy Malfoy rituals that go hand in hand with all you crazy Malfoy men."

Draco laughed a little at this. Crazy indeed. He only hoped she would agree that it was worth it.



The first coils of light were entering through his haphazardly drawn curtains, prematurely rousing Draco from sleep. He wrenched his eyes shut and tried to hold on to the last remnants of his dream.

He'd dreamt of Granger, of course. He'd always dreamt of Granger ever since he figured out who she was.

She'd been in his lap as they sat in his wing chair, the same way they were the last time they'd seen one another in real life. She was straddling him, completely naked this time, while he had his trousers shucked down around his hips.

He slipped his fingers into her wet channel just as he did last time and was met with the same satisfied moans. He again sucked gently at her neck, her breasts, and her lips all while continuing his motions inside.

Her mewls turned from passionate to frustrated, and she reached down between them to take him into her hands. He squeezed her hips and groaned, head lolling back deep into the upholstery of the wing chair.

Instead of pumping him like she did the last time they were in this position, she lined him up with her slick entrance and entreated him to enter. The feel of her hot, tight channel around him made his hips thrust up eagerly. He could feel her groans reverberating around him as he bottomed out inside her.

His thrusts quickly hastened, encouraged as they were by Granger's complete responsiveness to his every touch. He could feel his release barely held back and he fought to keep it back so he could enjoy their joining for longer.

When her hips thrust down to meet his and her fingers dug into his shoulders so deeply to make a pattern of half-moons behind, he realised that he could no longer restrain himself and he started to feel himself coming apart inside her.

The sunlight gleamed more fully and the imagery disappeared with the breaking of the fog of sleep, though his body still vividly remembered each part. He was already gripping himself and pumping slowly, his motions turning more purposeful and deliberate as he regained full consciousness.

It felt the same as it did before. He could feel his release just beyond his reach; with each motion he felt as if the next one would surely tip him over, only to disappointedly realise that it again was not quite enough. Draco growled, picking himself up off the bed and heading towards the bathroom. Perhaps a cool, refreshing shower was needed to lessen the sting of his denied satisfaction.

Several minutes later he was clean and relatively refreshed, and as ready as he would ever be to start the day. Perhaps the fates would smile on him and he would even receive word from Granger.

He was hopeful to receive an owl response after his first, second, and third owls went out, each increasing slightly in desperation. However he was beginning to lose hope as he was penning the sixth draft of his fourth letter, and thought perhaps a different solution might be required.

It was early afternoon, just after lunch, when Draco was lying on Granger's bed in the ritual room, that inspiration struck with the faint sound of a chime emitting from the strange box on top of Granger's desk.

Draco looked at the box and saw a strange wavy square with four colours inside, along with the word "Windows". He wasn't really sure how anyone could mistake this odd box as a window, and if he wasn't mistaken he believed he recalled Granger screeching that it was something called a 'computer'.

He watched as the image faded to black and was replaced immediately by several other images, a vivid green hill and dusty blue sky. A small arrow seemed to whiz around the screen, pausing over some of the smaller images for a moment before the pictures all changed again.

Granger must be using this in her room right now, he thought.

Suddenly some letters began appearing, and Draco was again torn whether he should keep looking, or turn away to offer her some privacy. But as he saw the letters appear on the screen, he was reminded of the control board with letters on it that seemed to be connected to the device, and he had an idea.

Not really sure what was going to happen, he looked at the control board and found the letter 'G'. He pushed it.

It appeared on the screen, right in the middle of the word 'the', before it was erased to make the word correctly spelled once more.

Undeterred, he looked for the next letter - Merlin, did Muggles not recite the alphabet in the same order that wizards did? - and pushed it too. It appeared at the end of the word 'happen'.

He kept going in the same manner, typing letters that promptly got erased, until he reached the second G in Granger. This time the word did not correct itself, and just below he could see the following words appear.

Malfoy?

Yes!, he thought. This was the most he'd heard from her in more than a week, and although his method of communication was perhaps not the best when one viewed it from a stalking / spying perspective, at least he was able to engage her.

He kept pressing letters at a snail's pace, though this time they appeared all in one line instead of interspersed with other words.

yesitsme

He supposed there must be a trick to getting these to look like actual words rather than a jumble, but he'd have to learn that later.

Imnotspyingonyouthisisweirdmalfoymagicandicanexplain

He paused for a moment to see how she would react. He watched as Granger altered his line to add some punctuation and spaces between the words, making it much clearer and easier to read. *I'm not spying on you. This is weird Malfoy magic and I can explain.*

The big blank rectangle at the bottom will make a space.

It seems her need to continually teach and mentor people was winning over her desire to not speak with him.

this is a ritual performed every malfoy generation i have a book you can read can i owl it to you

Several seconds passed while Draco awaited an answer, increasing until they crossed a minute. He wasn't sure whether she would accept, or what he would do if she didn't.

Finally, **Okay** appeared on the screen, and he whooped in celebration.



Draco was counting down the minutes on this particular Thursday afternoon. He felt the spark of excitement in his chest, similar to how he felt a few weeks ago when things were more normal. He was preparing to head out to Hemlock with Theo, Blaise, and anyone else who might happen to be there, and he was hopeful that Granger might make an appearance as well.

After their strange computer conversation, Draco had immediately owed her the copy of Nobilius' diary. He'd of course read through it before, and was impressed with how romantic his ancestor made the whole process seem. There was even a small addition from Nobilius' wife Carmella who was able to share some of her experience of being a partner. Draco thought it was interesting that both of them commented on the warming sensations felt in their chests whenever they saw one another, which seemed to grow stronger over time.

He hoped that would be enough to get the conversation started. He knew Granger would prefer published and peer reviewed texts, however since the entire ritual was so personal to the Malfoy family everything he had to offer was from a single, direct and biased source.

After checking the computer for messages again after sending the letter, Draco saw that the screen was empty and pushing letter buttons didn't seem to do anything like it had before. He assumed Granger must have turned the contraption off. After that, he'd decided to spend his time in his own room rather than the ritual room. No matter how comforting it was to sleep in Granger's bed and be surrounded by her things, he didn't want to risk something else showing up that he maybe shouldn't be privy to and would have to justify or defend against when he saw her next. No, best to just pretend that room didn't exist for a little longer.

Two minutes after what he had decided was the absolutely earliest time he should leave his house, Draco walked out of the floo at Hemlock and headed straight for their regular table. He ordered a drink, same as normal, and tried to calm his nerves.

The minutes ticked by almost as slowly as they did when he was waiting in his room, though at least now that he was sitting here there were significantly more distractions. His eyes flitted over to the floo regularly, but he didn't spy any of his friends coming through, so he continued to sit at the large table on his own.

One by one they started to trickle in, this time with Potter arriving first.

"You're here", Potter said, draping his cloak over the back of the chair. Draco couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing based on Potter's voice.

"Indeed." Draco mimicked his indifference.

"Excellent. Well, I'll be just at the other table over there," Potter noted, plucking his cloak from the chair again, slinging it over his shoulder, and nodding his head towards a few tables over.

"Have fun," he announced over his shoulder as he was walking away, waving a hand back towards Draco. "I'll ask that you both just try to keep your wands out of sight."

"Yes, please, all of them," Theo's voice added suggestively, appearing seemingly out of nowhere and following Harry to the new table, leaving Draco continuing to sit all alone.

Granger arrived next, and Draco didn't pretend that he didn't notice her presence immediately after she stepped foot out of the floo. Her face was impassive and gave nothing away about how she was feeling. Draco

could feel the light in his chest thrumming, like it wanted to spread its warmth again but wasn't sure whether it should still be caged.

She spotted him sitting at the regular table, and her eyes continued around the room, presumably looking for Potter. She froze in indecision for a few seconds before her Gryffindor bravery won out, and she started heading towards Draco's table.

He seemed to realise all at once that he actually hadn't prepared anything to say to her, and the distance between them was very quickly closing. He instead chose to focus on his drink, cowardly waiting for her lion-like courage to continue the conversation once she arrived.

She sat down across from him and looked at him through cool, but not cold, eyes. A lock of her springy auburn hair hung down in front of her face but she steadfastly ignored it in favour of maintaining eye contact with him.

"Malfoy," she greeted, her voice just as unreadable as Potter's was earlier.

"Granger." His voice was distinctly softer.

She rustled in her entirely-too-small beaded bag for a moment before pulling out the diary that he'd sent earlier in the week.

"The partner ritual," she began, sliding the closed book towards him so far that the worn edges knocked into his tumbler slightly. "A ritual created by one Nobilius Malfoy that has been secretly performed in each generation since the 1700s. A ritual whereby someone, traditionally the father - although of course that would not have been possible for the first iteration - prepares a set of three potions to encourage mind, body and heart to be more open to recognizing their true life partner, and a spell that ties the Malfoy ancient magical lines to the ambient magical atmosphere with the purpose of assisting the wizard in identifying his partner."

Draco was impressed with her succinct summary of the entire process. She certainly was able to hit on all the critical points in a much more logical manner than was portrayed in the book.

"I assume you've done a cover-to-cover read through, then?" Draco asked her. Upon her nod he continued "I would expect nothing less from you."

She twisted her hands together on the table, looking like she had something uncomfortable to say.

“I did a little extra research over the past week.”

There was a scoff from Potter a few tables over. Draco glanced over and saw that Blaise and Weasley had also joined them, and they were all doing a poor job of pretending not to listen.

Granger cleared her throat, sent a glare at Potter, cast a muffliato and continued.

“I obviously couldn’t find anything about the ritual itself as it’s quite proprietary, but I did do some research on the potions ingredients and proto spells that Nobilius wrote about in the earlier portions of his journal, and cross referenced those with other similar modern spells.”

Draco felt the warmth in his chest begin to swell again, a mixture of pride for this amazing witch in front of him, and the reactionary heat of the glowing light registering that his partner was talking to him again.

“From what I can tell, there seems to be no inherently harmful properties of either the spell or the potions; most of them just work on altering some of the neural pathways of whoever imbibed the potions to make them more perceptive of the subset of things related to their partner, and connect this enhanced perception to the naturally occurring swirls of magic that already exist in the world. It seems like this can only be replicated in families with already historically established magic.”

“Our family has been doing it for years. It’s how my grandfather met my grandmother, and how Father met Mother. You can say what you like about how they acted during the war and the things that they did, but Granger - no one who knows them can deny that they are perfect for each other, and balance the other out perfectly.”

Taking another sip of his beverage to give him a moment to consider what he was going to say next, Draco eventually settled on explaining how each iteration of the spell manifested itself for each generation, focusing on how the ritual always provided the information immediately to assist in identifying and locating the match.

“But mine was different, Granger. My room was empty. There was not a single thing in it for ages, and I spent that time resigning myself to living my life alone, trying to convince myself that something went wrong and the spell didn’t work, but knowing somewhere deep down that it did, and that something was different.”

“I don’t expect anything of you, Granger. I know that book was filled with the empirical discovery of historically highly accurate matchmaking and creating long-lived happy relationships, but I knew from the beginning that something was different about this, about us. I gave you that book so you would understand that this whole thing is a me problem; it’s not about you, and I didn’t try to recreate your bedroom like some stalker who was creepily obsessed with you. Those items just appeared slowly over time, trying to encourage me to learn parts about you that I was too afraid to learn from the source.”

Granger was silent after his spiel. Draco recounted his words internally and felt his stomach roil in regret. None of that came out like he wanted it to. It sounded like he was just trying to save face and not seem like a creep. He meant to tell her about how overwhelming this must have been for her and how he had no hard feelings about her accusations the other day, but somehow the words that came out did a poor job of matching the thoughts in his head.

Just when he was about to open his mouth again in an attempt to salvage the situation, Granger decided to speak.

“I read about some of the symptoms, on both sides. About what will happen to you if this ritual fails. About some of the things that the partner has felt, both before and after knowing about the ritual.”

Granger lifted a hand to her chest and placed it in right about the same spot that Draco could feel the pulsating warmth growing in his own chest.

“That warmth... I thought I was imagining it. That this is what it felt like to be interested in someone as an adult, that the tingling butterfly feelings I felt through teenage crushes as a girl just naturally evolved into this warmth. And it seemed to make sense, as it seemed to go away when I was angry with you.” She explained how she’d talked to Potter and Weasley (the female one) about it and neither of them knew what she was talking about, and then after reading the diary and learning that the warmth and its reactions were so perfectly described by Carmella’s addition.

Granger’s face hardened a little. “I don’t like the fact that this spell was designed to essentially voyeuristically look into someone else’s life without their knowledge or permission. That’s not ok, and I will never be ok with that part of the ritual.” Draco inhaled as he was about to, stupidly again, use his words to defend how he didn’t mean to be a voyeur instead

of apologising that she felt that way, but she thankfully interrupted him before he could come out with even more words that he would regret. “I realise that you didn’t choose how this would manifest, and I can understand why you continued to explore the room considering what the alternative was. But I don’t condone it, and I won’t have any relationship between us starting off with this as its foundation.”

Draco’s ears perked up embarrassingly when Granger said the word ‘relationship’. He thought another version of himself might consider himself pathetic, but presently he was just happy that the witch was still talking to him about how she felt, which meant she might be open to reconciling.

“I like you, Malfoy. At least, I like the version of you I’ve come to know over the past several weeks. And I don’t want to think about how there’s any element of pre-destiny or fate or any of that rubbish that caused us to be together. I want to think that we are capable of reconnecting, of learning about each other as adults without the assistance of some creepy room or strange family magic forcing us to be together.”

Draco mulled over her words. It made sense, and he could see how learning about the room would cause her to question all of their interactions so far up to that point. He successfully voiced as much, his words and thoughts finally aligning in a way he was happy with.

His words hung between them for a few moments before he drugged up what meagre impersonation of courage he possessed and held his hand out towards Granger, offering a handshake.

“Hello, my name is Draco.”

Granger smiled shyly at him and reached out to take his hand softly.

“Hi Draco. I’m Hermione.”

NINE



THE BED

Draco and Hermione spent the rest of the evening getting to know each other the old fashioned way. She quizzed him on what muggle literature he'd actually read - a woefully small amount consisting only of the items she'd lent him or had in her room already. He asked her about how she managed to score top marks in fifth year transfiguration when he was sure he'd had her beat. They took turns sharing stories back and forth, being mindful to not let the room or its contents direct the conversation any longer.

When they parted ways it was with a smile and a tentative hug, and a wish to meet up again the following week to see how things go.

Later that night, after the evening at Hemlock as well behind him, Draco noticed that the door to the ritual room was closed up. A faint glow showed the outline of where the door should be, but the handle had disappeared and there was no physical difference between the wall and the door. He thought that was maybe for the best for now, and would deal with the aftermath of this strange new development later.

He walked into the breakfast room the following morning with a renewed spring in his step. His father was absent this morning, but his mother was sitting at her usual seat, delicately noshing on a bowl of yoghurt and berries. While Draco wanted to keep his new-again relationship with Granger - Hermione, he corrected himself - a secret from his parents, he knew there was no way he could avoid keeping his jubilant mood hidden from them during meal times, and would not be able to explain the door situation to them if they happened to take a walk through

his quarters, which they were wont to do sometimes, particularly after the completion of the ritual.

“Morning, Mother,” he greeted, reaching for a cup of tea this morning rather than coffee. With his more settled nerves he felt he could appreciate the warming comfort of a morning tea rather than the adrenaline kick the coffee normally imparted.

“Good morning,” Narcissa greeted cautiously. It seemed his mood as of late required testing before engaging in conversation. Once she deduced that his smile was due to good spirits rather than a melancholy craze, she engaged a little more directly. “Did you have a good evening at Hemlock with Theo and Blaise?”

“Among others,” he agreed, unable to suppress the smirk/smile hybrid that jumped to his lips and choosing to hide it behind his teacup instead.

“Indeed. And may I surmise that things have been improving with your partner?”

Even though Draco already convinced himself that he was not going to try to keep the rekindled relationship a secret from his parents, he was almost embarrassed about how little time it took for his mother to come right out and question it.

Life continued thus for the next two weeks. Draco spent his time looking forward to Hemlock, when he and Hermione would sit and chat while excluding almost everyone else at the table. They would be the first to arrive and the last to leave, ordering a refill on their beverages if they happened to remember and had an opportunity between the back and forth of conversation.

In between Thursday evening visits, Draco spent his time continuing to look through any of the books his father had on hand related to the ritual, and providing any resources to Hermione upon request. While the room aspects of the ritual made her a little squeamish (her words), she was fascinated by the interaction of the potions and magic and how it all connected to the ancient family line.

Since he previously lacked the incentive to delve so deeply into any of these tomes, Hermione’s knowledge was quickly becoming level with or even surpassing his own. She now knew the location of the ancient ley lines and other buried magical infrastructure better than he did, which he assumed his parents would be none too pleased about should they find

out. Draco's owl was working overtime delivering books back and forth; each trip carrying several shrunken and lightened volumes, as well as a swiftly written note signed off with a single letter, D or H.

On the next Thursday, Hermione spent the first hour of their chat talking about the most recent book Draco had sent and how it discussed some of the lesser known properties of some of the potion ingredients used for crafting some of the ritual potions. There was something about facilitating the connectedness between the heart and the mind or something to that effect; to be honest he was having trouble parsing her words when his eyes were trained on her perfect lips forming around them.

Seeming to sense that perhaps his interest in this subject was waning for the night, Hermione changed the topic to something more appealing.

"Would you say this is our third date?"

The question seemingly came out of nowhere. He supposed it might be, depending on when one started considering these chats 'dates'. "I suppose it could be," he answered.

She smiled shyly at him. "Have I ever told you what muggles sometimes say about the third date?"



It had taken all of three seconds and two stumbles for the two of them to find each other on the other side of the floo in Draco's bedroom. Their lips connected, and Draco's internal warm light exploded inside his chest.

He pushed her back up against the far wall, his hands immediately rushing to her thighs to lift her up and support her against the wall. He drank in the muffled moans that fell from her mouth into his own and dug his fingers into her hips.

"I feel it," she huffed, breath frantic against his lips. "In my chest. That glowing spark. Is it back for—"

"Hermione," Draco growled, pulling away from her just long enough. His hot eyes bore into hers. "Let's save it for later, yeah?" He pushed his lips against her neck and gave a heated kiss.

She moaned, in pleasure or agreement he wasn't sure, but either way the words died on her lips and her hands pushed firmly against his hair to keep him in place.

If questioned about how Draco managed to get Hermione from the floo parlour to his attached bed chamber, he wasn't sure he'd be able to recall. His entire body was consumed by a wave of burning lust, the last several weeks' worth of tension and longing and not being able to fucking come feeding the fire and making him feel like he was about to combust.

His memory started to receive some improved clarity only when his hips nestled between hers with just the thin material of her underwear between them, his clothes somehow already lost to the floor.

He found his mouth attached to her neck again, hands pawing roughly at her breasts and pushing the material of her bra aside. Her moans shot straight through his body, getting even more heated as they reverberated in his chest and continued straight to his groin. He couldn't help the mimicking moan and harsh thrust of his hips that followed.

"Gods, Draco-" her hips ground against his as she moved her hot mouth over his neck in return. He felt her wet tongue creep out and caress a sensitive spot on the side of his neck before biting firmly and sucking.

A primal growl echoed through the room. He pulled back and crashed his lips against hers while he tugged her underwear completely off, quickly followed by his own.

He took a moment to appreciate her naked form before falling back to her. Hermione's coiled hair was even more chaotic than ever, splayed out around her head that was resting on his pillow. Her eyes were darkened and looking at him - at his cock - with barely restrained lust.

Her full breasts sat plumply on her heaving chest, nipples already hardened and peaking up from the soft mounds. He licked his lips as he admired them, and Hermione's whimper in response nearly broke his concentration. Overcoming the impulse to give in and just roll into her, Draco continued his appraisal of her body.

He admired the way her sides dipped in at her waist and out again to accommodate her hips. He relished the flatness of her stomach when she breathed in, and the slight plumpness when she breathed out. He was suddenly accosted by images of a far more rounded belly with taut skin, and he gasped in surprise and pleasure when his cock gave a very excitable twitch and pulse at the thought.

Her legs were pressed together at the knees and Draco tentatively traced his pointer finger down the line the connection of her legs made.

Her legs almost instantly fell apart and she signed. Draco was able to see the darkened red of her lower lips glistening and waiting to be touched.

If the sight of her perked nipples almost had him abandoning his plan of visually appreciating her before diving in, her glistening wet centre was too much for him to overcome.

He used both his hands to push her legs further apart, settling them into the bed on either side and flattening her hips, causing her lips to spread even further apart and letting her rosy clit poke out from between them.

“Fuck Hermione, I need to taste you.”

While it wasn't exactly phrased as a question, Draco still restrained himself for the three seconds it took for her to nod and moan “please...”. As soon as the permission left her lips, Draco's own dove towards her centre and latched onto her clit.

Hermione was incredibly responsive almost immediately. Her hips thrust up to push more firmly against his face and she used her hands to pull her lips apart, providing him better access. The feeling of her fingertips on either side of his face while she pulled herself apart for him was a soft contrast to the pointed licking of his tongue.

“I don't understand,” she managed to breathe out. “I normally don't... I - I normally need more build up to feel... fuck, Draco, your fingers, now.” He swirled his fingers in her wetness to lubricate them and then immediately and firmly pressed them into her, curling them right away to start hitting the spot that caused her to fall apart last time.

She keened immediately, and her hands left from holding her lips apart to crushing his face up against her.

It was maybe thirty seconds, he wasn't quite sure. The only marker of time his brain was registering was how far apart or close Hermione's pants and grunts sounded. There was almost a note of surprise in each of her sounds just before they dissolved into pure carnal pleasure.

“I can't - I can't - it's too soon, I can't-” was Hermione's mangled chorus of words in between moans and pants that crept higher and higher in pitch, starting to become so close together tha one bled immediately into the next. “Oh my god, I'm going to - don't stop, don't stop, don't stop - Draco!”

Draco could feel the exact moment she tipped over the edge and fell into her orgasm, not just by the clenching around his fingers so tightly that it was hard to move them, or by the fluttering of her clit under his tongue, but by the intense burst of light from within his chest that made him groan and lift his hips up from the bed lest the slight scratch of the sheets against his weeping cock send him over the edge with her. He clenched his thighs and breathed harshly against Hermione's folds, careful to keep his stomach sucked in to prevent any jostling.

When her breathing evened and Draco felt like he could move without spontaneously coming apart, he crawled up her body and tested his weight against her. He nuzzled her neck, a hybrid of helping her come down gently from her orgasm while also hopefully keeping her body revved up for more.

Her face was flushed red and her chest was glistening with a thin layer of sweat. He licked tentatively at her neck, relishing in the salty taste of her skin and the feel of her body starting to squirm against him.

"Hermione..." he breathed against her lips. It again wasn't a question, not really, but he still paused to make sure she had an opportunity to back out or say no, even if he thought it might actually kill him if they stopped here.

She nodded, and in true Gryffindor fashion bluntly said "I'm ready, Draco. I want you."

That was more than enough for him, and he was worried that if he spent too much time internalising her words and the voice she used to say them he might bring a premature end to their evening.

He lined himself up at her entrance. Memories of fantasies rolled through his brain, but he knew they would be no comparison for the real thing. His heart was thudding in his chest, that glowing light exactly in tune. He rested his weight on his shoulders on either side of her and slowly curled his hips forward.

It felt like ecstasy as soon as he entered her. She was the perfect blend of softness, pressure and warmth. He had thoughts of teasing her, of entering her so slowly that she would beg him to move faster, but those thoughts flew out of his mind as soon as he thrust in. His hips surged forwards almost without permission until he was pushed as deep as he could inside her.

All of her sounds shot through him. Any reaction, however slight, was immediately recognized in his brain and processed to determine how much pleasure she was experiencing. He pulled out ever so slightly just so he could experience the feeling of pushing all the way back into her again.

Their mouths connected, almost bruising each other with crushing fervour followed by soft caresses. His hands were everywhere, running over her breasts and pushing on her shoulders and grabbing her hips to hold her down while he pressed into her again and again.

He wasn't going to last. He knew that coming into this, but now that he was here and hearing her, feeling her, watching her -

"Come with me, Hermione," he half instructed, half pleaded.

"I can't," she huffed, repeating what she'd said every time before he'd made her come. His thumb crept between their bodies and found her swollen clit, rubbing gently with each thrust. He felt her tighten around him as her pants quickened.

"I'm so close." The words fell from Draco's lips, but he could tell by looking into Hermione's eyes that it was the same for her. His thumb kept up a steady rhythm on her clit. "You're so tight, so fucking perfect-"

Her walls clamped down around him like a vice, and her voice sounded just as tight. "Fuck, fuck, please, please, I need, please-"


He could feel himself harden and tighten, feel the pressure mounting in his groin as his cock prepared to release. His thrusts were frantic now, increasing in pace to match Hermione's desperate pleas.

He leaned down and covered one of her nipples with his mouth, flicking his tongue over it with the hope of bringing her over the edge with him. As soon as he felt that tell-tale fluttering of her walls that told him he'd pushed her over, he finally let himself go, growling her name as he ruptured inside of her.

The light in his chest exploded at the same time, leaving his torso and spreading warmth throughout his entire body. It felt like it was seeping out of his skin and brushing up against Hermione's, mixing and swirling before pulling back in and warming him once more.

His brain felt like it was leaking from his ears. He barely had the wherewithal to roll to the side to prevent himself from suffocating his new paramour before closing his eyes and falling unconscious.

TEN



THE PARENTS

Draco rustled himself awake hours later before the sun had come up. His bedroom was bathed in darkness, but he could still make out the shape of Hermione laying beside him and could feel her warmth pushing up against him.

Her breaths seemed even; he supposed she was still asleep, likely still fatigued by their earlier activities. He wasn't sure what that was with the warmth exploding over his entire body, but it certainly knocked him out pretty well. He couldn't remember anything after his fantastic release.

His memories from earlier in the night came back to him vividly, and he felt his cock twitch in reaction. He could feel his blood rushing down, causing him to harden with every clench. He was laying on his side with Hermione's backside pressed up against him, and his growing cock was happy to nestle between her cheeks as it awoke.

She groaned and pushed her arse back against him. Merlin if she wouldn't be the death of him. He stilled himself, feeling uneasy about the potential to take advantage of her sleeping state, but she pushed back again (this time more firmly) and softly sighed his name.

"Draco," she breathed. He felt her shift beside him slightly and bit back a moan when he realised what she was doing. She snuck her hand down between her legs and had parted herself, starting to rub slowly and gently at her clit.

He leaned over to get a better look and groaned into her ear when he saw her delicate fingers disappearing into her folds. "Fuck, that's fantastic,"

he whispered hotly into her ear. He pushed himself up against her more firmly, adding a hand to her hip to keep her flush against him while his cock pressed into the folds of her arse and thigh.

That warmth in his chest was burning again, but this time it felt like the warmth of glowing embers rather than the white hot glow of blue fire. His whole body wanted to fuck her again.

He moved one hand down her body, tracing between her breasts and over her hip to land gently on her backside. He used his thumb to part her cheeks and the rest of his hand raised her thigh, which gave him an exquisite view of her slick channel from the back while her fingers were still busily strumming in front. He inched his thumb closer to her cunt as he breathed "Can I?"

"Yes!", was her breathy response. He inched down the bed slightly and lined himself up with her entrance, gently pushing forward and feeling that sweet wet heat surround him again. She was still facing away from him, laying sideways on the bed and never stopping those soft breathy moans she was eliciting with her fingers.

Draco pumped her slowly. Unlike a few hours ago, his libido was satiated enough that he felt able to slide in and out at a leisurely pace. He was eager to draw out her release as much as possible. While his hips were still moving slowly, in and out, his free hand found its way under her rib cage to locate her naked breast. He began massaging softly but made sure to keep his touches away from her nipple.

He kept this pattern up for several minutes; a firm but controlled repetitive in and out, enough to keep building her up but never enough to get her close to the edge. Her other hand, not busy with her clit, found its way up to her chest and she pinched the nipple of the breast just out of Draco's reach. She gave a strong moan that turned into a whine when he still didn't pick up the pace.

"Faster, Draco," she instructed, whining again when he didn't obey. She moved her fingers faster on her clit and he could feel the accompanying clench around his cock. He wasn't ready for her to come yet, he wanted to see how far he could push her, so he lowered her thigh and snaked his newly free hand over her vulva and pushed her hand aside, taking up the torturous pace she'd previously used.

When her thigh fell back down it increased the friction, making her channel feel even tighter. Draco groaned at the new sensations, and

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Hermione followed. Not only could he feel his cock slipping in and out of her cunt, but he could also feel the firm grip of her thighs and arse embracing him as he pulled out. He had to fight to push himself back in again.

He could feel himself building more and more, which was a little strange; normally he needed to be fucking at a much faster pace to get off. But that steady pressure kept building and building every moment, and he was eager to see where it might stop.

His mouth moved to her neck where he scraped his teeth along the taut muscles there. His hips were unrelenting, pushing and pulling at the same pace, consistent and perfect. When his teeth scraped across a spot that made her breath hitch, Draco lightly licked the area before sucking firmly, drawing the muscle into his mouth and laving it with his tongue before releasing the pressure, hands still working steadily on her breast.

"I could come like this," he panted. His hips continued to piston in and out. "Feeling your cunt wrap around me each time I slowly push in" - he enunciated his words with a thrust - "and slowly pull out."

Obviously she was building more than he thought she was because she answered "me too. Oh gods, I feel it, it's coming."

Her words hit an erogenous zone in his brain that he never knew he had. The stuttering warmth in his chest glowed brighter, and he adjusted the pace of his thrusts and finger flicks to match it. Hermione's groan rang in his ears; her back started to arch, but he used his forearm to hold her in place while he continued to pound into her, her backside slapping against his hips with every movement.

"I'm coming, I'm coming Draco!"

His body reacted to her words. His balls tightened almost painfully as he thrust as deeply as he could, anchoring himself inside her as his cock emptied. It felt like an eternity before the spurts stopped and he finally felt like he was done.

When they both recovered some of their senses, Draco pulled out of Hermione and she rolled over to rest her head on his chest. It was the first time they'd been face to face this morning, and he was sure that thought would have been a little amusing if he had enough brain cells left to piece it together. They whispered 'good morning' to each other almost giddily.

He was in such a good mood he couldn't help but ask "No 'I can't' this morning, then?" He was referring to her previous chants of not being able to come, always followed by a surprise reaction that she was.

She blushed, which was particularly endearing while she was laying naked in his bed. "I suppose I've collected enough evidence to the contrary now."

He smirked. If that didn't inflate a man's ego, he wasn't sure what would. His thoughts were interrupted by a loud gurgling sound coming from Hermione's torso, which caused her blush to darken even more.

"Hungry?"

A few minutes later they were set up in two plush dressing gowns with a morning tea service from Tilley. Hermione was surprisingly pleasant with the elf; perhaps because she saw the strange dress and stocking combination the elf was wearing which showed her status as a freed elf. Draco thanked the little house caretaker and proceeded to pile a croissant and some fruits onto Hermione's plate while their tea steeped.

"I suppose we should talk about what happens next, now that we've... Talked." She was referencing Potter's earlier insinuation weeks ago, and he cursed her Gryffindor courage to bring up topics like this so directly.

They'd discussed the ritual at length, of course. She'd read damn near every book he'd found in the library related to the subject. Draco had even told her about how the door had sealed itself off (which she found fascinating, though he wasn't sure why). So she was already very aware of what sorts of side effects he'd likely suffer from should it fail.

But they'd never spoken about what that meant for them. Could they casually hook up with the idea of this ritual looming above them? Was this a one time event that was supposed to test the limits of the ritual, after which she'd leave with her research (both academic and practical) and use the basis to develop a cure for Dragon Pox?

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs before speaking. "I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to think right now, but all I know is that after last night - and this morning - I have absolutely no desire to pursue any other witch now or possible ever. And I would be honoured for you to accompany me through even part of that journey, if you feel comfortable."

Hermione's face lit up; obviously he'd touched on some good answers, and he was relieved. He poured the tea for them, both because he was

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thirsty and because it seemed like a good distraction from her beaming affectionate gaze.

“I’m happy to hear that,” she began, twirling a lock of chocolate coloured hair in her fingers as she spoke. “I’m partial to monogamy, myself.” Her eyes twinkled, and Draco was mesmerised.

Now that the tension was broken, Draco realised how hungry he was and heartily dove into his pastry and fruits. It was only a few minutes before both of their plates were empty and their teacups held only dregs.

Draco stood up and stretched, causing him to catch the scent of himself in the air and encouraging him to declare that he was in desperate need of a shower lest Hermione smell him and decide she should get out while she still could.

“I have to go clean up,” he announced. He gave Hermione a heady look and followed up with “There’s more than enough room for two in the bath.”

He could almost see the haze in her eyes as she contemplated the idea of showering together. He was concerned for a moment when she still didn’t move and he was awkwardly standing there, unsure whether to sit back down or keep moving towards the shower. But suddenly her eyes cleared and he could feel the corresponding warmth flooding in his chest before she even announced her answer.

“How convenient, as I seem to have worked up a sweat over the past few hours and couldn’t possibly wait for even the few scant moments more it would take for yours.” She gave him a wink and stood up beside him. She offered her arm, and he chuckled before holding her wrist and placing it over his arm in the traditional way. Trust Hermione Granger to take something as simple as linking arms as an opportunity to reverse gender roles.

They walked the short distance to the bathroom, and Draco wandlessly set the temperature and light bergamot scent of the bath to fill as they disrobed. Draco tugged on the tie of Hermione’s robe and licked his lips as it fell apart. He ran a finger down the side of her neck before pushing the robe off her shoulders. His eyes stayed locked on her face as the garment fell to the floor. He heard her breath catch, but he moved his hand away and turned to tend to the bath before she could reach out to touch him back.

Testing the water to make sure it was perfect, he took Hermione's hand in his own and encouraged her to gently lower herself into the water. He relished in her soft sighs and moans as she soaked her muscles in the warm water. He mimicked her enjoyment as he slid in beside her and felt the tension and fatigue leave his body.

After a few moments of soaking in the warmth and relaxing sore muscles, Draco reached for the soap and two fresh washcloths. He took one for himself and offered one to Hermione as well. He had just begun soaping his shoulders when he felt her small hands take the cloth from him and take over.

His skin flared to life under her ministrations. She seemed to second guess herself once she started because she stuttered "Is this - is this ok?"

He took her empty hand in his and lifted it to his chest, pressing against the spot where that ever-present glow was thrumming. "You said you feel this, right?" She nodded in response. "Hermione, to me this means that everything is ok."

She ducked her head and her curls fell in front of her face, but not before he caught the smile and blush combination.

"Everything," she repeated.

He bent his head down to meet hers and gently caressed her lips with his own. She hummed and he felt the vibration against his lips. She sucked on his lower lip and tugged on it with her teeth, and he felt all of the relaxation disappear to be replaced with that delicious tension Hermione seemed to inspire in him.

Her hand with the washcloth continued its journey over his shoulders and down his arms. She alternated between staying still and massaging gently, rubbing small circles, and scratching with her fingernails through the cloth. He bit his lip to hold in a groan as she made her way lower and moved the cloth across his abs.

Shortly after the cloth was left abandoned, floating in the water as Hermione's hands traced directly over his skin, skirting lower and lower with each pass. He sucked in a breath when she reached his hip bone and dipped lower to grasp his cock firmly.

She pumped him beneath the water and trailed kisses down his freshly cleaned neck. He reached out to run his hands over her narrow waist

before palming one heavy breast in his hand. He captured her lips again and groaned harshly into her mouth.

He tried to pull her towards his lap and encourage her to straddle him in the tub, but she resisted. "No," she breathed into his ear, "I want to do this for you." She emphasised her statement with another firm tug, causing him to groan once more.

If he couldn't use his hands on her to bring her pleasure like he wanted, then he was going to try to drive her crazy with that he was allowed to touch. He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger and pulled gently and pushed his hips up into her hand.

Her pace increased, so slowly that he didn't even realise she was speeding up until it was almost too late. She was unrelenting, keeping the near exact tempo the entire time, applying perfect pressure, adding swirls and flourishes at the right moments to keep him in suspense. The water in the tub around them started sloshing with the force of her movements.

"Fuck, Hermione, I'm so close."

"Yes Draco," she purred. "I want you to come for me. I want to see you come just for me."

He gripped the sides of the tub to steady himself as his hips thrust rapidly up into her hand and his release started forming deep inside.

"I'm coming," he breathed out raggedly, just seconds before the first wave of his orgasm rushed over him and spilled from the tip of his cock. "I'm coming just for you." He tilted his head back and groaned his release.

She continued to hold him as he came down and softened in her hands. He tried again to collect her onto his lap, and this time she obliged. He nuzzled her neck and was happy to feel her rest the weight of her head on his own.

"Thank you," he whispered into her hair.

"For everything," she finished.

It took much longer than either of them expected to finish their bath, but eventually both Draco and Hermione were fully cleaned and in their dressing gowns. Draco's arm was around her waist as they exited his ensuite bathroom into his main bedroom.

As soon as they crossed the threshold they were nearly accosted by Tilley.

“Merlin, Tilley! Give us a moment, would you?” Draco readjusted his gown and looked to make sure Hermione was still decent in hers.

“Apologies, Master Draco, but Master Lucius and Mistress Narcissa request the presence of Master Draco and his lady friend in the parlour for tea.”



Draco stood outside the door to the parlour, holding Hermione’s hand.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” he reiterated. He’d told her his several times already while they were getting dressed and preparing to meet his parents as requested.

She squared her shoulders and set her eyes on the door. He couldn’t tell what thoughts were running through her mind, but she looked resolved and assured. She touched a hand to her chest and he felt the reciprocal thrum in his own.

“Based on everything I’ve read, I think this will have to happen sooner or later. Better just to get it over with now, right?” She turned to him and gave a half smile, and he reached for the hand on her chest and squeezed it in solidarity.

He pushed open the door while their hands were still clasped between them, and saw his parents both sitting on the plush sofa facing the window. They both turned their heads as the door opened, and he focused on the expression on his parents’ faces as they saw Hermione for the first time.

Narcissa’s lips gave the faintest upward twitch and Draco noticed her eyes sparkled slightly, both telling signs of her feeling happy. Lucius raised an eyebrow in question before setting both his palms over the top of his cane and standing up from the sofa.

Lucius’ voice broke the silence in the room. “Welcome, Draco.” A slight, almost unnoticeable pause before he continued “... Miss Granger.”

Now that his parents’ reactions were noted (and they weren’t as bad as he thought they might be), Draco turned back to Hermione. She had the same expression of determination on her face as she did before.

“Hello Lucius, Narcissa.”

Draco knew that he should feel negatively that Hermione used his parents first names rather than addressing them as Mr and Mrs Malfoy, but

he only felt a sense of pride and amusement, especially as he thought about some of his previous imaginings of Hermione plopping down on his antique furniture with no sense of propriety. He wondered if he would get to see this scenario play out in reality as well.

He didn't, it seems. Hermione sat down boringly properly onto the sofa across from his parents. She took her tea with the exact correct amount of propriety, and responded to any of his parents questions with decorum.

"Has Draco shared any of our library's books with you, Ms. Granger?" Narcissa asked. There had been some back and forth banter while everyone got set up with their beverages and pastries, and this was the first question that broached the topic of the ritual.

"Yes he has. They have been very ... enlightening, though I think there is probably some opportunity to make the process a little more contemporary."

Draco flinched. Of course one of her first comments would be how to improve a centuries-old family ritual.

"Contemporary?" Lucius repeated, a slight note of interest in his voice. "How do you mean?"

Hermione cleared her throat, but there was no pause to consider her words before she began. She repeated some of the parts of the ritual that manifested the partner's essence and brought it into the manor (and here Draco noted his father's questioning look at exactly how much of the family's secrets Draco had already shared) and noted that swapping some of the ingredients or changing one or two runes in the ritual slightly might improve the results and intrude a little less on the partner's personal privacy.

"Indeed."

His father's one-word response seemed aloof, but Draco was certain Lucius was now contemplating Hermione's words and filing them away for future analysis.

Narcissa continued with her original questioning. "And having read these books, do you have any doubts about the ritual's veracity or success rate?"

Draco balked at his mother's straightforwardness. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen his mother be so forthright with a guest. He almost said

something to interrupt, to let Hermione know that she wasn't required to answer anything she wasn't comfortable with, but he was also interested to hear her answer.

She clenched her hand into a fist and brought it to the middle of her chest, over the warm light and the locket that held the images of her parents.

"Not at the moment, Narcissa."

This time Narcissa's smile was outright, and Draco felt a glowing relief course through his body at the fact that things seemed to be going so well.

The conversation turned lighter after that, keeping to safe and common topics like asking about Hermione's work at the Ministry (boring, but fine), whether she'd travelled anywhere recently for holiday (Spain for a week last summer), and how she and Draco reconnected (at Hemlock). After half an hour Draco decided it might be time to call things off while they were still good, and announced he and Hermione were going to retire to his quarters.

She was still giggling about his phrasing as they entered the hallway leading to his room ("retire to my quarters" she repeated facetiously, flicking her hair over her shoulder in mocking haughtiness) when he stopped suddenly.

"Draco? What's wrong?"

He looked at the door to the ritual room, fully glowing with the handle back in place, looking fully like a door again rather than a faint etched glow in the wall. "It's back. It was gone for a while, but now it's back."

Hermione approached the door and tentatively held her hand out towards the handle. The faint blue glow of the door increased cyclically, and Draco felt the resonating pulse in his chest as she got closer.

When she touched the handle the door fully reappeared and the glow fully disappeared, sinking into Hermione's arm through the point of contact. She slowly opened the door and walked into the room.

Draco's jaw dropped. The room was now fully furnished, exactly how he remembered Granger's room in her flat from earlier. The locket, which normally sat on her dresser which he assumed was where Hermione placed it while she was sleeping, was missing. All of the objects no longer had their ethereal glow they previously had, and when Draco picked up a book it felt exactly like a real book would feel.

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“It’s different,” Hermione breathed, caught up in observing the room just as he was. “It feels warm... accepting. Like this is a place I’d like to spend more time in.”

Their thoughts were interrupted by a dingy sound coming from the box and letter contraption - computer, he corrected - on her desk. Seemingly out of habit, she moved over to it and shook the little device attached by a thick string, which appeared to make the screen turn from black to colourful.

It only took a few seconds before he noticed the glistening of tears in her eyes. He immediately approached her and wrapped his arms around her, not knowing what was wrong and not entirely sure how to handle it. He only knew that seeing her cry caused the glow in his chest to clench and pull uncomfortably, and holding her seemed to calm it a little.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

She looked up at him through teary eyes and said “It’s my parents.”

Draco immediately thought of the locket, of the photos of her parents inside and how she always wore them close to her heart. He assumed that meant her parents might have passed away, though he’d obviously been hesitant to ask her about it directly, and she’d always deflected whenever conversation came close to it whenever they spoke at Hemlock.

“They’re in Australia, but... they don’t remember me.”

Draco listened attentively as she told the story of how she needed to Obliviate her parents and send them away during the war to protect them, and how in the years since both she and many specialty healers had tried to restore their memories again but were not successful. He rubbed her back patiently and wiped her tears as she spoke, careful not to interrupt her as she shared her story with him.

When she was done and they were both sitting on her bed, her in his lap curled around him, Draco tried his best to offer whatever comfort he could.

“I’m so sorry, Hermione. I know you’ve tried everything, but I want you to know that if there’s anything I can do or offer - money, influence, throwing the ancient Malfoy power around to intimidate the right people - well, you’re my partner. Just let me know, and it’s yours.”

Something about what he said must have sparked something in her mind because suddenly she jumped up and aggressively brushed any remaining tears from her eyes before hooting in celebration.

“That’s it! Draco, that’s it!” She reached for a piece of parchment (she knew exactly where it was as this was essentially her bedroom, after all) and started scribbling notes on runes and potion ingredients that looked vaguely like those he saw in some of the books he’d sent her in the weeks prior.

She held the parchment in front of his face when she was done, and while Draco understood parts of what she’d written it wasn’t enough to draw any conclusions. “What is this?” he asked.

“The ancient Malfoy power - the ritual. How it connects mind and body and spirit together, and amplifies it with the ancient ancestral magic.”

Her smile up at him would be eternally burned into his mind as she said “Draco, I think there might be a way to restore my parents’ memories.”

ELEVEN



THE HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Draco groaned and stretched as the morning light hit his eyelids. He relished in the feeling of the scratchy cotton sheets scraping against his skin; uncomfortable, but a physical reminder that he'd had the opportunity to spend another night in Hermione's bed.

He reluctantly opened his eyes and squinted into the light, cursing himself for not having the foresight to close the curtains the night before. He pushed himself up to a seated position and rubbed his face, adjusting his eyes to scan the room.

The space in the bed beside him was empty. He wasn't concerned; he'd learned over the past few months that Hermione was an incredibly early riser and he enjoyed his sleep, so waking up to an empty bed was a common occurrence. The sheets were rumpled and her pillow was flattened, but the bed was cool, indicating she'd been up for a while.

His eyes continued around the rest of the room, eyeing the furnishings and accessories scattered throughout the room. Ever since she accepted the room six months ago the room became an exact replica of Hermione's room in her flat. All of the items had also since become even more corporeal, feeling more sturdy and looking more solid and causing the room to feel more complete. He consistently felt a sense of calmness when he entered it now, and after speaking with Hermione extensively over the past few months he was reasonably assured she felt the same.

She'd been interested initially about whether that meant her belongings actually existed in both places at once, and almost immediately

she created a plan to bring some of the items from the ritual room back to her flat. They'd found that the items still disappeared when they left the room even though they felt different and more real, which was an extremely tantalising revelation when she left the bedroom in only her dressing gown and he was able to see it instantly disappear.

It wasn't until Draco had noticed that the locker had seemingly disappeared from the room that they tried bringing things from Hermione's flat to the room itself instead of the other way around. Each time one of the real objects entered the room the duplicate item disappeared, dissolving into its basic magical components and dissolving back into the room itself. Hermione immediately took several notes and scheduled multiple observations, sure that this would help her planned improvements to the ritual.

He'd lost her to a flurry of scattered parchment and scarcely dried ink for several evenings before he reminded her unless she'd planned on moving in with him (which, for the record, he was completely ok with) she'd best stop before she got to the bed and needed to sleep on her couch. Of course his clever witch immediately responded with a quip about how she'd easily shrink the bed here in the ritual room once they'd merged and happily run it back to her flat, along with a highly suggestive comment about being fairly certain another bed might be available for her should she decide to spend the night at the manor.

As if she was summoned by his thoughts, Hermione suddenly appeared in the doorway, clad in that awful dressing gown paired with fuzzy pink slippers. Her hair was chaotic and she'd obviously not done more than wash her face and brush her teeth since waking up. (He couldn't tell from this distance whether she'd done these tasks, of course, but he'd spent enough mornings with Hermione now that he knew the only thing keeping her from brushing her teeth first thing in the morning would be something like a natural disaster. Or, as experience has proven, perhaps an incredibly attentive partner who was eager to get an early start on the day's amorous activities.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she greeted, folding her arms and leaning against the door jamb while giving him a mocking exasperated look. Draco could tell, even from this far away, that there were ink stains on her fingers that weren't there last night, as well as a small fresh tea stain on her dressing gown. These clues were enough to let him know what she'd been up to.

Hermione wasn't the only morning person in the manor.

"Good morning. Have an interesting breakfast with my father?" He flicked the sheets off of his lower body and stood up beside the bed, continuing his morning stretch by raising his arms above his head and leaning slightly to the right. He noted her appreciative glance and smirked.

"Oh, shush," she pouted, and he wasn't sure if it was in response to his teasing comment about breakfast or having caught her ogling. She moved towards him and poked him in his very exposed ribs. "And you would know all about breakfast with your father if you decided to roll out of bed before seven thirty."

He pretended to wipe a non-existent ink stain off his abdomen where she poked him and scoffed, "Seven-thirty is a perfectly reasonable - nay, early - time to get out of bed. I am happy with a summary of any relevant topics in exchange for an additional one to two hours of sleep, I promise."

She grabbed a few pieces of clothing from her dresser as she continued recounting her morning. "It was extremely productive, actually." She chose a light pink top and lacy nude bra and held them against her chest with one hand as she continued rummaging. "We revisited the potion ingredients for the bridging potion. That's the--"

"The light blue one, yes I know." Draco found his trousers on the floor from the night before and shoved one leg in, then the other. He'd not been nearly as invested in the potions and ritual as Heriome and his father had, but he'd heard enough from the pair to at least know the names of the potions he'd unassumingly ingested close to a year ago.

"Of course you do." She now held a pair of navy blue trousers and a pair of unmatching lilac underwear in her opposite hand and added them to her pile. She made her way to the doorway as she continued. "We tested the theory and are now quite confident that by swapping the mallowseet with dandelion root we can give power not just to the recipient of the potion, but also to their partner, allowing both parties to visualise aspects of each others lives instead of how you got to peek in on me." She systematically held each piece of clothing out past the door threshold and observed whether it disappeared. She sighed when the lilac underwear dissolved.

"Too bad," Draco smirked, trousers fully on and reaching for his shirt. "Should've just worn them and taken a chance to see what happened."

She ignored him and grabbed another two pairs and shoved them into the hallway, giving a satisfied smile when one pair stayed firmly grasped in her hands.

Hermione quickly dressed into her confirmed actually-real clothes. "If we alter the brewing time to about three quarters of the recommended length and swap the last four stirs from clockwise to counter-clockwise, then reduce the cooling time by one hour, and—"

Draco approached her and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his lips against hers to stop her detailed list of proposed changes. She melted into him, and he felt the familiar warmth seep through him.

"You're stressing," he told her. "You don't need to stress. We've gone over this a hundred times already. You and Father have perfected every last piece of this puzzle and I know it's going to work." He gave her another gentle kiss before pulling apart from her and squeezing her around the middle tightly.

She'd been working with his father tirelessly over the past few months, investigating the potions, ritual, and magical tethers to the Malfoy family magic to figure out how to use the components to reinforce the connection between the mind and heart. Six weeks ago they finally landed on a solution that they'd tested and agreed was viable, and Draco started assisting with developing a plan to get her parents here to the manor to take advantage of the generational magic within the property.

He'd learned through Hermione that the Wilkins/Grangers had abandoned their teeth-repair business once they'd gone to Australia and instead started up a floral business that was having mediocre success; enough to pay the bills, but not exactly lucrative. Though she'd never worked up the nerve to actually send one of her many drafts herself, Hermione had taught him how to use the computer to write letters that could be instantly delivered to her parents, and through several weeks of anonymous communication he and Hermione had been able to convince them to take a look at the esteemed Malfoy gardens in Wiltshire to discuss opportunities for introducing some home grown hybrid varietals to their selection back in Australia.

They were set to arrive tomorrow morning.

"Of course I'm stressed," she admitted. "This is the only chance I'm going to get at this, and it needs to go perfectly."

“And it will,” Draco confirmed, squeezing his hands in hers. “You’ve prepared for weeks and you have everything planned down to which tea set Mother should use when they arrive.”

“I only mentioned that mum really loves dahlias and the light blue floral set would really-”

“-which is why,” Draco cut her off mid-sentence “I’ve booked a reservation for us at Hemlock for lunch today. We’ll meet up with the others and take your mind off things long enough to keep you from combusting. I love you and I know how your brain works and it needs a little break.”

He didn’t realise what he’d said until he caught her shocked expression.

Fuck.

It was the first time either of them had used the ‘love’ word since this whole thing started. They’d spoken endlessly about the ritual and what the results of that would be, about their forced ties and how best to navigate them to lessen the ill effects, and naturally fell into a rhythm where they spent multiple nights per week together physically while continuing to get to know one another emotionally. He’d known he’d felt this way almost since the first time he’d kissed her, but had been good at keeping those thoughts inside.

Until now.

Her eyes were almost glassy and her hands felt limp in his own. He met her gaze solidly, refusing to take back the truth even if he felt he could at this point. He watched as her eyes started to crinkle and saw the smile grow on her face.

“How dare you suggest that my brain needs a break,” she whispered softly before pressing her lips to his. She gave him the gentlest kiss before pulling back, and he felt the glowing pressure in his chest expand in preparation of her next words that he somehow heard in his heart before she voiced them.

“And I love you, too.”

The words bounced around within his head, stoking the glowing light and causing it to almost burn. He grabbed her face with his hands on either cheek and pulled her to him, crushing his lips against hers and feeling their

soft, yielding warmth again. He wasn't sure if he would ever get tired of kissing Hermione Granger.

Her lips parted and he felt her tongue against his mouth, flicking and massaging and encouraging the fire that was starting to ignite within him. He moved his hands down her neck and followed the familiar trail to her breasts, tracing the mounds ever so lightly before continuing to her waist and pulling her firmly against him. He felt her small hands pull his shirt from his trousers and slip upwards, tracing his abs and fighting against the pressure that formed between both of their bodies.

He pulled his lips from hers and gasped for a breath. His brain whirred with trying to find something to say, something to recognize the words she just said and the impact they had on him, but his blood was rushing to other parts of his body and he felt almost dizzy with happiness. He moved to her neck and lapped and sucked, grinding himself up against her and listening for the moans he knew would escape from her mouth as he did it.

One of her delicate fingers flicked against his nipple under his shirt, and he gave a reciprocating groan. He grabbed her hips and tossed her onto the bed behind him. Her hands slipped from beneath his shirt to land on either side of her body on the bed, and she giggled.

"Who says we need lunch at Hemlock to distract me?" Hermione asked coyly. "I'm sure you could do a decent job of it if you put in some effort."

Draco scoffed. "If I put in some effort? I seem to recall being able to distract you just by existing."

She blushed and also glared at him, which he always felt was an adorable and sexy combination. He decided perhaps she needed even more distracting before she had a chance to think of any retaliation that might shift the mood to something less promising. He lowered his body to hers, pinning her in place with his hips while his lips skimmed the side of her neck before sliding her carefully selected pink shirt to the side and placing not-so-chaste kisses against her shoulder.

He felt her muscles loosen and relax beneath him, and he encouraged it by digging his fingers into the flesh of her upper back, massaging out any remaining tension through her shirt. Her appreciative noises went straight to his cock; he pulled her hips firmly against his before sitting back on his heels to strip his shirt off and toss it onto the floor. She hurriedly removed

her own shirt, leaving the lacy bra in place before shimmying out of her trousers and underwear.

“Please, Draco,” she pleaded, dark eyes focused on his face and biting her lower lip in the way she knew drove him crazy. Her hand crept down to her lower lips and she rubbed herself slowly, spreading herself apart so he could see her fingers move against her clit.

He growled and shoved his trousers down around his hips. He sensed she was trying to rile him up on purpose, and he wasn’t going to play that game this morning. He fisted himself and lined his cock up with her centre, rubbing against her slit to make sure she was wet enough for him to push inside.

He locked eyes with her as he kept rubbing against her, wanting to pay her back a little for the teasing lip biting. She reached her left hand - the one that was not still busy rubbing gentle circles over her nub - up to his cheek and whispered, “I love you.”

He ducked his head and moaned as he thrust into her deeply with one practised movement. It felt wet and hot and tight and perfect, and he sucked in a breath sharply when he felt her clench around him at the same time he bottomed out within her.

“Fuck, that’s perfect,” he whispered. “Merlin, I love when you do that.”

The words had barely left his mouth when he felt her start to rock against him, her fingers still swirling between their bodies. He quickly realised that she wasn’t in a mood to play and tease, and thought briefly that maybe their admission of feelings had affected her as much as it did him. He drew his hips back just to forcefully push them in again. Hermione gave a soft whimper in return and increased the pace of her fingers.

He leaned his body down so that it was pressed fully against hers. Her lips found his immediately, and he could feel the desperation in her kiss. Her thighs tightened around him with every thrust, and her core felt impossibly tight around his cock as he tried to keep up the unrelenting pace.

“Oh, gods,” she whispered against his lips before attaching themselves to him again. He increased his pace ever so slightly, barely noticeable, and she squeaked in surprise and ground her hips against him more forcefully, pressing her clit and still moving fingers against his hips so firmly he wasn’t

sure how she was still able to move. His chest rubbed against hers, nipples tight and skin slick, triggering a spark of pleasure each time they scraped against each other.

Her hips became more frantic, hovering between starting to lose pace and trying to find it again. Her breaths were ragged against his lips, but he devoured every sigh and moan that she made.

“Come for me, Hermione,” he instructed. “I want to feel you come around me, feel your walls clench to tight - fuck, just like that.”

Her breaths quickened and her fingers stuttered just before she whispered “I’m coming”. He felt her walls clamp down around him so far that it was hard to stay inside her. They continued pulsing around him for several seconds after her fingers stilled.

Her body felt relaxed around him now, and he slowly, gently rocked his hips into hers again. He moved in and out of her slowly, feeling the increased slickness after her release coating him. He loved this feeling after she’d come around him, and loved being able to bring her over the edge another time as he sought his own release.

He kept rocking gently, keeping his hips pressed against her clit, hoping for some pressure and friction against her as he thrust. His lips were back on hers, hungry and open and searching. He felt himself harden even more, pulsing slightly with the tremors that always took him just before he came, when he was trying desperately to hold back his release for as long as possible, riding so close to the edge that the slightest movement would send him over.

He didn’t dare increase his pace, just kept pumping rhythmically into her with their lips still connected. Her breath hitched, always in surprise that she could continue to feel good even after her release. He angled himself so that he pushed firmly against the top of her channel, slowly and consistently, biting down on his lip and focusing to keep himself from spilling into her.

“I’m so close,” he ground out.

“Don’t stop,” she replied. “Right there, yes - again, I’m almost - fuck, fuck, fuck I’m almost-”

He kept up the rhythm for two more thrusts before his most basic urges won out and his hips stuttered against hers, movements erratic as he stumbled over the edge and reacted on pure instinct to the feel of her walls

around him. He vaguely recognised the telltale flutter of her walls around him indicating he'd managed to bring her with him before he collapsed on top of her, winded and spent.



They made it to Hemlock a couple of hours later, after a short accidental nap and two quick separate showers to make themselves presentable to their friends. Their efforts didn't keep their friends from mocking them, however.

"Draco, Hermione; lovely to see you!" Theo greeted them warmly, but with a glint in his eye. Gesturing to the rest of the party, all seated with a beverage and half full plate in front of them, he continued "After waiting around for thirty minutes with no sign of you, we decided we were too hungry to wait. We assumed you both maybe had some muggle books to catch up on."

From beside him Potter scoffed. "Ugh, don't even mention reading muggle books around me anymore. I will never get the visual of stumbling upon these two 'reading muggle books' out of my head."

Hermione levelled him with a stern look and said "Nor will I get the visual of Theo appreciating your Auror skills in our office out of mine, so I suspect we're even."

Potter blushed, but Theo just looked chuffed.

"At least some of us are able to keep our hanky-panky to ourselves, right Blaise?" Ginny gave a wink to her not-quite-boyfriend but still very-obviously-together-and-not-seeing-anyone-else partner.

In an uncharacteristic show of revealing more of his bedroom proclivities, Blaise agreed "Of course. We wouldn't want to scare any of these novices away with some of our more innovative approaches." Neither Ginny or Blaise blushed, but the look between them seared with repressed heat. Draco wondered whether they spent any time together outside of Hemlock or their bedroom. Though he figured he and Hermione weren't much better, so perhaps it would be in poor taste to ask. Hermione was already blushing, though he had no idea which comment in particular she was reacting to.

Draco just smirked and ended the conversation topic with “But those muggle books are just so fascinating, I can’t help but to devour them.” Hermione’s predictable deepening blush was exactly the reaction he’d hoped for, but he could have done without the whack she gave him in response.

Once they’d all gotten their regular jibes out of the way and Draco and Hermione ordered a couple of salads for their lunch, conversation turned to slightly more serious topics.

Potter was involved in a new case tracking a suspect who left odd, idiosyncratic notes at all of his crime scenes, and Theo was quite pleased to be taking on the role of ‘house husband’ while Potter put in extra hours at work. Draco had to quickly derail his friend as he recounted some of the tasks he regularly completed as part of his duties, as it didn’t take long for the list to go from ‘cooking dinner’ to ‘having Potter for dessert’.

Blaise, as usual, kept to himself, however Ginny was happy to share details about their last weekend visit to Spain and how they visited one of the local magical beaches and oh by the way did you know that Ron has been spending time with Pansy Parkinson?

“What?” The same word exploded from everyone’s mouths, though Draco was sure for different reasons.

“Nothing’s happened yet - I think - and it’s all very new and he asked me to keep it a secret, so obviously I’m telling you all with the expectation that it doesn’t leave this table. I happened to spot them at the new Quidditch Supply store in Diagon Alley a few days ago and they were yelling at each other about something before they were decidedly not yelling and then I left. We chatted about it a little afterwards, just enough for me to promise not to tell you all.”

Draco turned to look at Hermione’s reaction, and found her already looking up at his face. Weasel and Pansy, both of their exes, apparently now hooking up. Maybe there was some sort of epidemic happening, forcing former snakes and lions to pair up. She seemed happy with the news, and though Draco thought there were literally eight billion other people in the world better suited to Pansy than Weasel was, he would be happy if she was happy. Though he thought he might be happy if he didn’t learn too many more details; having Theo and the female Weasley at the table was enough sharing for his tastes.



The next morning, Draco and Hermione woke before dawn to begin preparing for her parents' arrival. Even Narcissa and Lucius were both awake, looking far more put together than either he or Hermione were. She was frantically pouring over her notes and practising her wandwork, even though everyone knew that she had everything perfectly memorised already.

Draco was helping his mother set out the tea service for Tilley to prepare once the Grangers arrived - making sure the blasted floral set was front and centre, just as Hermione requested. Even though he was sure everything was going to go according to plan, he couldn't help but feel that anxious flutter in his chest, so similar to what he felt before when it was his Father practising his wandwork in the privacy of his office in preparation for Draco's own ritual.

Tilley was happily placing multiple floral arrangements all throughout the parlour, helping sell the case that this was a business meeting and they were all definitely there to discuss flowers and horticultural practices and what-not.

The morning passed quickly, and everyone was now dressed and coiffed and ready to receive the Grangers into their house. Mindful of house elves and magic, Tilley had completed some self transfiguration to give her the appearance of a pleasantly plump, completely non-magical looking older lady with a soft face and sparkling eyes. Hermione noted that she looked strikingly similar to an old neighbour they'd had growing up, and was sure her parents would be happy and trusting to follow her. Draco and Hermione would wait to receive her parents in the carefully decorated parlour, while Narcissa and Lucius would be on standby to monitor the ritual components.

The clock struck eleven, and Draco felt the thrum of magic letting him know that someone had approached the property. The disguised Tilley headed to the front door to open the gates and bring the Grangers inside.

Hermione was pacing frantically beside him, pulling at her hair and muttering self-deprecating utterances to herself. Draco stepped in and held her tightly, whispering into her ear.

"You are the most capable witch I know and you are going to do your best. I can't guarantee what's going to happen, but I can promise I'll be right there with you."

Her eyes glistened and she gave him a watery smile.

"I love you," she said, this time more strongly and affirmatively than the first.

"I love you," he repeated, giving her a soft but purposeful kiss.

"Pardon me," a male voice interrupted, and Hermione jumped from Draco's arms instantly. "We're here to meet a Mr Draco Malfoy regarding a potential botanical exchange."

Wendell Wilkins, nee Richard Granger, stood in the parlour entryway beside his wife. A tittering Tilley stood behind them and gave Draco a conspiratorial smile before scurrying off to prepare the tea service. Mr Wilkins was well dressed in a smart business suit and carried a plain brown briefcase. Mrs Wilkins also looked well dressed in a floral dress (Hermione may have been correct about the tea service crockery after all), her slightly wavy hair held back in a neat clasp. Her eyes darted admiringly around the room.

Draco would have known her immediately even without any introduction; in spite of the many years that have passed, Hermione's mother still looked amazingly like the photo in the locket that was currently draped across Hermione's neck.

Draco cleared his throat, trying to hide his embarrassment at being caught in a slightly compromising position, and welcomed them both to his home.

"Mr and Mrs Wilkens, welcome to Malfoy Manor. I hope Tilley was good company on your walk from the gate to the parlour?"

"Of course I was, young Mr Malfoy," Tilley announced, using the name they'd agreed on prior to the Granger's arrival, but opting to add the 'young' qualifier on for his embarrassment, he presumed. Tilley was carrying the tea service in her hands and moved past the Granger-Wilkins to set it onto the ornate parlour table.

"She was lovely," Richard agreed, reaching out a hand to shake Draco's. "Wendell Wilkins, and this is my beautiful wife Monica Wilkins."

Jane Granger smiled at him. "Pleasure to meet you, Mr Malfoy. The photos of your gardens looked beautiful."

Hermione was silent beside him, clenching his hand tightly and staring at her parents longingly.

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“Draco Malfoy, and please call me Draco.” He pondered for a moment on how to introduce Hermione, or whether he even should before they got to the main event. Eventually he decided regardless of whether or not they were successful her awkwardness around them wouldn’t matter much anyway, so he opted to introduce her. She was uncharacteristically silent beside him ever since the Granger-Wilkins walked into the room.

“This is my... partner, Hermione Granger.”

He saw a flicker of something in their eyes when he said her name. This is what Hermione was talking about earlier, how the seeds of recognition were still there but nothing they could do was powerful enough to overcome their memory alteration permanently.

“What a lovely name,” Richard said, while Jane gushed over the tea service. “Oh my, what a lovely pattern! Wendell, look, it’s almost the same as the one my grandmother had when I was a girl.”

Draco gestured for everyone to sit and enjoy a spot of tea before they got down to business. Hermione was still silent beside him, not even speaking when he introduced her.

Their plan was for Hermione to confound her parents while they sat to drink tea, and then she (with Lucius’ support from the sidelines) would replace the tea in their cups with one of the potions she’d been working on and begin casting the ritual spells.

They’d been speaking for several minutes longer than he’d expected, and he noticed Hermione’s hands were shaking and her eyes were downcast. He could feel the reverberating anguish in his chest. Deciding perhaps he would take the lead on initiating the scheme, he slipped his hand between the couch cushions where his wand was carefully tucked and whispered “Confundus”.

The Wilkins-Grangers eyes glazed over and they set their teacups down, awaiting instruction. Hermione released a huge breath beside him and finally shook herself of her self-inflicted paralysis.

“Thank you,” she said to Draco as she retrieved her wand and began vanishing the tea and pouring in a delicate light blue coloured potion - the bridging potion, he corrected in his head - to replace it. Her parents continued drinking the tea, scrunching their faces up a little at the taste but otherwise continuing to stare blankly and sip from the floral cups.

When the potion was finally gone, Draco gave Hermione's hand one last squeeze before he took a step back, letting her reclaim the lead and perform the spells. He watched her as she expertly swished her wand around, chanting the incantations in perfect latin and drawing exact symbols into the air with her wand tip. Her parents' eyes followed the wand movements with confusion, seeming like some of their faculties were coming back. Richard had just begun narrowing his eyebrows when several lines of magic began moving through the walls and the floors of the manor, zigging and swirling until coalescing in the middle between Hermione and her parents.

Two floating balls of light - lilac coloured rather than the blue he remembered from his own ceremony - popped up from the collection of lines and floated softly towards the Granger-Wilkins, nestling themselves into each of their chests before fading out of existence.

Hermione's wand stopped and her chest was heaving, a bead of sweat trickling down the side of her face. Her eyes were locked onto her parents, unblinking. Draco could see his own parents' faces peeking in through the parlour doors, and he caught the look of pride on his father's face before he reverted back to his regular dour facade.

The entire parlour was silent and still, save for Hermione's breathing. Her parents still looked slightly confused, staring straight ahead at nothing and still holding on to their empty tea cups.

Draco wasn't sure whether it had worked, and also wasn't sure if Hermione was going to be able to bear it if it didn't.

"Richard?" he asked, trying the man's actual name rather than the fake name of Wendell. "Richard Granger?"

Richard's eyes seemed to suddenly clear and he rubbed his palms against his eyes and forehead. "Yes, that's me, I'm - Hermione?" Richard's eyes focused on his daughter standing just a few feet away from him, and the recognition was evident on his face and in his voice.

"Hermione?" Jane's voice echoed Richard's, and she stood up shakily to approach her daughter. "Hermione, is that you?"

Hermione's face crumpled and tears poured from her eyes. Her arms were wrapped around her middle as she took a careful step forward, lips quivering with overwhelming emotion.

"Mum? Dad? Do you remember me?"

Jane's face softened and even Draco could sense the love she had for her daughter from her expression.

"Oh my dear Hermione, I'm your mother. Nothing could ever truly make me forget you."

Hermione ran into her mother's arms and sobbed onto her shoulder. Richard joined the women also, wrapping his arms around them both and telling them that everything was going to be ok now, that they'd figure it all out. Draco stood well back to try to give the family some privacy, but still be close by in case Hermione needed him.

Richard looked up from the family hug and he looked clearly at Draco for the first time since their memories came back. His look hardened, and Draco was suddenly reminded of the fact that this man, Hermione's father, had walked in on the two of them embracing in a very much not-just-friends sort of way just moments before.

Richard's voice was stern when he asked "Tell me again, who are you exactly?"



Shortly after the family hug, Lucius and Narcissa interrupted the brief inquisition on Draco's intentions with Hermione to explain that they were the Lord and Lady of the Manor and that there was more than enough space to provide the Grangers time and privacy to catch up. They then forcibly removed Draco from the room and instructed the still human-appearing Tilley to assist the Grangers with their things and set them up in the guest suite. Tilley was happy to oblige, and Draco was forced to retreat to his own quarters to bide his time until Hermione returned.

It had taken days. They'd had so much to catch up on that Hermione spent every moment, from morning to night, telling them stories and catching up on the years missed in one another's lives. Tilley had been delivering meals to the guest suites for them, and had let Draco know that the Grangers were fine and respected the privacy the Malfoys were affording them in order to repair some of their family ties. He knew Hermione had some tough conversations ahead of her, like how she needed to sell the family house to have enough funds to get by during the war, how she was tortured and maimed in this house during the war,

bloody hell even the fact that there was a war, and a selfish part of him was glad that he wasn't around for any of those conversations.

It wasn't until three days later when an exhausted looking Hermione finally found her way back to his quarters and into his bedroom. She barely greeted him before flopping onto his bed (he actually had to scoot out of the way quickly before she landed on him uncomfortably) and proclaiming her exhaustion.

He laid down beside her and gently rubbed her back and shoulders, trying to temper his reaction to her moans of appreciation while he focused on helping her feel better. But Merlin it was hard when his cock kept jumping in his trousers with each moan and sign that left her lips.

"So I take it their memories came back successfully, then?" he asked facetiously, brushing the hair back off her forehead and giving her a quick chaste kiss there.

She snorted in answer, rolling over onto her back to face him. "Yes, very successfully," she confirmed, stretching her arms above her head and giving Draco a tantalising view of her midriff. Her voice croaked as she spoke. "So successfully that I've spent the past several days talking and laughing and crying non-stop." Her expression turned serious and she reached her arms out to wrap around him.

"Thank you," she whispered, giving her voice a rest while still expressing her gratitude. He felt the cool metal of her locket pressed between them, gradually getting warmed by that ever-present blue glow in his chest. He felt the complementary warmth in Hermione's chest as well, and they smiled at one another at the feeling of connectedness.

"You're welcome," he answered her, grabbing the blanket by his feet and pulling it up over both of them before snuggling down. "Just promise me no more rituals for a while, I think I've had enough of the Malfoy family magic for a few years at least."

Hermione nestled her face into his neck and breathed him in, closing her eyes and fading fast.

"No more rituals from me," she confirmed. One eye opened and she twisted one side of her mouth up into a grin even he had to admit was perfect. "The next one would be your job for the next Malfoy heir." The dancing ball of blue light hummed in contentment at her words before they both fell asleep.

THE END